LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
of BRITISH COLUMBIA

First Session, 43rd Parliament

OFFICIAL REPORT OF DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday, May 13, 2025
Afternoon Sitting
Issue No. 64

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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Boyle, Hon. Christine ..... Vancouver–Little Mountain
Brar, Hon. Jagrup ..... Surrey-Fleetwood
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Chant, Susie ..... North Vancouver–Seymour
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Chouhan, Hon. Raj ..... Burnaby–New Westminster
Chow, Hon. George ..... Vancouver-Fraserview
Davidson, Hon. Tamara / Laanas ..... North Coast–Haida Gwaii
Dhir, Sunita ..... Vancouver-Langara
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Eby, Hon. David, KC ..... Vancouver–Point Grey
Elmore, Mable ..... Vancouver-Kensington
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Gibson, Hon. Diana ..... Oak Bay–Gordon Head
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Ma, Hon. Bowinn ..... North Vancouver–Lonsdale
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Morissette, Steve ..... Kootenay Monashee
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Osborne, Hon. Josie ..... Mid Island–Pacifc Rim
Parmar, Hon. Ravi ..... Langford-Highlands
Phillip, Joan / Amshen ..... Vancouver-Strathcona
Popham, Hon. Lana ..... Saanich South
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Routledge, Janet ..... Burnaby North
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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

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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

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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

Tuesday, May 13, 2025
Afternoon Sitting

Page

Blessings and Acknowledgements 2661
Eugene Louie

Orders of the Day

Government Motions on Notice 2661
Motion 29 — Amendments to Tla'amin Final Agreement
Hon. Christine Boyle
Scott McInnis
Rob Botterell
Hon. Jodie Wickens
John Rustad
Hon. Randene Neill
Á'a:líya Warbus
Hon. Christine Boyle

Second Reading of Bills 2667
Bill 15 — Infrastructure Projects Act
Hon. Bowinn Ma
Peter Milobar
Hon. Jagrup Brar
Misty Van Popta
Hon. David Eby
Scott McInnis
Hon. Ravi Parmar
Lawrence Mok
Lynne Block
Tony Luck
Ward Stamer
Bill 14 — Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act, 2025 *(continued)*
Teresa Wat

Reporting of Bills 2720
Bill 13 — Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2025

Third Reading of Bills 2720
Bill 13 — Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2025

Proceedings in the Douglas Fir Room

Committee of Supply 2720
Estimates: Ministry of Children and Family Development *(continued)*
Brennan Day
Hon. Jodie Wickens
Amelia Boultbee

Point of Order (Chair's Ruling) 2725

Committee of Supply 2725
Estimates: Ministry of Children and Family Development *(continued)*
Hon. Jodie Wickens
Amelia Boultbee
Reann Gasper

Personal Statements 2730
Withdrawal of Comments Made in the House
Amelia Boultbee

Committee of Supply 2730
Estimates: Ministry of Children and Family Development *(continued)*
Reann Gasper
Hon. Jodie Wickens
Estimates: Ministry of Attorney General
Hon. Niki Sharma
Steve Kooner
Trevor Halford
Peter Milobar
Teresa Wat

Proceedings in the Birch Room

Committee of the Whole 2751
Bill 13 — Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2025 *(continued)*
Tony Luck
Hon. Ravi Kahlon
Lynne Block
Larry Neufeld
Hon. Anne Kang
Donegal Wilson
Hon. Randene Neill

Appendix 2779

TUESDAY, MAY 13, 2025

The House met at 1:31 p.m.

[The Speaker in the chair.]

The Speaker: Hon. Members, I ask you to rise as I invite Elder Eugene Louie of the łəʔamɛn Nation to offer a blessing.

Blessings and Acknowledgements

Eugene Louie: Thank you very much. Eugene Louie from the łəʔamɛn Nation. I raise my hands to all of you in honour and respect.

Also at this time, belated happy Mother's Day to all the mothers in here. All the men have to wait till next month.

Thank you for this opportunity.

I always look at things from the past, the present and the future. The past for us as a nation is a story, a long story, but that's in the past. Now presently, we are very happy with the process that we've gone through and the discussion that's going to be happening today. Appreciation for the recognition and inclusion.

Also in the past, our nation has always been recognizing the people in our environmental area, the city, the regional directors and the industry at that time, but now it's gone. They were always at our table when we started to negotiate our treaty. Every table we had, they were there presently. So that was the past. Like I said, the present now is recognition and inclusion.

For the future, working together from a government to government-to-government situation is what we are happy about. Also that in our territory, the recognition and inclusion of all the environmental people that live in our section is much appreciated in terms of the regional district changing their name to qathet regional, the Powell River General Hospital changing their name to qathet, the school district changing their name to qathet.

qathet in our language is "togetherness." The recognition of that is much appreciated from our nation.

With that, I'm going to say in ʔayʔaǰuθəm, our language, a short prayer for you.

[1:35 p.m.]

[ʔayʔaǰuθəm was spoken.]

I also would like to express my appreciation to the nations that are living in and around this area and respecting the territory that we're on.

[ʔayʔaǰuθəm was spoken.]

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Thank you, Elder Louie.

I had the privilege two years ago, along with our head Clerk, Kate Ryan-Lloyd, to visit the łəʔamɛn Nation. It was a beautiful area, and we want to say thank you for hosting us.

It was part of our reconciliation project. We are reaching out to different nations to seek guidance and learning from them.

Thank you so much for coming.

Orders of the Day

Hon. Mike Farnworth: I call Motion 29.

Government Motions on Notice

MOTION 29 — AMENDMENTS TO TLA'AMIN FINAL AGREEMENT

Hon. Christine Boyle: I move Motion 29 standing in my name on the order paper.

[Be it resolved that, pursuant to paragraph 5 (b) of Chapter 25 of the Tla'amin Final Agreement, the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia consents to the amendments to the Tla'amin Final Agreement set out in the attached Tla'amin Final Agreement Amending Agreement (No. 4).]

TLA'AMIN FINAL AGREEMENT AMENDING AGREEMENT (No. 4)

AMONG:

HIS MAJESTY THE KING IN RIGHT OF CANADA, as represented by the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations
("Canada")

AND

HIS MAJESTY THE KING IN RIGHT OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, as represented by the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation
("British Columbia")

AND

TLA'AMIN NATION, as represented by the Hegus
("Tla'amin Nation")

WHEREAS:

A. On April 5, 2016, the Tla'amin Final Agreement came into effect;

B. The Tla'amin Final Agreement provides for its amendment and specifies requirements for the amendment of various of its provisions;

C. The Parties have previously agreed to amendments to the Tla'amin Final Agreement;

D. The Parties agree to propose further amendments to the Tla'amin Final Agreement set out in Schedules 1 and 2 of this Amending Agreement;

E. The Parties have determined that the processes set out in paragraphs 3 and 5 of Chapter 25 – Amendment apply to the proposed amendments set out in Schedules 1 and 2 of this Amending Agreement;

NOW THEREFORE the Parties agree as follows:

PART I – DEFINITIONS AND INTERPRETATION

1. In this Amending Agreement:

"Tla'amin Final Agreement" means the Tla'amin Final Agreement among the Tla'amin Nation, His Majesty the King in right of Canada and His Majesty the King in right of British Columbia, as it took effect on April 5, 2016 as amended.

2. A reference to a Chapter by number or name is a reference to the chapter of that number or name in the Tla'amin Final Agreement.

3. Words and expressions appearing in this Amending Agreement that are not defined in this Amending Agreement but are defined in the Tla'amin Final Agreement have the meanings ascribed to them in the Tla'amin Final Agreement.

PART II – PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

4. The proposed amendments in English to the Tla'amin Final Agreement are set out in Schedule 1.

5. The proposed amendments in French to the Tla'amin Final Agreement are set out in Schedule 2.

6. The Parties agree that, as necessary, the Tla'amin Nation or British Columbia may provide their consent to these amendments in accordance with paragraph 5 of Chapter 25 – Amendment before Schedule 2 is complete, subject to subsequent approval of Schedule 2 by the Tla'amin Nation or British Columbia, as applicable, which shall be provided in writing:

a. for the Tla'amin Nation, by the Hegus, and
b. for the Province, by the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

7. Pursuant to paragraph 7 of Chapter 25 – Amendment, the proposed amendments set out in Schedules 1 and 2 will take effect on the date the last Party required to consent to the amendment provides its consent.

PART III – PROCEDURES

8. This Amending Agreement may be signed in one or more counterparts. A signed counterpart may be delivered by one Party to another Party by facsimile or e-mail transmission and a facsimile or e-mail so transmitted will constitute an original document. Signed counterparts held by a Party, taken together, will constitute one and the same instrument.

9. This Amending Agreement may be executed by electronic signature, which will be considered as an original signature for all purposes and will have the same force and effect as an original signature on paper. Without limitation, "electronic signature" will include faxed versions of an original signature or electronically scanned and transmitted versions (e.g., via pdf) of an original signature.

FOR HIS MAJESTY THE KING IN RIGHT OF CANADA, as represented by the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, signed this day of _____, 2025.

_____
Authorized Signatory
Printed name:_____

FOR HIS MAJESTY THE KING IN RIGHT OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, as represented by the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, signed this _____ day of _____, 2025.

_____
The Honourable Christine Boyle
Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation

FOR THE TLA'AMIN NATION, as represented by the Hegus, signed this _____ day of _____, 2025.

_____
Hegus John Hackett]

[See Appendix…]

I rise in the House today to move the fourth amending agreement to the Tla'amin final agreement.

I am incredibly honoured to be here in the Legislature on the territory of the lək̓ʷəŋən peoples, the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations.

Before I start, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the łəʔamɛn Nation on their ongoing efforts to support their strong, healthy and thriving community.

And I want to thank Elder Eugene Louie, pelachiewtwx, a łəʔamɛn Elder, former Chief and former treaty negotiator and adviser, for starting us off in a good way.

I also want to say c̓ɛc̓ɛhaθɛč to the members of the łəʔamɛn First Nation who are here in the gallery today. This means "welcome." It also means "thank you" and "I honour you" in ʔayʔaǰuθəm, the language of the łəʔamɛn People.

I want to acknowledge and introduce the łəʔamɛn delegation that has joined us in the gallery here today: hegus John Hackett; łəʔamɛn executive councillors Brandon Louie, Callum Galligos and Dillon Johnson; as well as Stefan Virtue, director of intergovernmental relations; łəʔamɛn government intergovernmental relations staff Emily White and Wren Shaman.

I want to recognize all members of the łəʔamɛn executive council, legislators, łəʔamɛn Elders and Matriarchs and łəʔamɛn citizens, all of whom may be observing our proceedings today and whose participation has brought us to this important moment.

The purpose of the proposed amendments to the Tla'amin final agreement include the following.

The first is the inclusion of ʔayʔaǰuθəm, the language of the łəʔamɛn People, in the treaty and one of the reasons I am so proud to be wearing a T-shirt gifted to me by the

community with ʔayʔaǰuθəm landmarks on it. The inclusion of ʔayʔaǰuθəm better reflects the taʔow, the teachings of the nation and community.

As well, a change to the title of the Tla'amin final agreement to ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs, which means "a good relationship with someone." I just want to make a clear point on this: changing the name from the final agreement to ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs, a good relationship with someone.

The amendments also include adding a provision to the general provisions chapter to reflect a recognition and acknowledgement that the łəʔamɛn treaty is a living agreement and provides a foundation for evolution and an ongoing relationship among the parties.

The amendments include aligning the adoption, guardianship and child and family services provisions with changes made to B.C.'s Adoption Act and Child, Family and Community Service Act under Bill 38, Indigenous Self-Government in Child and Family Services Amendment Act passed in 2022.

[1:40 p.m.]

These amendments are part of our commitment to working responsibly with łəʔamɛn Nation as a treaty partner. This work today is the result of a significant commitment by the provincial and federal governments to honour and respect our treaty relations, as well as reaching new treaties.

Chapter 25 of the Tla'amin final agreement allows any party to the treaty to propose amendments to the łəʔamɛn treaty, and the łəʔamɛn Nation proposed a series of amendments to the treaty. Through tripartite discussions, the parties have now agreed on the amendments that I just walked you through.

There are confirmed mandates or policy approvals in place for all three parties.

The Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport's heritage branch has confirmed that the proposed updates to names of geographic features, like mountains and rivers solely located on łəʔamɛn lands, in the amending agreement align with official geographic feature name changes which came into effect April 5, 2025.

The proposed provision to acknowledge the łəʔamɛn treaty as a living agreement is consistent with B.C.'s direction under the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. It's also in line with the *Recognition and Reconciliation of Rights Policy for Treaty Negotiations in British Columbia*.

The language now acknowledges that treaties and treaty relationships may change and evolve over time. This has been demonstrated through the province's treaty relationship with łəʔamɛn, and we are so grateful for that partnership. The proposed amendments regarding adoption, guardianship and child and family services will ensure that łəʔamɛn have the same opportunities as other Indigenous governing bodies under federal and provincial legislation.

łəʔamɛn Nation has already consented to these treaty amendments. Canada has also signed the amending agreement and will be seeking consent to these treaty agreements by order in council. For the amendment to be ratified by the province, the Legislative Assembly must consent to the amending agreement.

In 2016, łəʔamɛn Nation, through the Tla'amin final agreement, became the eighth B.C. First Nation to become a self-governing modern treaty Nation, the seventh nation through B.C.'s treaty negotiation process. On April 5, we celebrated the łəʔamɛn treaty's ninth anniversary by hanging their nation's flag in our Legislature's Hall of Honour.

łəʔamɛn Nation demonstrates the power of modern treaties to build government-to-government relationships as we work toward common goals.

It is my great honour to rise in the House today, with the support of the łəʔamɛn Nation, and move this motion to give British Columbia's consent.

Scott McInnis: On behalf of the official opposition, I would like to welcome the łəʔamɛn delegation here today in this very significant moment.

I rise today to speak in support of the Tla'amin final agreement and the amendments therein. This is one of British Columbia's landmark modern treaties and a testament to the strength and dignity of the łəʔamɛn People.

The łəʔamɛn treaty is more than a legal document. It is a living agreement that represents reconciliation, respect and a shared future. Most significantly, it has been given the name which in the ʔayʔaǰuθəm language means "a good relationship with someone." That name is powerful. It personalizes the treaty, grounding it in values of mutual trust, cooperation and forward-looking partnership.

The treaty process in British Columbia is one that is very robust. It helps to address long-standing questions of Aboriginal rights and title, while offering certainty and clarity to everyone. Treaties like the Tla'amin final agreement mark a departure from conflict and uncertainty and, instead, chart a path toward meaningful and enduring reconciliation.

Recent amendments to the agreement bring about significant improvements, especially for children and families. The treaty now allows for greater flexibility in child and family services in giving decision-makers the ability to prioritize the best interests of the child in culturally appropriate ways. This means families can benefit from services designed with the community's needs, traditions and values at the heart of the process. It's an important and compassionate shift that takes children first.

[1:45 p.m.]

It's also worth noting that the current Leader of the Official Opposition signed the Tla'amin final agreement on behalf of the government of British Columbia in his previous role as Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. That should re-

mind us all that reconciliation and treaty-making should transcend partisan politics.

This is about building a better future for everyone in British Columbia. We should all be proud of this work. The treaty process brings certainty, healing and self-determination above all else. It acknowledges history, affirms rights and build a future based on respect.

Let us continue to support and strengthen the treaty process in B.C. as we walk a path of reconciliation together.

Rob Botterell: Thank you, ləʔamɛn Elder Eugene Louie, for opening this House in a good way. As a former Chief and former treaty negotiator and adviser, your presence, guidance and insights carry deep meaning for us here today. Recognition and inclusion are vital elements of moving forward in a government to government to government relationship. We very much appreciate your words.

I also want to echo the welcome extended to those in the gallery, including the hegus, John Hackett; Brandon Louie; Callum Galligos; Dillon Johnson; Emily White; Wren Shaman; Stefan Virtue, many of whom I've had the privilege of working with in my previous endeavours. We are grateful for your presence and honoured to welcome you here today.

The treaty amendment process we're completing today is an example of good progress. It is ləʔamɛn-led. All First Nations choose their own path, and I have great respect for that autonomy. The ləʔamɛn have chosen the path of a treaty, and they are showing us the many benefits of that path.

Today we're also witnessing good progress, because the process to reach today has been open and transparent, and ləʔamɛn, Canada and B.C. have worked together to negotiate the wording of this amending agreement. The province has taken time to meet with its opposition counterparts to bring everyone along.

Today's amendments also remind us, as was mentioned earlier, that treaties are living documents. They're not papers to be signed and then stuffed in a drawer. The relationship between nations must continue to grow and adapt to the circumstances of the day. It's an important reminder, as we move legislation through this House, that our relationships with other governments and nations are ongoing and must always be considered and advanced, because reconciliation and treaty-making are ongoing and must never be stopped in time.

We're also adding the language of the ləʔamɛn People, ʔayʔaǰuθəm, to the text of the treaty. This is a sign of respect and inclusion and also improves the treaty's accuracy. Today we're giving the ləʔamɛn treaty a new name, ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs. It means "a good relationship with someone," something that we can all celebrate because good relationships are the key to our future.

Today's amendments also add new language on adoption, guardianship, child and family services, which enable ləʔamɛn to exercise their rights in the same way as other Indigenous governing bodies.

The B.C. Green caucus celebrates all of these changes, as well as the process used to reach today's agreement. May our two nations continue to come to the table and continue to work together for a prosperous, shared future on a government to government to government basis.

Hon. Jodie Wickens: It is an absolute honour for me to stand, to acknowledge and thank the members of ləʔamɛn Nation for coming to the Legislature and spending time with us today.

I want to join my colleagues in thanking and welcoming Elder Eugene Louie for getting us started in a really good way with your words and your guidance.

[1:50 p.m.]

A warm welcome to the hegus, John Hackett, and the ləʔamɛn executive council members, staff and citizens here today. We are pleased to have you here in person. It is our honour that you have taken the time to be here with us.

I also want to applaud the ləʔamɛn Nation on their ongoing efforts to support a strong, healthy community. I know that the care of children and youth in your community is paramount. They certainly are our most precious resource in this province, and they're the most important treasure for us to take care of today and every day.

I am moved to see the ʔayʔaǰuθəm language of the ləʔamɛn People added to the treaty. I look forward to the impact that it will have on children and generations to come.

I congratulate the nation for implementing amendments for adoption, guardianship and child and family services into the treaty. It's been a long time coming, and historic changes in federal and provincial legislation have made this shift possible.

I am proud that B.C. enacted legislation to recognize Indigenous peoples' inherent right to self-government, including the right to provide child and family services. We know that the journey started long before that to address barriers and gaps that hindered the exercise of Indigenous jurisdiction. We also know that there is far more work to do.

In my role as the minister, I see what a privilege it is to advance historic agreements like this one; to work together to support First Nations children and families and create a new approach to child and family well-being in British Columbia; to ensure First Nations and communities like ləʔamɛn can decide what's in the best interest for their children, keeping children and families connected to their culture, because we all have a deep love for children and youth in our families and our community.

We know this province and this country have a dark history, and the impacts and trauma of that history are still with us. We know that there are better outcomes for Indigenous children and youth when they are connected

to the community and people in their culture who love them dearly and deeply. We are encouraged to see that the number of children and youth in care is coming down, but Indigenous children continue to be overrepresented in care, and that absolutely needs to change.

Indigenous youth and children belong with their parents, their grandparents, their aunties, their uncles and their communities. We are working hard every day to make this happen. We know that there is much more work to do.

In 2024, we hired the very first Indigenous child welfare director, who is working with First Nations on crucial care decisions to help better ensure the safety, wellness and access to community and culture for Indigenous children. It is the first of its kind in this country and represents a significant step in our work to reform the child welfare system and reduce the overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in care.

We have been working with the federal government, First Nations and Indigenous organizations to support nations who wish to provide child and family services under their own laws, in ways that work best for them. We have signed five trilateral coordinating agreements with First Nations, one interim bilateral coordinating agreement and seven more bilateral community agreements.

Each nation is at a different stage or different path, and we need to ensure each has an opportunity to participate fully in the process if they wish to do so. This includes working collaboratively with modern treaty Nations like łəʔamɛn to amend the provisions in their existing treaty so it aligns with the legislative changes that we made in 2022.

We are also actively working with our partners to advance the discussion on funding for jurisdiction. In fact, just last week I attended a workshop in Vancouver, along with łəʔamɛn.

It was an honour to get to meet you, to talk to you and hear leaders who care so deeply and the concerns that you have.

[1:55 p.m.]

It is my hope that we can move forward in a meaningful way and that my ministry can continue to build on the historic work that has taken place here today. We need to continue making a positive difference to Indigenous children, families and communities. It is too important not to.

We have a lot of hard work to do in my ministry, a lot of hard conversations to be had. I'm committed to taking the steps to improve existing treaties with modern treaty Nations and develop measures that support your inherent right to self-determination.

I thank you. It is an honour of mine, and I look forward to working more with you in the future.

John Rustad: I want to take a moment to add a few words to this moment, to this motion as well.

First of all, I'd like to thank Eugene Louie, Elder, for starting us off in a good way. Thank you for being here and for doing that.

I want to recognize John Hackett, hegus, as well as the whole delegation from the łəʔamɛn Nation. It's nice to see them here.

I had the honour of being in łəʔamɛn territory back in 2016, when we signed the treaty, when we went through that whole process, and the honour of seeing that move through the Legislature as part of that, as minister. It was one of those things that I was very proud of.

I have to admit…. You know, when you think about a treaty, it's the three governments. It's the łəʔamɛn government coming together with the Canadian government and the British Columbia government with an agreement about how to build a future, how to come together and work together in cooperation and coordination. It's about moving beyond the Indian Act. It's about moving beyond section 35 of the constitution.

Most importantly, it's about empowering the nation for their culture, for their language, for their people to take control of their future and how we can work as partners, as opposed to what has happened historically, which is governments looking at it as being more of an overseeing and not actually working as true partners.

That, to me, was one of the huge problems, one of the huge errors that we made in Canada for our existence. Moving beyond that into partnership, into what is I believe to be true reconciliation, is an important step. Certainly, the treaty has been a way to be able to do that with the łəʔamɛn Nation.

I want to just maybe make mention of a couple other little things. Like I say, I remember when I was there, there was some friction within the community when we signed the treaty. There were some people who opposed; there were some people who were supportive. But what I've seen from that is how the community has been able to come together, how the community has been able to grow and how it's been able to really strengthen the łəʔamɛn People.

I think that's a great testament to the łəʔamɛn People in terms of their treaty, in terms of how they've implemented it and how they work both within their nation but also with people around them.

When I look at some of the changes, particularly the implementation of the language as part of the treaty and some naming within the territories, it's something that is easy to dismiss, or it's easy to say: "What does this mean? Why are we doing this?" The important thing is that the treaty is about, like I say, recognizing the culture and the language and supporting that and understanding, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, that true history within the area. I think this is an important step in terms of having that added.

I find myself, even, too often dismissive of that, not recognizing the strengths that are needed and the strengths that should be there as part of this. So I actually want to

celebrate and say thank you for bringing it forward and making those changes. I think it's an important piece of how we recognize reconciliation and how we work together in terms of building those futures.

With that, I also want to make mention, of course, of the child services. For far too long, the federal government and the provincial government have viewed First Nations as wards of the state. It's hard to say that, but it has been the way that government and government policies have happened for far too long, whether it's the Sixties Scoop or whether it goes back to residential schools — the entire process that has happened over time.

To empower the nation to be able to look after their own children in a culturally appropriate way, to be able to make sure that the federal and provincial governments are partners in supporting but not overseeing is the important piece that, I think, is being put into this treaty. I think it's something, of course, that's work that needs to be done right around the province for so many nations.

It's the only way we can get past what has happened historically and be able to move forward in terms of dealing with the children in care and making sure that services are done appropriately.

[2:00 p.m.]

I had many conversations as a minister with nations around this province about these steps, about things that needed to be done to move beyond the provincial government in supporting nations for that. There were always issues around the legal side. There were always issues around responsibilities. I'm actually very glad that we've seen this move beyond that and that we see now, certainly as part of the treaty, that we're now in that much better place. I think it'll have a much better outcome for children, for the łəʔamɛn People.

Once again, I wanted to stand and say I'm honoured to be able to support this motion coming forward for the changes to the treaty. I'm very pleased to see the łəʔamɛn Nation has been advancing with the work, and I look forward to seeing that work continue. This is a multigenerational effort that took a long time to get here but that will also take a long time to see the really positive changes.

I wish everything could happen immediately, overnight, but I understand this is about laying a foundation and building that foundation, strengthening it and continuing to make those proper moves forward so that the nation can stand proud in its culture, in its people, in its language, and be recognized, certainly, by all people around the province.

Once again, I'm honoured to have an opportunity to say a few words and say congratulations to the łəʔamɛn People.

Hon. Randene Neill: I won't take up much time. It does my heart glad to see so much support for this motion today, and I'm so honoured to speak to the importance of this treaty agreement amendment.

As the MLA for Powell River–Sunshine Coast, I've had the absolute privilege to get to know the hegus and council and work with them.

As Minister of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship, it has been my honour and pleasure to work with my counterpart, the legislator of lands and resources, Callum Galligos, and talk to him about the vision and future of the area — the description of stewarding their land for the next seven generations and beyond, the abundance, biodiversity, water security and protection that will benefit not only the łəʔamɛn People but also the entire community.

That's what modern treaties do. They are essential for government to government to government relationships. They are based on mutual recognition and respect. This amendment will allow for this agreement to be a living agreement, as everyone else has mentioned, allowing it to change and evolve as our relationship grows over time.

The inclusion of ʔaʔǰɯnxʷegəs, meaning "a good relationship with someone" in ʔayʔaǰuθəm, in the language that the łəʔamɛn People speak, is so incredibly powerful.

Part of the importance of this agreement is in the benefits to the health, to the well-being of the children, to the families and to the people not only for the łəʔamɛn but for the entire qathet community, and the benefits to the health and well-being of our water and the ecosystem, which once again benefits the łəʔamɛn but also the entire community in qathet.

Thank you so much for your wisdom, your determination and your generosity.

Congratulations to you, and we will see you all back at home.

Á'a:líya Warbus: Hoy chap. Á'a:líya tel skwix, xwelmexw tel skwix, Stó:lō Nation casta Sq'ewqeyl xʷməθkʷəy̓əm Se:math casta Sts'ailes Sq'èwlets.

[Halq'eméylem text provided by Á'a:líya Warbus.]

My name is Á'a:líya Warbus, the MLA for Chilliwack–Cultus Lake, but I come from the Stó:lō Nation. My grandparents come from all up and down the coast, from xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sts'ailes, Sq'èwlets, representing almost the entire valley.

I really want to thank you for being here today and for the work that I know you've done to bring your community to this place. Getting people to sit together, come to an agreement, one vision to share the territory with all of the people that have come to Turtle Island — a big undertaking. You completed it, and you're here to show everyone what a relationship built on trust, partnership and a foundation of true kindness and compassion looks like.

[2:05 p.m.]

I'm honoured to be standing here as a part of the official British Columbia government, but in my heart, there's

always a conflict, because I'm not with my people. I know that our Ancestors are with us. In our language, we say tómiyeqw, "seven generations back and seven generations forward." Our community has worked to try to establish treaty agreements. It has been very difficult, for many reasons. As our leader has stated, the work ahead is not easy, but there's hope.

To see you walk through those doors as a sovereign leader in British Columbia is such an honour for me today. I'm so humbled to be in the presence of a strong treaty Nation like yours.

I only wanted to speak today to reflect on the importance of bringing language into these agreements, bringing language back to our people, because there are words in our languages that do not translate to English. There's no way we can explain the sentiment that we have for our land, for the water, for the animals and for the trees that we connect to and that are alive to us, that continue to show us the way forward, for exactly the complicated issues that we have in the province.

That's why I continue to stand as an elected leader in British Columbia and hope to carry the work that's been passed down with humility and remembering that for all of the generations that came before, all of our Elders, the suffering that they endured for us to be here, we can never pay that back, but we can do our best. The language, for us, means everything, so that we don't lose that connection to our past.

I only wanted to congratulate you and just express how honoured I am to be here today from the official opposition but also from my nation, which hopes to do something like this and to find our way through reconciliation. It's messy. There are a lot of conversations that need to be had. There are a lot of voices that need to be heard. The most important thing is that we bring everybody to the table in a respectful way and that we try to honour as much as we possibly can.

It makes my heart happy. It makes me feel good.

I know that everybody in this House is committed to finding a way forward for all of our people so that British Columbia can prosper once again.

Le hoy.

The Speaker: Seeing no further speakers, the Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation will close debate.

Hon. Christine Boyle: I want to thank all of the members present for their cooperation and for the words of support from all three parties. I want to particularly thank the MLA for Chilliwack–Cultus Lake and the House Leader for the official opposition not only for powerful words but for bringing in the language of the Stó:lō Nation as well.

I, too, think that the shift in language of this treaty and the opportunity to bring a nation's language into this space is groundbreaking. I'm so grateful to get to do that work together and to have the opportunity to vote on these amendments, which include so powerfully integrating ʔayʔaǰuθəm into this treaty agreement.

[2:10 p.m.]

This is a living agreement, and as others have remarked on, I am struck by the reminder of the new title, which is a good relationship, ʔaʔǰɯnxʷegəs.

Now, I don't know if I'm allowed to do this, but we do a lot of heckling, so I'm going to just do it anyway. I'm going to ask folks to join me in practising saying that new title of the new treaty, a good relationship.

Some Hon. Members: ʔaʔǰɯnxʷegəs.

Hon. Christine Boyle: Pretty good. Pretty good. As a former camp counsellor, I appreciate you all participating so willingly in that ʔaʔǰɯnxʷegəs, a good relationship, which is what got us to this point.

I want to acknowledge the huge amount of work that brings us here and the work that we have to do still ahead together in good relationship.

With that, thank you.

I move the motion.

The Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Thank you to all speakers.

Members, the question is the adoption of the motion.

Motion approved.

[Applause.]

Hon. Mike Farnworth: In this chamber, I call second reading debate on Bill 15.

In the Douglas Fir Room, Section A, I call continued estimates debate for the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and after that, Ministry of Attorney General estimates.

Committee stage to be called on Bill 13 in the tiny House, Section C, the Birch Room.

[Lorne Doerkson in the chair.]

Second Reading of Bills

BILL 15 — INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS ACT

Deputy Speaker: Thank you, everybody. Welcome and good afternoon. We are going to contemplate Bill 15 debate this afternoon. We'll call on the minister to introduce the bill.

Hon. Bowinn Ma: I move that the bill be read a second time now.

I'm pleased to rise in the House today as Minister of

Infrastructure to speak to this piece of legislation. New and expanded schools, hospitals and other health care facilities are critical for growing communities. That's why our government has been working to implement the single largest and most ambitious capital infrastructure plan in B.C. history.

For more than 80,000 students, more than 226 new, expanded and seismically upgraded schools have been built or are underway. Additionally, more than three dozen major hospital and health care projects and over 10,700 student housing beds are complete or underway in communities across the province, and there is more to do.

Despite our efforts, however, an exploding population in recent years has meant that even a record-breaking financial investment isn't enough to ensure new infrastructure is keeping up with the growing needs of British Columbians. We need to find ways to do this faster, better, more economically. That is why my new Ministry of Infrastructure was created and why we have tabled Bill 15, the Infrastructure Projects Act.

The new Ministry of Infrastructure was formed last year to support B.C.'s growing communities by providing major capital project planning services, procurement and delivery for schools, hospitals and health care facilities, post-secondary facilities and other important public buildings.

[2:15 p.m.]

By consolidating the capital functions that were previously spread across ministries, the new ministry can officially lead work in communities on behalf of the province and ensure that government planning and resources are well coordinated.

This will allow the ministry to identify and implement opportunities to reduce costs for taxpayers, to take advantage of economies of scale by procuring in a bundled way — for instance, through modular expansions for schools or long-term-care buildings — and to create project efficiencies, such as the standardization of infrastructure.

The new ministry will also be empowered to deliver projects for health authorities, school districts and post-secondary institutions on a project-by-project basis when it makes sense to do so. This will enable the ministry to provide additional capacity to deliver major capital projects for partners who may not have deep experience in capital projects themselves or who don't regularly employ large capital teams.

Projects too often face unnecessary delays caused by existing approval processes and lengthy timelines for permitting requirements. Delays can mean missed opportunities and higher costs for much-needed infrastructure projects.

Therefore, the ministry is also mandated to expedite the approval of projects in order to ensure faster delivery of designated infrastructure investments. This is critical at a time when government is working to deliver the largest capital investment in the province's history amidst global economic uncertainty.

During this legislative session, the opposition parties have spoken to the need for more schools, hospitals, clean energy projects and other critical infrastructure across our province, which this bill will help to deliver. This bill will support the ministry's work in two ways.

The act's first purpose is to provide statutory authority for the Ministry of Infrastructure to conduct activities related to planning and prioritization, procurement and the acquisition, development and administration of surplus lands, as well as to consolidate the duties, powers and functions that relate to capital planning and infrastructure from the Ministries of Health, Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills, and Education and Child Care. It will consolidate those duties, powers and functions into the Ministry of Infrastructure.

This act brings over those powers from the various schools, universities, colleges and health statutes. It will allow the new ministry to deliver projects on a case-by-case basis on behalf of health authorities, school districts and post-secondary institutions when it makes sense to do so.

This would allow the Ministry of Infrastructure to do a coordinated procurement for multiple projects at the same time, to achieve cost savings per project. For instance, as I noted before, the ministry could bundle procurement for project components for multiple health authorities' projects together or procure multiple modular classrooms for multiple school districts at one time.

As I noted earlier, it would also allow the Ministry of Infrastructure to build a school for a school district in situations where a school district might be very small or inexperienced with building a school on their own. As it stands, without Bill 15, the school district must fully lead their own project.

The second purpose of the legislation is to provide the province with tools to streamline and expedite decisions, so that projects that provide critical benefits to British Columbians can be built more efficiently and cost-effectively.

Specifically, the act will do this by enabling the Lieutenant Governor in Council to designate two categories of infrastructure projects. Category 1 projects are Ministry of Infrastructure projects and other ministries' projects that are provincially funded. Category 2 projects are projects that have been designated as provincially significant and could include projects delivered by entities outside of government, such as Crown corporations, local governments, First Nations, the federal government or private proponents.

To provide greater clarity, category 1 projects could also include projects delivered by the Ministry of Transportation and Transit. However, immediately following royal assent, it is anticipated that Ministry of Infrastructure projects will be designated as category 1 projects as a priority.

[2:20 p.m.]

Category 2 projects need to create significant economic, social or environmental benefits for people in our province. They must have First Nations support and must also significantly contribute to the priorities of the province, such as public infrastructure, critical mineral supply, food or water security, human health and safety, energy security, recovery from post-disaster events, trade diversification, access to new markets, supply chain security, replacing U.S. imports, housing or reaching British Columbia's climate goals.

The criteria for provincially significant projects will expressly exclude pipeline projects, LNG facilities, low-barrier housing and overdose prevention sites.

Projects that are designated as provincially significant would not get access to all the streamlining tools of this act automatically. It would depend on the circumstances, on a case-by-case basis.

Ultimately, however, it is important to note that none of the tools in this act allow for such a project to skip over environmental standards or provincial obligations to First Nations. The tools instead allow for decisions to be made more quickly, whether that decision be a yes or a no.

All category 1 and 2 projects will be required to uphold B.C.'s high environmental standards and our government's commitment to the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. Again, this bill does not change that.

Several powers will be available under the act to get shovels in the ground faster for designated projects. Some of the powers expedite provincial permitting, while some streamline local approvals. Upon designation, the Lieutenant Governor in Council may select the power or powers that are authorized to be used to expedite that specific category 2 designated project. Any combination of these powers may be authorized by the Lieutenant Governor in Council and must be authorized by regulation in order to be implemented.

While we continue to work to speed up permitting across government, this act will enable the province to expedite these processes and environmental assessments on projects that bring significant benefits to B.C.

Under this act, the Ministry of Infrastructure may be authorized to collaborate with natural resource permitting ministries such as Water, Land and Resource Stewardship, Energy and Climate Solutions and Mining and Critical Minerals in order to identify, track and prioritize provincial permitting to expedite designated projects.

For example, we had a school in recent years where a provincial permit was required very late in its development process because the school district's team had not realized until quite late that what they thought was a ditch in the corner of the property met the statutory definition of a stream, under provincial law. This resulted in the entire school being delayed for two years, while they waited for their permit to be processed.

With Bill 15, this permit, under this circumstance, would be brought forward for immediate review. The project would still have to meet all of the environmental standards of the permit, but that permit would be seen by reviewers much more quickly.

Additionally, this act will enable the Lieutenant Governor in Council to authorize the use of qualified professional certifications in place of select lower-risk provincial permits in order to expedite the approval of a designated project. I would note that complex and high-risk permits will remain with statutory decision–makers.

To enable a framework that will allow for qualified professional certifications to be used, the act provides regulation-making powers to the Lieutenant Governor in Council. This process would not be appropriate for all decisions, but it could be appropriate for some.

Keeping in mind that a major project has many decisions and permits that it must achieve success on to move forward, a qualified professional certification process is not a one-and-done sort of situation for project approvals. Again, major decisions would still be left with the statutory decision–maker within government.

This framework, the qualified professional certifications framework, will be developed in consultation with interest holders and key partners, such as First Nations regulatory bodies, interested private sector proponents, natural resource permitting ministries and the office of the superintendent of professional governance. This framework will ensure that quality standards and safety mechanisms are in place to ensure professional integrity and environmental protections remain a priority.

[2:25 p.m.]

To illustrate how this tool might work, I'll provide a hypothetical example. Let's say that a provincially significant private sector project receives permission to access the qualified professional reliance route on some provincial decisions. Per the set-out process, the proponent accesses two professional engineers, independent of each other, who have been pre-qualified by government as being trustworthy and experienced enough to provide a professional certification for a certain decision.

The project goes through the rigour of the provincial standard. However, for a specified decision or specified permit, the two professional engineers would independently conduct works and activities to provide their assessment and recommendation around certification to the B.C. government public service as to whether the criteria has been met for the particular decision.

I look forward to working with my counterparts within government and with a broad cross-section of interest holders and partners on this framework, that will go a long way in creating efficiencies in permitting, in collaboration and partnership with trusted licensed professionals.

There are two tools available in the act that relate to environmental assessments. Firstly, the act will provide the Ministry of Infrastructure with the power to order the approval of low-risk duplicative or redundant provincial permits to be issued under other provincial natural-resourcing permitting statutes.

This power will be developed in consultation with First Nations and can only be exercised where three conditions have been met:

(1) The designated project is also a reviewable project under the Environmental Assessment Act.

(2) The environmental assessment for the designated project is complete, and an environmental assessment certificate has been issued.

(3) Only where the minister has been authorized to do so by the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

With this power, we can ensure that projects continue to undergo robust environmental reviews and consultation with First Nations as part of the review and approval process. But by foregoing duplicative requirements for other lower-risk provincial permits, we can expedite approvals and get projects moving more quickly.

Bill 15 would allow government to recognize that because the environmental assessment process is already so rigorous, the need to go through more minor provincial permits following the achievement of an environmental assessment certificate can be redundant in many cases.

Here is an example. Let's say that a mine has successfully completed an environmental assessment and received their environmental assessment certificate. The five-year process that it took to achieve the certificate included a rigorous assessment of the impact of the mine on the trees in the area and the impact to biodiversity that removal of those trees would result in.

Under the current process, the mine would then have to subsequently apply to the Ministry of Forests for a separate tree-cutting permit for the trees that have already been assessed. Bill 15 would allow for that tree-cutting permit to be automatically issued following the environmental assessment certificate, due to the impacts of the removal of those trees having already been assessed by a more rigorous process through the environmental assessment office.

Our government has been working hard to speed up projects while making sure that we continue to defend our clean air and water and consult with First Nations. We are committed to continuing this critically important work.

We also recognize that the existing environmental assessment process does not provide the flexibility and efficiency that is needed for some projects. Therefore, the legislation adds a new part to the Environmental Assessment Act to enable the environmental assessment office to work with interest holders to develop an expedited environmental assessment process that is an alternative to the one currently provided for under the act.

Projects designated for this expedited process will continue to undergo robust environmental reviews and support our goals to build a sustainable future for everyone. The environmental assessment office will develop this framework in consultation with its partners and interest holders, notably First Nations. I will note that once developed, this expedited process will only be available to projects that are designated under this legislation and where authorized by the Lieutenant Governor in Council.

Here is an example of how this might work. Let's say that a project comes forward that is a collaboration between First Nations and the private sector. It has broad support to proceed but does have potential impacts on the environment that need to be assessed. They appeal to the B.C. government for designation as a provincially significant project on the basis of its economic impact on communities and contributions to a critical mineral that is needed to replace U.S. imports.

[2:30 p.m.]

The environmental assessment office does a preliminary review of the project and speaks with all partners and stakeholders involved. The environmental assessment office then determines that based on its broad support and low to moderate levels of complexity, it is a good candidate for a streamlined process that takes two years instead of five years or more, and the project receives permission to access the streamlined process. So that's an example of how that process might be used.

I will say that I have heard some reference or describe this expedited environmental assessment process as bypassing the environmental assessment process altogether. This is incorrect. Projects using this tool would still have to go through an environmental assessment process. This tool is about putting projects through the same rigour of an environmental assessment process, but in ways that allow it to be done more quickly when conditions are right.

I want to be clear. Consultation with First Nations is and will continue to be critical and required. We remain committed to our section 35 constitutional obligations, as well as our obligations under the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

This legislation will also address certain types of approvals that happen at the local government level. I have heard from many local governments who tell me that the processes they are obliged to follow are sometimes unable to facilitate speedy permitting on projects that are critically important to their communities. Since the tabling of Bill 15, I have also heard from local government leaders who are excited about the opportunities to collaboratively work with the province on solving issues that can ensnare important infrastructure projects.

Bill 15 provides two tools to expedite designated projects with respect to local permits and approvals.

First, it sets out a framework for an agreement-seeking process between project proponents, including the prov-

ince, and local approval authorities to collaborate and come to an agreement on addressing constraints that impede the construction or intended operations of a designated project.

Where an agreement can be reached, the legislation provides for the agreed-upon replacement measure to take the place of the identified constraint. This legislation provides for facilitators to be appointed to assist the parties, if required, to help reach an agreement, and for monitors to be appointed to ensure that the designated project is undertaken and completed in an appropriate manner.

As well, it provides for the province to step in to develop replacement measures to replace a constraint where agreement cannot be reached between a project proponent and a local government approval authority. This latter provision is to be used only as a last resort, as the goal in all of these projects is collaboration.

We are stronger together, and we want to be able to support local governments in achieving our shared goals, which is what British Columbians also expect us to do.

I would note two things about these provisions. Under the act, local authorities are defined to include a local government, the University Endowment Lands or the Islands Trust, and the framework in this legislation is modelled after the process laid out in the Significant Projects Streamlining Act and is not an entirely new power.

I note that the Significant Projects Streamlining Act was enacted in 2003. It preceded the enactment of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act and therefore does not reflect the requirements for the province to align its laws with the United Nations declaration under section 3.

Further, with recent population growth and economic uncertainty, our province needs the ability to build schools faster, and with an aging population, we need the ability to meet the health care needs of our communities. The existing Significant Projects Streamlining Act was not designed with those needs in mind.

Additionally, that act does not account for projects where the Ministry of Infrastructure is a project proponent, which this legislation does. This tool has thus been modernized and brought into the Infrastructure Projects Act, and the Significant Projects Streamlining Act will be repealed as part of this bill.

We are working closely with the Declaration Act secretariat and the Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation and will be undergoing deeper consultation with First Nations for policy and regulation development.

Here is an example of how the municipal authorizations tool might be used. Let's say that a town is devastated by wildfire or another natural disaster and that they want to rebuild quickly in a way that ensures that their communities are more resilient than before.

[2:35 p.m.]

They identify that their usual planning, development and permitting processes were not set up to support a speedy post-disaster recovery scenario and are too bureaucratic and inflexible for the challenges that they're facing.

This town asked the province for help on this, and the provincial government and local government worked together to come up with a plan that allows for multiple processes and steps to be done all at once across the entire disaster zone, instead of doing it step by step, which could take many years.

The second tool in this legislation is a tool for local governments to take advantage of if they so choose. The legislation empowers local governments to expedite and streamline their own permitting and approval processes by providing for a mechanism for them to request provincially legislated requirements to be waived or modified for a designated project.

Under this legislation, a local government could, by way of resolution, request that planning requirements be waived or modified, such as requirements for development approval for a designated project to be in alignment with the official community plan in order to move forward. This tool could eliminate issues that we've encountered in the past.

In one instance, for example, a student housing project was delayed by a year or more because of the requirement for a local government to update their official community plan first. Everyone in this case, including the municipality, wanted construction to begin, but rigid provincial requirements dictated that the official community plan needed to be updated before development permits could be issued, and therefore before building permits could be issued and construction could begin. Under this legislation, the municipality would be able to request that the province waive or modify these provincial requirements.

In keeping with our intent throughout this legislation to preserve health and safety and environmental protections, certain requirements that impact those areas are carved out of this power to exempt or modify. Examples of such requirements are those that are critical to health and safety, the natural environment or protection from hazardous conditions. Such requirements might be building inspections, occupancy permits, requirements related to sewer or stormwater management and engineering permits.

Bill 15 signals government's new approach to infrastructure development. Through the consolidation of capital functions across the critical school, health and post-secondary sectors, the new Ministry of Infrastructure will be able to prioritize and plan projects from an overarching perspective to enable critically important infrastructure projects, such as schools and hospitals, to be built more quickly and cost-effectively for people in our communities.

The legislation will also empower local governments to expedite and streamline their own permitting and approval processes by removing provincially legislated

requirements that are sometimes the cause of local government approval delays. It establishes a framework for alternative permit authorizations through an agreement-seeking approach with local governments to help get shovels in the ground faster for provincial and other designated projects. To support the implementation of this framework, the Ministry of Infrastructure will begin consulting with local governments this year.

Finally, with this legislation, we will build upon work already underway across government to improve efficiencies and further support government to get out of its own way with respect to provincial permitting and project approvals, without reducing environmental standards or affecting our obligations to First Nations.

The latter, in particular, is assured by both section 20 in Bill 15 itself and by the Interpretation Act, which requires that all provincial laws, including Bill 15, be interpreted in a way that upholds Aboriginal and treaty rights as recognized in section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, and are consistent with B.C.'s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

Pragmatically speaking, Bill 15 is about moving projects forward more quickly, which is not possible without First Nations support. Everything about Bill 15 is about accelerating infrastructure, and that can only be done hand in hand with First Nations.

British Columbians expect their government to deliver the critical infrastructure projects their growing communities need. At its core, Bill 15 is about doing just that, not by reducing standards but by overcoming duplicative processes and redundancies that sometimes ensnare critical projects. Members of the opposition have regularly referred to the need to build projects more quickly, and this bill is an important step towards that.

[2:40 p.m.]

I would hope, then, that they put their vote to where their mouth is and join me in support of Bill 15, B.C.'s Infrastructure Projects Act.

With that, I look forward to hearing from my colleagues in this continued debate today on second reading of this bill.

Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much, Minister of Infrastructure, for opening debate on Bill 15.

Now recognizing the member for Kamloops Centre.

Peter Milobar: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be our designated speaker on this bill.

There's a lot of ground to cover, actually, with Bill 15. With the government changing, as is their prerogative, the order of bill debate today, I was fortunate enough, I guess, to be wrapping up my Bill 14 comments just before lunch, and here I find myself immediately after lunch addressing Bill 15.

I say that because the two…. I referenced this in my Bill 14 comments, and I think the minister even slightly touched on it in her comments — that we can't look at these bills in isolation. There's a reason the government made Bill 7, Bill 14 and Bill 15 confidence votes, because they're very far-reaching, and they're very all-encompassing, and frankly, they're all blatant power grabs by the Premier's office under the guise of a tariff threat.

I'll dive into some of what the minister said throughout my comments. We're talking about bringing on stream a critical mineral mine with expedited permitting, expedited environmental assessment process under Bill 15 that will require several overrides by cabinet.

What we heard in the minister's speech were lots of references to "may" or "might" or "possibly." What the minister fails to highlight in her comments — and understandable; any government minister would stay away from this area — is the amount of regulatory power that Bill 15 would put in the hands of cabinet through orders in council, and that's fundamentally, at its core, the problem with Bill 15.

I'll touch on one area to start, and I'll likely loop back to it. When we hear about the words used on the Environmental Assessment Act and the changes…. I want to read into the record a government press release and see how similar the language is — from what we heard today for this government press release.

> "The British Columbia government has introduced legislation to modernize the environmental assessment of major resource projects. This is designed to provide a clear and timely path for the approval of responsible resource projects, pursue reconciliation with B.C.'s First Nations, Indigenous peoples, increase public engagement and transparency and deliver strong environmental protections.
>
> "British Columbia was one of the first provinces in Canada to introduce environmental assessment legislation in 1995 and is making a comprehensive regulatory framework stronger.
>
> "'By revitalizing our environmental assessment process, we're striking a better balance for our province, where good projects that respect B.C.'s environment, Indigenous peoples and the public will be approved more quickly,' said George Heyman, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy. 'Our province was built upon the wealth of natural resources at our disposal. This legislation reaffirms the continued importance of these resources to British Columbians and enhances public trust by engaging people and communities early to ensure our resources are being used sustainably. Growing a strong economy and protecting the environment we all cherish go hand in hand. That's the legacy we want our kids and grandkids to inherit.'
>
> "Revitalizing the environmental assessment process in B.C. is a shared priority between the govern-

ment and the B.C. Green Party caucus, and it's part of the confidence and supply agreement.

"'Revitalizing the environmental assessment process is a key shared commitment because we both recognize the need to strengthen public trust in government decision-making,' said Sonia Furstenau, MLA for Cowichan Valley. 'It is vital to modernize the EA process so that important considerations like climate change, cumulative impacts and new scientific standards are properly incorporated. I look forward to discussing the legislation further so we can ensure that the wealth of our natural resources and the well-being of our ecological systems can be enjoyed by British Columbians for generations to come.'

[2:45 p.m.]

"In introducing the Environmental Assessment Act, Heyman said Indigenous participation in environmental assessments will also be greatly enhanced. If passed, the legislation will result in an EA process delivering timely evidence-based decisions where the public can more actively participate. The legislation reflects government's commitment to reconciliation and the implementation of the United Nations declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples.

"'Having Indigenous collaboration from the beginning means more certain and efficient processes where good projects can move forward quickly, providing benefits to Indigenous peoples while respecting their rights, values and culture,' said Heyman. 'We want to reduce the potential for these types of legal challenges we've too frequently seen in B.C. These have impacted our province's economic development, eroded public trust, alienated Indigenous communities and left project proponents trying to navigate through a costly, time-consuming process.'

"The legislation will also provide increased clarity and certainty to project proponents through an early engagement phase that will identify the focus areas for the project assessment prior to proceeding through an environmental assessment; enhanced public engagement, including additional comment periods; earlier collaboration between the environmental assessment office and local communities, coupled with funding to support public participation; the ability to more fully assess positive and adverse environmental, economic, social, cultural and health effects, including greenhouse gas emissions and require their consideration in decisions.

"Strengthened compliance and enforcement for approved projects, along with audits, to make sure conditions, including EA certificates are mitigating identified adverse effects as intended. Government has been engaging extensively on a revitalized EA process for over one year, consulting with Indigenous peoples, industry, communities, environmental organizations and the public.

"This included establishing an EA advisory committee that included a cross-section of members from industry, academia, non-governmental organizations, Indigenous peoples and local governments. The committee met for over 75 hours and produced a report recommending changes to the current EA process and legislative framework, with direct engagement with a variety of key stakeholders, including industry and business associations, environmental associations, local governments and EA practitioners and extensive engagements with Indigenous people through bilateral meetings and regional workshops and a public comment period on a discussion paper outlining the proposed changes, which received over 2,500 public comments and 60 formal submissions from Indigenous peoples, industry and stakeholders."

That was November 5, 2018. The language sounds very similar to the government's new stated objective in Bill 15. Except in 2018, they insisted they knew how to get things moving while still protecting the framework around environmental assessments and respecting Indigenous comments.

In fact, the people that came out supporting this at the time…. Grand Chief Stewart Phillip; Grand Chief Edward John, First Nations Summit political executive; Regional Chief Terry Teegee, B.C. Assembly of First Nations; president and CEO of the mining association, Bryan Cox; Gavin Smith, staff counsel to West Coast Environmental Law Association — they all came out in favour.

What do people say about Bill 15? Well, let's see.

Jody Wilson-Raybould predicted more lawsuits. George Heyman said in 2018 that it would result in less lawsuits. UBCIC, Stewart Phillip's organization — he's still there — are adamantly opposed.

The minister talks about municipalities and her discussions, with some wanting this. It's interesting, because back in 2018, they actually consulted with municipalities. This year UBCM, which typically doesn't actually take very strong stances or firm positions on legislation, is not a fan of Bill 15. Stand.earth is not a fan of Bill 15. And the list goes on and on and on.

That's the problem. With this government, it's rinse and repeat. Except with Bill 15, they finally have essentially acknowledged they don't know what they're doing. They don't know how to move projects forward in a timely fashion while still respecting all those other values that former Minister Heyman talked about. So their solution is just to give cabinet unlimited overriding powers on a wide range of areas.

[2:50 p.m.]

Now, about a week later, ten days later, George Heyman wrote an op-ed.

"When the use of B.C.'s natural resources intersects

with the protection of our natural environment, British Columbians expect their government to make decisions that are transparent, responsible and, above all, in the public interest. We've recently introduced new measures we believe will restore the public's trust in a way that government manages our natural resources.

"Our new Environmental Assessment Act will bring about a strong and transparent environmental assessment process based on science. The decisions we make about the resource development affect the air, land and water we value. We have a responsibility to our children and grandchildren to pass along a healthy environment, and that's why concerns such as sustainability, climate impacts, community health and safety and effects on future generations will all be addressed in future assessment decisions.

"The general public and Indigenous communities will be able to participate meaningfully, and companies will be able to get good projects reviewed and ready more quickly. Local and Indigenous communities as well as the project proponents will be engaged much earlier in the new process. This is to everyone's benefit.

"The time for the public and Indigenous peoples to flag questions or concerns about a project is at the beginning, not well down the road after companies have already developed project designs. This way, companies can incorporate feedback into project designs early, eliminating the need for costly design changes or expensive litigation later on.

"The new process will provide more public comment periods as well as funding to support public participation. There will be independent reviews on the evidence and science put forward by proponents, and Indigenous knowledge and values will be incorporated. Overall there will be shorter time frames to get projects assessed and decisions made.

"Where a project requires both provincial and federal approval, we will work with the federal government to reduce redundancies while retaining independent final decision-making authority.

"The collaborative partnership with Indigenous groups will advance reconciliation through a consent-based process that must be considered and addressed by ministers when we make decisions. This is so Indigenous people can share in the economic prosperity of a robust sustainable resource sector while their rights, values and culture are respected.

"Another important way we are increasing public confidence in resource management is by improving the way we regulate the qualified professionals who make decisions in the natural resource section."

Let me repeat that. Another important way we're increasing public confidence in resource management is by improving the way we regulate the qualified professionals who make decisions in the natural resource sector. I'll come back to that in a second.

"New legislation we've introduced will improve the professional reliance model by aligning and consolidating oversight of regulated professions integral to the model. This includes agrologists, technologists, technicians, engineers, geoscientists, biologists and foresters. Our aim is to ensure that roles, responsibilities and expectations of qualified professionals are clear. This will improve public trust in the professional reliance model and provide industry the certainty it requires to continue to generate jobs in a healthy economy.

"The legislation we have introduced for both the environmental assessment process and regulating qualified professionals is designed to get responsible, sustainable projects approved in B.C. more quickly and efficiently so communities can prosper, Indigenous peoples can prosper and people can have good jobs all while ensuring environmental responsibility."

That was November 15, 2018.

Mr. Heyman and myself did not always see eye to eye on everything, I think it's fair to say, but I was his critic back then. I was his critic from 2017 until the election in 2020. I remember very clearly the debates we had around the Environmental Assessment Act changes, professional reliance model changes.

Now you hear the government talking Bill 15, and they seem to have zero issues with the professionals that are going to be providing reports. Back in 2018, they needed to blow the whole thing up because they didn't trust the reports that were coming forward. You know, it's interesting because again, in 2018, the language from the government was all about how this is going to speed everything up.

Here we are seven years later. Very little has actually been approved in that time frame — very little; and the government says they need Bill 15 to correct the problem that they created back in 2018. But they won't actually say that. They won't say that about 15, they won't say that about Bill 14, and they won't say that about Bill 7.

[2:55 p.m.]

Make no mistake about it. I do not think it's coincidental that as part 4 of Bill 7 got repealed, Bills 14 and 15 magically appeared. The government would not need Bill 14 and 15 if Bill 7 had stayed intact. They would have had their all-encompassing power, their overreach, their ability to make whatever rules they wanted at the cabinet table through the Premier's office.

It's not just in 2018 that the government was repeatedly talking about how they've sped things up and how they'd fix things. And they could say: "Well, this Premier wasn't the Premier then. That was then; this is now." So let's look at what this Premier promised about permitting timelines while he was the Premier.

April 14, 2023, the Premier, in a story by the Prince George *Citizen*. He was up talking to COFI and others.

> "'We're going to retain our high standards, but we're going to reform our permitting program to make sure that it's timely and predictable for people and that it works. In the meantime, we're bringing on 40 additional staff to work through the backlog within the permitting system.'
>
> "The Premier admitted that Friday to a crowd of 600 delegates at the B.C. Council of Forest Industries convention in Prince George, acknowledging that lengthy delays to approve mines, forestry developments and housing projects are far too prevalent, and he vowed to fix a broken system.

He said:

> "I know the state of permitting in the province is unacceptable. It's too slow, too complicated and many governments have grappled with it and failed to address it. It needs to be addressed. I saw it first as Housing Minister, working with people in the housing sector who wanted to build and had to deal with five ministries and, in some cases, multiple years before they could put a shovel in the ground. Bureaucratic backlogs and delays are unacceptable."

He also admitted:

> "Some of the delays are out of the province's hands, with federal and municipal and First Nations jurisdictions adding to the complexity of permitting. 'It's an issue I've raised with the federal government, and there's enthusiasm on their side to get permitting times down, too, and find other ways to work together.'"

He goes on to a few other…:

> "A vital message that I've heard certainly from the sector is predictability. They need to know where the trees are coming from and that the basic for the forest industry…. So our goal as a government is to deliver that. We've had lots of challenges. We've had wildfires. We've had the end of beetle-killed wood and court decisions that have resulted in injunctions around issuing permits."

You have Jody Wilson-Raybould — who obviously knows the subject area much better than I do, especially given her history with the federal government — saying that this is going to lead to more lawsuits.

Back in 2023, we had the Premier already saying: "We know that the era of litigation and fighting First Nations as a predominant response is over and that big changes are necessary. We have to address the legal rights and interests." You had the Premier acknowledging in 2023 that was still a big problem. You had former Minister Heyman in 2018 saying they'd solved that problem.

We've had other pieces of legislation come forward and proposed changes that they tried and then walked away from in the Land Act, before the election. This government said that would solve the legal issues as well.

The reality is that Bill 15 is the government's hamfisted way to take the full reins and the full control over processes of picking winners and losers of projects that they deem tolerable to them or not. One only has to look at what projects, what classification of projects are exempted to see that they've already started to draw the lines in as to what they feel is morally acceptable for them as a government to support or not.

When they exclude pipelines and LNG…. When the LNG project, when Site C and when Kinder Morgan were responsible for 80 percent of our GDP growth over the last four to five years, to just flat out, up front exclude them…. At least they're being honest with everyone about their thoughts around that. But it's not like they didn't just put up a bit of a fake fight on those things and still proceed with them.

If we're truly trying to rebuff what is happening and get highest and best yield of our products to international markets, it doesn't mean everything should be rubberstamped — absolutely not.

[3:00 p.m.]

This is a government, at a time when you have a new Prime Minister talking about energy corridors, when you have other provinces talking about trying to get their resources to tidewater, saying they're not willing to entertain expediating anything like that, unless it's dredging of Burrard Inlet. The minister that's flip-flopped back and forth on Kinder Morgan is okay dredging Burrard Inlet so we can have even bigger tankers with the logic that that means fewer ships.

Again, how is the public, based on that track record of decision-making coming out of this government's members…? You know, this government loves to try to heap back — back when our leader was in government, back when he did this. He was in cabinet in the second half of when he was part of a government. I'm surprised they don't say when I was in government. I was there for 18 days, so I guess that qualifies me as well, you know.

You would think that the ministers that fling that out know that ministers…. You know, they bring their best case forward on their files, but ultimately, Premiers' offices hold a lot of power on decision-making and direction. This government would be no different than the previous NDP government, which would be no different than the previous B.C. Liberal government. When they try to hang everything on one minister at a table, that a previous government did, it's a little bit rich.

When I say, you know, the Energy Minister had these positions, we're not talking about his positions that he inherited from some other Energy Minister. These were his own personal decisions he was making and positions he was taking, and they never want to actually answer for

that in this House. They never want to answer for their own track record of ever-changing priorities or ways that they view, especially, resource development.

Yesterday when we talked about a flawed piece of private members' legislation moving forward despite the Attorney General's advice, the Premier was kind of chuckling away. I hollered over to him: "Yes, because what could go wrong with this government expediating things?"

I would point out that, as best as I understand it, you know, the Mount Polley tailings design was actually approved by the NDP government when they were in office. They might not want to talk about that. But if we want to keep going back to the sins of previous governments and different decision-making, that's the confidence they want us to enshrine on them now. It's their track record and saying: "Just trust us. We know how to expediate things. We know how to do it without proper oversight."

I'm going to touch on it, and I'll come back again. Thankfully, I've been allotted some time by our House Leader on this.

Another area the minister talked about was that this will help us build schools. Well, a couple of things. The treasury is broke, so first off, you actually need money to be able to build schools. If every highway and hospital project you were doing wasn't consistently over budget, you could actually be building those schools at the same time right now.

I say that every time in my area, in Kamloops. Every time a local area highway around the Trans-Canada went $75 million or $100 million over budget — and it was actually getting scaled back at the same time, less project for more money — I would point out that extra $100 million or $120 million would build two more schools in Kamloops. We should actually be building and expanding a highway while having two other construction sites providing schools for the same amount of money out of our taxpayers' pockets.

It's interesting, eight years in, that this government has finally decided that they're overspending on every project and what they need is the ability.... They need all-encompassing power in Bill 15 to be able to go out and tender two or three schools at the same time. That absolutely makes no sense.

[3:05 p.m.]

If you want to build two or three schools at the same time and bundle them to try to get best value from a contractor, just go ahead and do it. You just make the bid. You ask people to bid on three schools so they can leapfrog their crews from site to site. They can take their form people from site to site. They can take their framing people from site to site, their HVAC contractors from site to site, and they can roll them.

You can already do that. You don't need Bill 15 to actually do that. You actually need a government that knows how to deliver infrastructure, which this government doesn't know to do.

Now, I say that because the minister.... You know, they announced, in the budget, plans around modular schools and other things. I got asked by several manufacturing companies.... There are quite a few in and around Kamloops that do camp-type modular housing, but they've branched out into other types of modular industrial-type construction, commercial industrial construction. They're big employers in Kamloops and area.

The prefabricated school classroom additions — they asked me what the process would be to tap into these hundreds of millions of dollars the government had identified in the budget. I said I didn't know but I'd find out. I would send a letter off.

Now, in fairness to the Minister of Infrastructure, I didn't cc the Minister of Infrastructure. I was running out of ministries that I could think might be connected to a school capital project, because this is brand new in terms of how this government is now structuring certain projects and which ministry it goes through.

Typically, you would ask the Education Minister about a school construction project. That's pretty standard. You'd ask the Health Minister about his hospital. This government wants to change that — add a different layer of ministerial bureaucracy to speed things up. Seems like strange logic to me, but let's see how it's going so far, shall we?

On March 26, I wrote the Education Minister. I cc'd the Minister of Finance, who I'm the critic of, thinking it might fall into her area, since it was a budget program, and the Minister of Citizens' Services, who deals with a lot of procurement. I wasn't sure if it might fall into them.

I'll just read the whole letter. It's very short. It says:

> "As MLA for Kamloops Centre, I'm writing to seek detailed information about the bidding process regarding prefabricated school classroom additions. Given the current economic challenges facing local manufacturers, I am seeking clarity on several key aspects of the procurement process. Specifically, I would appreciate guidance on the following points:
>
> "(1) Bidding process. What are the precise steps for manufacturers to submit bids for these classroom addition projects?
>
> "(2) Bid publication. Will these projects be listed on B.C. Bid and, if so, will they be posted by individual school districts or through the provincial government?
>
> "(3) Manufacturer eligibility. Are there any specific requirements regarding local manufacturing? Specifically, will the bidding be restricted to B.C. or Canadian manufacturers due to current economic considerations and tariff threats?
>
> "(4) Project timeline. What is the anticipated

timeline for project postings and potential contract awards?

"The local manufacturing sector is experiencing significant economic pressure, and an expediated response would be greatly appreciated. These details will help local prefabricated structure manufacturers prepare and position themselves for potential opportunities.

"Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. I look forward to your comprehensive response. Sincerely," myself.

Not a big, politically charged…. No big gotcha questions in there, I don't think. Pretty straightforward, only four. Pretty well laid out. Pretty easy to understand what direction I was going for. That was on March 26, to the Education Minister.

We decided to follow up on May 8, having not heard anything back at all, and we got a very quick response back, finally, saying: "Actually, you've got to go talk to Infrastructure." To Infrastructure's credit, on May 9, they said: "Let us get back to you. Thank you for your query. We'll reply back."

I don't necessarily…. I'm not taking issue with the Ministry of Infrastructure, because they can't respond to something they didn't even know existed. Three different ministries, though, that were contacted, that ought to have known where to direct that query back on March 26, sat silent until we decided to follow up on May 8.

I directly talk about tariffs. I directly talk about Buy B.C., Buy Canadian in this — all the language the government wraps themselves in, this whole time.

[3:10 p.m.]

But they need Bill 15 to act with urgency. They need Bill 15 to actually get their act together, ministry to ministry, and say: "Oops. The MLA erred on which ministry that went to. We should just fire that query over to the appropriate minister."

Again, Infrastructure can only do with what they were provided the information on. They responded very quickly once they finally got the notice. It does make one wonder. If that had just been forwarded on at the end of March, when I first sent the first inquiry to Infrastructure, we might have actually had a proper answer by now. Instead, we're delayed almost a month and a half.

It's not me they delayed. I followed up because I had those same companies asking me if I'd heard anything. It's a month and a half later, and they're starting to wonder if they have to start laying people off or not, if this will be a viable source for them to try to hang on and keep a skeleton crew going for scarce work that's out there.

But no certainty from this government. No, they need Bill 15, which wasn't even on the docket — it wasn't even being talked about at the end of March — to fast-track modular schools, instead of answering very basic questions about that exact program. Yet it shows up in the speaking notes of the minister to defend why they need Bill 15.

This is the problem. This is why I say it's great they made it a confidence vote, because I have no confidence in them.

Their track record would say that we should not have confidence in this government, not when it comes to health care, not when it comes to crime and safety, not when it comes to the finances of the province and not when it comes to the environmental assessment process or fast-tracking projects. Their track record would say, based on what I've read into the record already of their own government press releases since 2018 and their own Premier's comments while he was the Premier, that they simply haven't been able to deliver.

They're pointing fingers back at previous governments, except they seem to forget they are the previous two governments. In 2018, when the environmental assessment process was dramatically changed and the provincial professional reliance model was dramatically changed, they were the government.

Then we had an election in 2020. Then they were the government. Now we've had an election in 2024. They went from supermajority to clinging to a one-seat advantage, but they are still the government. We recognize that.

But they're blaming others for why things are taking so long. They certainly aren't taking any responsibility for their lack of actions over the last eight years.

It doesn't make any sense they then turn around and, under the guise of what's happening with the United States, say that is the number one driving reason they need these types of powerful tools to override municipalities, to override Indigenous leadership, to override the environmental groups.

We have business groups out there now, contractor groups…. I mean, the Premier is getting quite a backdrop of people that aren't very thrilled, not just with Bill 15. You've got the unions now mad about the way contract negotiations are going. I'm starting to lose track of where he might even have any allies left out in the real world.

Instead of actually acknowledging, instead of bringing forward legislation that could address things without creating this level of fear and anxiety, the government just makes it a confidence vote.

Now, what the government fails to comprehend or understand is the reason there's this much anxiety out there isn't because of the great speaking notes that the minister brought forward. Anyone listening to that would think, "Well, that sounds pretty reasonable," except for how it plays out in the real world, to real applicants, to real projects, to municipalities, to Indigenous communities, to the environmental groups.

[3:15 p.m.]

What they have watched from this government is a complete failure in all those areas. So when the govern-

ment says, "Just trust us; it won't be so bad," with a slight asterisk that says, "But if we want to, we can still override just about everything else we just talked about in glowing terms," people get a little suspicious. When they bring forward a piece of legislation they previously hadn't even talked about needing….

I mean, this is a piece of legislation, Bill 15, that is supposed to help create the Ministry of Infrastructure. The budget was on March 4. The cabinet was announced — when was that? — in February, or before that. Sorry, it was November. I can't even remember when the cabinet was announced.

The minister was announced six, seven months ago. The first order of business wasn't to bring forward a piece of legislation to actually create that ministry? It waits until the last week and a bit of sitting before it comes forward to create a ministry that's supposedly supposed to be there to fast-track infrastructure projects in this province? Were we so jammed up in this Legislature up until now, on critical work, that the government couldn't have brought that piece forward?

No, they needed to bring it forward and attach it to a piece of legislation that creates massive power overreach for the Premier's office. I say the Premier's office because if anyone at home thinks that any minister in this government would stand up against the Premier's directive of their ministry or for a project the Premier wants, they're kidding themselves.

I mean, we've stood in this place…. It will be very interesting to see when the votes actually happen. I do wonder how much political capital the Premier is burning internally in his caucus.

You have a caucus that campaigned on safe supply that has now walked away from safe supply. You have a caucus that campaigned on a wide range of issues, carbon tax, that they've now walked away from. How great CleanBC was, and they've now walked away saying that their emission profile is nowhere near going to be met.

EV mandates will be next, because there's no way they're going to meet the 2026 target, which means they're going to have to change it, and you're going to have a caucus full of people that campaigned on the exact opposite.

Involuntary care. The list goes on and on and on.

Now you have a government…. We had the Minister of Environment bring forward the motion to the House that we all supported. But respecting what we're hearing within Indigenous communities and working with Indigenous communities….

Well, it'll be interesting to see how this government and their members vote on a bill that UBCIC Grand Chief Stewart Phillip says of: "Bill 15 raises concerns about projects being fast-tracked under the guise of responding to Trump's tariffs and watering down the EA process. Additionally, UBCIC is concerned the province is not upholding its own interim process on alignment of laws with UNDRIP, or UNDRIP itself."

And as I say, Jody Wilson-Raybould is saying: "My prediction: more lawsuits from proponents and First Nations, more uncertainty and poorer economic and environmental outcomes." So I will be curious to see what the Indigenous leadership within the NDP caucus does, hearing Indigenous leadership outside of this chamber about Bill 15.

I know if Bill 15 was reversed, if this was a B.C. Conservative bill, the NDP would be asking those exact same questions about members on our side of House, the exact same. In fact, I hazard to guess if Bill 15 had been brought forward by the B.C. Conservatives, and Bill 14 and Bill 7…. I find it highly unlikely that the NDP members would be voting in favour of it.

I'd be very curious what those members, those Indigenous members within the NDP caucus, would say about the UBCIC comments if those were related to a B.C. Conservative Bill 15.

[3:20 p.m.]

I think they'd be in lockstep with those comments.

We get mocked by the NDP sometimes because we have open votes on this side of the House. I do wonder how much pressure internally is being put on three members to not listen and support Indigenous leadership from outside of this chamber. I feel bad for that.

Motions were brought into this place in good faith to be discussed and debated. A standing vote was had, and everyone voted unanimously in favour. Then a week or two later, Bill 15 drops a complete and utter 180 degrees to the premise of that motion.

But I'm going to love to hear how the NDP tells me: "But don't worry just because the Premier is flexing on this and demanding everyone toe the line and vote." They'll be more judicious as they pick losers and winners of projects, moving forward. That it won't matter what government relations firm you hire to help you navigate whether you're deemed to be a provincial project of interest or not. That it won't matter the Premier's personal opinion on a project or a government relations firm. Somehow we're supposed to actually believe that. Based on the track record, I'd say that's a pretty far stretch.

Bill 15 enables the government to acquire and gift government land to private proponents. It's incredible to me when you read through. You know the minister will take issue with how we're characterizing some of these clauses. That's what committee stage is for; she can try to correct us if we're wrong. The interesting thing at committee stage is what tends to come out.

First off, we're going to be jammed for time. Closure has already been invoked. It's eight o'clock next Wednesday, the vote.

Secondly, it's interesting when we interpret how the clauses are written, the minister will always — and not

just this minister, all government ministers — jump to: "That's not accurate. That's not right. That's not…."

Well, welcome to what happens to the private sector when they're reading a piece of legislation and trying to interpret it. That's why committee stage of any bill is so critically important. Because when the inevitable lawsuits get engaged — that the government has already been warned about — courts will actually look at the government's intention based on the minister's answers clause by clause. That's what they do.

Unfortunately, this government did their usual trick of bringing legislation of consequence in at the very end. I mean, you think of the first few pieces of legislation we had. We had the hard-hitting "How to appoint a Conflict of Interest Commissioner and extend that process" piece of legislation.

We had another two- or three-clause piece of legislation. It was so consequential I can't even remember what the issue was.

We had the ever-present, every-single-year parks GIS mapping update, where they take five or six parks in the province and they update based on new, current and better mapping.

That's what this chamber spent the first month, month and a half of a three-month session dealing with. Not Bill 15. Not Bill 14. Not Bill 7. The government couldn't even have the decency to present Bills 14 and 15, at least, on March 13, when they brought in Bill 7. At least we would've seen the full package of the power grab that was happening with this government.

[3:25 p.m.]

This is why we firmly believe the only reason they need Bill 15 is because part 4 of Bill 7 got withdrawn by the government, because the same groups raised the same concerns about that. So the government blinked on it, and now the Premier is doubling down. There will be no amendments. There will be no changes. There will not be pushing of Bill 15 into the fall sitting so it could be properly understood, properly vetted, properly looked at by the legal community.

I mean, in 2018, the committee met 75 hours to produce a report recommending changes in the Environmental Assessment Act. They engaged with a variety of key stakeholders, including industry, business associations, environmental organizations and local governments. Extensive engagement with First Nations communities. Public comment period. Over 2,500 public comments and 60 formal submissions. Those same groups actually supported those EA changes.

So when the government says that if you're opposed to Bill 15, you must be opposed to moving things forward quickly or getting things done in the province…. No. No, we're not. The Indigenous groups aren't. UBCM isn't. The environmental groups aren't. What we're saying is that it needs to be a proper process. What it needs is the government, instead of spending the last six or seven months since the election trying to pretend they've made these great changes to the environmental system and permitting process and everything's been accelerated….

The minister just tweeted out a list of accomplishments, of permits and timelines, last week. If that's accurate, why do we need Bill 15? If things are actually moving, finally, if things are actually moving forward, why do we need Bill 15? To build schools quickly? Are you kidding me? You need all-powerful control and overrides at the cabinet level, at the Premier's office level — let's call it for what it is — to build schools quickly, to build a hospital quickly? Yes, because municipalities are famous for holding up hospital projects. That's a surefire way to get yourself re-elected in a municipal election.

The delays in Kamloops on the cancer centre certainly haven't been municipal. They've been provincial. Now we're going to get an improperly rammed-through cancer centre on our hands because the government refuses to listen. But somehow that's the municipal fault.

Oh, that's right. The government said: "Oh, but if we built it properly, we would need a height variance, a three-foot height variance." Yes, because we all know municipalities are going to say no to a three-foot height variance, in a city that doesn't protect view lines, to build a proper cancer centre. Yeah, I'm sure that's what's going to happen. So let's just build it improperly and have an improperly functioning cancer centre for 50 years.

This is the government that wants the power to just build and move forward a project that they deem to be okay when, even though current ones they have…. When they've pointed out their flaws, their design flaws, the government refuses to build it properly. The response we get back from them, in, say, the cancer centre in Kamloops's case is: "If you delay any further, it will just be cancelled."

Well, the interesting thing is that those delays have been the government's delays. It was Premier Horgan in October of 2020 that promised the doors would be open in October of 2024. Architectural drawings still aren't finished yet, but somehow it's local leadership, if they raise concerns, that are now delaying this project or the local MLAs that are being obstructionists and delaying the project, as if we're the ones sitting in the architectural offices drawing up the blueprints.

They haven't even broken ground. It was promised by this government. Cancer care was promised to be open in October of 2024, and they haven't even broken ground. This government is trying to blame local governance and height variances, potential height variances, as the issue.

[Mable Elmore in the chair.]

I should explain to the public that the back side of this property is a hillside that goes up and up and up before you get to the first house. That's what they're worried

about getting a height variance for, of three feet, to build it properly.

[3:30 p.m.]

But Bill 15 is necessary or this government won't be able to build things quickly. Not one delay has been this government's fault. The Pattullo Bridge, two years behind schedule — not their fault. In fact, when they first finally announced and admitted it was behind schedule, they tried clinging to that it wasn't over budget.

Apparently, it was the only magical construction site in B.C. that had full construction and is two years behind schedule with people fully employed at it, and somehow not one extra dollar of what was budgeted was being expended. A couple months later they finally came clean and said: "Oh yeah, it's a few hundred million over budget."

Hospitals on the Island — over $1 billion over budget, double the cost of what they first said it was going to be. Hospital in Surrey — way over budget. SkyTrain in Surrey — way over budget, by billions of dollars. When they get asked about this, they say they need Bill 15 to somehow do other projects quicker and more efficiently, with better value. They can't manage the ones they've got.

The Transportation Minister goes on about $15 billion of infrastructure in this budget. Their current projects are $15 billion over budget. And $15 billion — what would that do for schools, if they'd just managed all those other projects properly? We're supposed to believe that Bill 15 is the linchpin, that this has been the missing piece all along. For eight years, they've sat idly by and defended project after project being delayed and over budget, and the missing piece, the secret to it all was Bill 15. With Bill 15, they can wave a wand, and everything will just work fast.

No consultation. "We'll consult after the fact." How many times have we heard the government say that about legislation in here? Just about every time. "We'll consult afterwards. We'll talk to UBCM afterwards. It'll be fine."

Well, what's the point? Bill 15 would enable this government to have so much power over municipalities that, once it's law, it doesn't matter what the municipalities think about it. The whole reason you consult with municipalities is beforehand…. If it was really that good and benign of legislation to these groups…. They're all pretty smart people.

Is the minister honestly trying to say that it's fine? They want to say that we're over-politicizing as an opposition or that we're being creative with our interpretation of clauses or whatever word you want to use. I get it. That's politics. That's this chamber. It's easy to dismiss us.

Are they saying that all the smart people at UBCM are completely wrong? UBCM typically does not push back very hard against government, not this publicly. They might do it in private boardrooms and private conversations. They certainly don't do it on a piece of legislation like this.

Is the UBCIC totally misinterpreting? Is Jody Wilson-Raybould completely misinterpreting, the former head of the government of Canada for legal issues? Does she not understand how to read a provincial bill properly and interpret its consequences?

Well, according to this government, that's just all overblown, and that's a problem. That's a problem when there's a repeated ask to just trust, but then the trust keeps getting broken, and rules keep getting changed, and there's an ever-shifting sense of how things will play out.

Madam Chair, you were here when I was talking on Bill 14 about how these are interrelated. They are interrelated.

[3:35 p.m.]

You have Bill 15, where the government can start unilaterally picking and choosing which projects get accelerated. The government will try to say, "Well, it doesn't guarantee they move forward," as if there are not investment decisions and cost pressures and a significant cost for every month, every year that a project languishes in a holding pattern with this government. They seem to not want to either acknowledge that…. The scary part is that they don't understand that. I'll give them the benefit of the doubt that they just don't want to acknowledge it.

There's a very real cost to someone else not being on the fast track for almost what appears to be the identical project except for what government relations firm they're using or which riding they may be in. That does not inspire investment confidence in British Columbia. It creates investment chaos in British Columbia.

Banana republics have more defined processes. It's not legal, especially in the Canadian context. It doesn't make it right, but you tend to know how big of a briefcase of money you need to get your permit moving. You don't need shifting legislative sands with two or three competing pieces of legislation that create a whole other patchwork of regulation and potential cabinet overrides or not. They just need to know what the rules are.

I used to say this when I had a hotel and a pub. I could literally do that anywhere in the world. There are hotels and bars everywhere in the world. You just need to go there and know what the rules are to operate in. Then you can figure out if there's a business case for your business. I chose to stay in Kamloops, where I grew up. I chose to raise my family there, and I chose to keep operating the business there because I reasonably knew what the rules of the game were and I reasonably felt I could provide for my family.

Mining, forestry, any type of industry is the same. They operate around the world. What they need to know is what the rules of the game in that jurisdiction are and that there's some certainty around the rules. Then they can make the decision if they're willing and able to afford to operate in that regulatory regime that is there.

This doesn't mean our regulatory regime has to be lockstep with everyone else. It just means it has to be con-

sistent. Our tax structure has to be competitive. Our overall business climate has to be competitive with those other jurisdictions. The regulatory regime just needs to be consistent to understand what that pathway is and what the actual timeline is.

The government's response to failing to properly implement or deliver what they promised from 2018 till today, with all of their reforms on the environmental act, with their reforms to the professional reliance act, with the Premier acknowledging in 2023 that they still had work to do…. Fine, that was a different regime. He was merely the Housing Minister and the Attorney General. We'll give him a pass.

I mean, he tries to take runs at our leader for being at the cabinet table for decisions made on things that were nowhere near our leader's former portfolio. The best one is when they say he was a former Forest Minister. Yeah, for those same 18 days that I was in government. Apparently, he should have solved forestry in those 18 days. He should have solved softwood lumber in those 18 days back in 2017.

That's what this government likes to do. Yet the Premier — who was the Attorney General from 2017 till 2022, was it? — had no sway, no voice at the cabinet table. Who knew that the Attorney General had so little power of influence at a cabinet meeting. Apparently, the gentleman who became Premier, who had enough political heft to strong-arm his way through a leadership race, didn't have that same type of sway in the cabinet room — only in a leadership race. That's what we're trying to be led to believe by this government and this Premier.

[3:40 p.m.]

That's the problem here. They have failed miserably to advance things in a way that all those groups that signed on and validated thought was going to happen.

Now they wonder why those same groups are saying, "You know, we've been down this road before. We don't believe it's actually going to happen. You told us you had the answers and you were going to expedite based on our concerns and our input back in 2018. That hasn't happened. The Premier said he was going to address it, yet again, in 2023. That hasn't happened. And so, yeah, we're a little concerned that your final solution is to keep making an end run on absolute power in the Premier's office."

Part 4 of Bill 7 would have provided absolute power in the Premier's office. That got withdrawn; Bill 15 got introduced. Bill 15 does the exact same thing, just in a more defined area of oversight. But make no mistake about it. This is a bill about the Premier getting to pick winners and losers when it comes to resources. And the message keeps changing, which is how you know the Premier got it wrong.

Now the Premier has alluded to how only Indigenous-owned projects, or that have equity stake, will be the ones fast-tracked. But we're not really sure, because he flings this stuff out at press conferences. The minister didn't touch on that in her opening comments. Normally, the opening comments by a minister would provide a lot more detail into things like that, if that's actually what was going to happen.

Apparently, there's already a disconnect between the Premier and how he's going to interpret Bill 15 and the minister and how she's presenting Bill 15. If that doesn't give you cause for concern as well, I don't know what does. The Premier's vague statements also create a whole lot of other questions, even within Indigenous communities.

Does that mean a proponent, an Indigenous nation in and around a mine who perhaps doesn't have the wherewithal to raise the equity to be an equity partner or doesn't want to assume the risk of being an equity partner would just prefer to get a royalty payment off of the mine?

Does that mine no longer qualify because of the ownership structure? We're now tying the winner and loser of a project not to the project, not to whether the project should advance because we need that critical mineral. It's going to be at the Premier's discretion as to who the ownership group is. But ownership groups come and go. So is this just a new, fancy way to make sure we have an ownership group in place to get you expedited through the permitting, and then the sale happens to the next ownership group?

These projects aren't owned in perpetuity by one company. Shareholders come and go. Majority shareholders come and go.

Sorry, does the minister need to…?

Deputy Speaker: Recognizing the Minister of Education and Child Care.

Hon. Lisa Beare: Thank you very much, Speaker. I seek leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

Hon. Lisa Beare: Joining us in the gallery today we have Lord Byng Secondary School and their teacher Scott McKeen.

On behalf of the Premier and all of us here in the House right now, we welcome you. Thank you for joining us.

Debate Continued

Peter Milobar: I was talking about how a project…. Especially in the mining world, companies come and go. Companies come in. Junior companies start getting the process moving. They feel they've created enough value in the project that a bigger company comes in. Permits start to get issued. The cost of construction and to get access to the higher-quality ore body start to change that profile,

and they need to go out, and they need to find other investors. That's just standard business.

[3:45 p.m.]

There's nothing shady about it. It's not nefarious. It's literally how you take a mine from somebody claiming an area to getting it all the way to a full-production mine. How does that have any certainty in this process? How does it have any certainty at all in this process?

These processes are supposed to be independent of the Premier's office, not at the whim of the Premier's office. What happens if a municipality or a First Nation is at odds with the Premier's office on a different topic completely? Will this be used as leverage to make sure that there's grudging adherence, glowing press releases about a government project or program that's completely unrelated to the project they want to get fast-tracked?

It sounds ridiculous, I know, but the legislation actually enables those scenarios to start to happen. That is the problem of the eroding of the process.

So when ICBA chimes in…. They say: "The irony is impossible to ignore. The NDP has had to create an entire new ministry and pass legislation just to cut the red tape they created in the first place. Yes, permitting delays and red tape are slowing down schools and hospitals, but they're also slowing down homes, roads, energy, bridges and every other type of construction. This should have been an across-the-board fix, not a narrowly focused government workaround." That's from Chris Gardner, the ICBA president.

He also said: "Simpler is better. The answer is to eliminate unnecessary delays for all projects, not just the ones favoured by government. Government procurement is broken. Every major project in B.C. is behind schedule, often by years, and over budget, often by hundreds of millions of dollars. We need real, across-the-government reform that empowers B.C.'s builders, gets more projects to yes faster and restores investor confidence in this province."

You only get that if you have a clear set of rules and guidelines for these applicants to follow, and it can't have them circuiting through the Premier's office. It's the equivalent of when we raise issues in this House about health care or people not having a doctor, and the minister will stand up and…. Ironically enough, it's the current Energy Minister, who's dealing with Bill 14, that would say this repeatedly in this House: "Well, you should just bring that concern to me. We'll talk after the House rises." He was good; he would follow up with you. I give him that.

Our health care system has really gotten to the point that it requires somebody needing a doctor to phone their local MLA to stand up in the chamber at the Legislature, to talk to the Minister of Health directly in person, to have him then finally follow up to try to find that one person when we have almost a million people without a family doctor. That's the government view of efficiency with the NDP. All MLAs are more than happy to try to help people find that family doctor, but I don't think that sounds like a reasonable way, one case by one case by one case, to deal with the bigger, broader issue.

Instead of dealing with that bigger, broader issue, we just have to keep standing up here in the 20 weeks we might sit in a year and bring them one issue at a time, and all those other people don't get their issue addressed. That's the same problem with this. The individual shouldn't have to go through a Health Minister to find a doctor. A mine or a large project should not have to go through the Premier's office to get a permit.

It simply makes no sense. It opens up for abuse. It opens up for the appearance of abuse, and the appearance is more deadly than actual. Look at what happened around a sundeck in this province. We're a far cry from that with this bill. We're talking about mines that could be worth billions of dollars of economic good to the province.

[3:50 p.m.]

There are 18 critical mineral mines right now languishing, waiting for permits. Those mines, over the life of the mines, the average of about a 24-year lifespan of a mine, would add $1 trillion to the province. This government has known that for eight years. Those projects have not meaningfully advanced.

Now this government is saying: "Just trust us. All the processes will still be the same. Bill 15 is just, really, about speeding things up, not about signing orders to waive things, not about looking the other way and any of that." Well then, what do you need Bill 15 for?

On the one hand, they say: "Don't worry. Nothing's really going to change." On the other hand, they say: "We need Bill 15 to make everything change and to speed it up."

Without Bill 15, they don't know how to package two schools in the same city together — to ask one contractor, or a series of contractors, to bid on the contract to build two schools at once, instead of one. They need Bill 15 to make that happen. I'm totally unclear why that is needed. Schools that they say are held up by municipalities…. Most municipalities already have pre-identified school sites.

Here's the other thing in my riding. We have a government that says they want to accelerate schools because it's municipalities with delays. I talked about the cancer centre and the complete cluster that is in Kamloops. Let's look at another problem we have.

We need another school site in Aberdeen. We could have had that school site for a few million dollars. The developer, under immense pressure to release that school site for housing, kept holding it for the school board so that they could acquire it for a future school site at a reasonable price. It took this government almost two years, and the price went up 50 percent — over two years of begging and pleading by the school board to acquire the site.

There's no school approved for the site. There's no

money assigned to the site. They haven't even approved the concept. It was just to acquire the land to make sure housing didn't go on there, in a critical part of our city. It is hilly in that area, so there are very few actual appropriate building sites for a school. And now the government has the nerve to stand here and say that without Bill 15, we can't move schools forward quickly.

We had a school in my riding that burned down to the ground at the beginning of the school year, an elementary school. It took five instructional years for this government to rebuild, essentially, an insurance claim, five instructional years for an elementary school to be built on the same site as the elementary school. I believe the good folks — is it in Port Coquitlam? — that had a devastating school fire at the beginning of the school year in 2024, I believe it was, are going to be facing the same thing.

We had another school…. Oh yeah, it's approved. Three budgets — it took three budgets after the government first said they'd approved that school for the money to actually be in the budget. And that's it for schools in the Kamloops school district. That's this government's view of efficiency and speed. And they blame others.

Not one of those sites was delayed because of the municipality or the school district. All of it was delayed by this government and their lack of action. Yet we are being led to believe that you need Bill 15 to override all oversight to somehow make these projects move faster. When they say: "So we can build schools faster…." If the government really wants to just wield a firm hand on this….

[3:55 p.m.]

Last I checked, there's a pretty big backlog of school districts desperate for new schools. Here's a thought. Just tell the municipality or the school district: "If you're not ready, come back to us in two years. We're going to move to the site next door, the town next door, the city next door, because they've got something on their capital list that could be funded instead."

But no. Let's use that as the excuse to bring in Bill 15. Frankly, it's somewhat objectionable that the government has tried to wrap themselves in schools and hospitals with Bill 15. Because they're essentially saying to people: "Just accept that all large projects are going to be at the sole discretion of the Premier's office, or else your schools and hospitals won't get built, let alone in a timely fashion." I guess, in a way, they're already wielding that iron glove. They're just doing it provincewide and, finally, they're doing it in the open.

Again, they're amalgamating so many different concepts in Bill 15 to try to justify the overreach when it comes to the overrides and the picking of project winners and losers. That's what ICBA was talking about. We agree.

We also agree, like the ICBA, that environmental assessments aren't a bad thing. They just need to be done efficiently, effectively, quickly and professionally. This government said in 2018 that they'd solve that riddle. They're not even willing to admit they got it wrong with Bill 15.

Maybe one of them will stand up and say: "You know what? We have totally failed for the last seven years as government since we brought in the changes to the Environmental Assessment Act, so we need Bill 15. George Heyman didn't know what he was talking about. Sonia Furstenau didn't know what she was talking about.

"We bought a bill of goods from them, and we thought we had something good in the works. But they didn't know what they were doing. They had no idea. We need Bill 15. Bill 15 is the only way to do this."

It'd be refreshing. It'd be honest. It'd be refreshing if their members would stand up and say: "You know what? UBCIC has no idea what they're talking about. We're going to vote for this despite the First Nations leadership across this province saying that they have massive concerns about it, because we know better than the First Nations leadership, as government." I'd love to hear someone on that government side say that.

Environmental groups. Apparently, they don't know what they're talking about. Their concerns are unfounded.

UBCM. What do a bunch of locally elected mayors and councillors that are heading into an election year know? They're obviously trying to be obstructionists. They obviously don't want hospitals and schools in their riding. That's why they're against Bill 15.

Certainly, none of them would want to see hospitals and schools built in their riding over the next year. What a horrible way to get yourself re-elected as a locally elected official. What a horrible way for a school trustee to get re-elected, to see schools built. Of course that's why they're opposed to this bill. They don't want to see that activity in there.

The minister has tried to characterize this as "this is how we're going to fast-track these projects in these cities, like these are projects these cities fight against." It's interesting that she left out the housing piece. The more at-risk housing is left out of this bill, because they know that would be very contentious. But they try to wrap it around, as if the delays at local government have been all around hospitals and schools, those well-known areas of civic infrastructure that municipalities just hate to have.

The other problem, and the reason that municipalities are a little concerned, is that if the government goes ahead and forces things through on them that they deem to be of provincial significance, without corresponding infrastructure money for them…. When I say infrastructure, I mean it in the municipal sense. I was a mayor for nine years. I mean it in the sense of pipes and pavement and, yes, playgrounds — quality of life for your residents.

[4:00 p.m.]

If they start forcing through, under Bill 15, developments and actions that are going to impact those core services municipalities provide…. But municipalities have no

way to pay for the impact. We've already seen that happen and that push-back happen on Bill 44 with housing, when this government refused to listen to municipalities. Those same concerns are still out there on Bill 44 and haven't been addressed by this government, a government, I would point out, that has no infrastructure money in this year's budget or next year's budget for municipalities to tap into, of any consequence.

They hang their hat on a one-time $1 billion that was distributed per capita. That's the only infrastructure en masse that this government has done in eight years. There used to be about $1 billion a year to tap into as a municipality, and that was oversubscribed. That was year after year after year. This government has done it once in eight years.

Now municipalities are worried because, again, it's not just about looking at one piece of legislation in isolation, as much as the government wants people to do that. It's about looking at Bill 44, if you're a municipality, and saying: "We already have concerns about that impact on us." Now you read Bill 15, and you say: "Okay, here's the other shoe that's going to drop. It's bad enough what they've done on Bill 44 to try to force us down certain avenues of development. It'll be even worse when you layer in Bill 15 and how they can just snap their fingers and override us and force dramatic cost pressures on a city."

It's just simply not the best way to move forward. In 2018, they consulted with municipalities when they made major changes to the Environmental Assessment Act. In 2025, they didn't, and you're seeing the result. In 2018, municipalities were on board; 2025, they're steadfastly opposed. In 2018, First Nations leadership was fully on board with the changes; 2025, they're not. And the list goes on and on and on.

When I think of other projects that have been delayed by the province, around this province, and when I think of what Bill 15 enables…. You know, I was thinking about this the other day when it came on the news. I thought: "Well, there's an interesting piece with Bill 15." Already it's dredge, baby, dredge, when it's the Burrard Inlet. I'm just waiting for the Energy Minister to have a "Log it; mine it; pave it" T-shirt on one of these days. Log it; mine it; pave it — that seems to be the new mentality coming out of the government side.

We're going to dredge the Burrard Inlet to load up bigger tankers on a project he was adamantly opposed to, and now we have Bill 15. Part of the guise of the Massey Tunnel replacement is that we need the tunnel so bigger ships can get in. So under the guise of needing to unlock our ports…. Again, this side actually supports all this type of development. We just wish the government would be a little more upfront about their true intentions here.

We've said all along that we didn't think a tunnel replacement would actually pass an environmental assessment, and it hasn't yet. It hasn't passed one. Let's see. Last I checked, there are a few salmon that go past the Massey, go over top of that tunnel in the water. Just one or two. Bit of a sturgeon estuary as well. All sorts of other impacts with wetlands and things of that nature.

Under Bill 15, I think you could argue that the Massey Tunnel would be of provincial significance, given its critical need to transportation links for trade. Sounds like this government doesn't really care what people have to think about the environmental assessment of the Massey Tunnel replacement. But let's track what the government says versus their actions, especially when it relates to Indigenous commentary.

[4:05 p.m.]

Now, I referenced salmon because we all know how important salmon are to Indigenous communities and culture in our province. But the salmon don't just stop when they get to Chilliwack. Just outside of my riding is Adams River, largest salmon run in the world. At least, it used to be.

Where does the government think those salmon start? Where do they think they actually come by? Why might an environmental assessment process on the Massey Tunnel replacement be so critically important?

Are you going to actually take, at the same value, the Indigenous concerns that might be raised from Adams River all the way down? The Skeetchestn have a fisheries on Kamloops Lake. When the fish are coming through, the cultural impact that it could have, the impact it could have on steelhead…. We're down to a couple dozen in the Thompson River now. That's a whole other story of hearing that the province is trying to walk away from dealing with the steelhead and turn that over to the feds.

But at what point does this government not want to walk the walk when they talk about actually talking to impacted Indigenous communities and getting their perspective on things like environmental assessment impacts? It's their words. It's their way of trying to frame the issue. It's this government's way of always trying to wag the finger to this side of the House on issues like this.

And then they just walk away from their commitments when it's convenient for them and try to pretend that Stewart Phillip doesn't know what he's talking about when it comes to Bill 15. Must make for interesting dinner conversation. That's all I know.

But I'm quite serious about that. I've said that from day one, when the government pulled the plug on the bridge as the replacement for the tunnel, the bridge that would have been much less impactful to the river. The bridge had passed an environmental assessment, was ready to go, actually was waiting for the contract to be signed, was projected originally to be $3.5 billion, actually had a contract in hand for the government to sign at $2.9 billion.

Only this government could act this way. Because it was the previous government's project, they scrubbed it. So now we're going to be looking in the $5 billion plus range, because why build a project for less money when

you can build it for more and delay it? That seems to be the NDP mantra. And now we need Bill 15 to somehow expedite things and somehow make things cheaper for us.

But I go back to the salmon. I sincerely would love, one of these years, to actually get a straight-up answer from somebody in government. Is there a distance requirement that they want to get comment on the impact that the Massey Tunnel replacement might have on the salmon? Is it only bands up to Chilliwack? Is it only nations up to there?

Do the Interior nations not count when it comes to salmon? Do the Adams Lake, the Skwlāx, the Tk'emlúps, the Neskonlith, Whispering Pines, Skeetchestn, Lytton, Líl̓wat…? I know I'm going to miss a few. I already probably have missed a couple. Those are just the ones that are literally right on the banks of the Thompson River. Do their opinions not count when it comes to salmon?

Is it only coastline First Nations that this government wants to hear about when it comes to the impacts to salmon? It would be nice to get a clear answer from this government on that. I think the local First Nations leadership in my part of the world would love that answer as well, a very clear answer.

Bill 15 doesn't help provide that answer. Bill 15 is the exact opposite. Bill 15 says, quite literally: "We know we need to get going on the Massey Tunnel replacement. We're desperate to replace three-lane rush hour capacity with a permanent three-lane rush hour capacity." Talk about building for the future. That's a whole other ball of wax with that.

[4:10 p.m.]

Pattullo was the same way — 80-year-old bridge, four-lane bridge replaced with a four-lane bridge. That's how you build for growth if you're the NDP.

Then you turn around, and you bring in Bill 15, and you tell us: "Well, we need Bill 15 because that's how we're going to start building things properly in this province. That's how we're going to build things that aren't delayed. That's how we're going to build things that aren't over budget."

The funny thing is that the government always says projects have been delayed, and they blame municipalities. The interesting thing is, when you actually go back and start looking at the timelines of these projects, they're always delayed after they've been approved and after they already have their building permits. I don't see how a municipality, after things have already got moving, is the one delaying a project. It's the government.

As I say, five instructional years to replace a burnt-out elementary school in Kamloops. I mean, you think about that. Those kids that were in grade 2 when that fire happened never went to that school again. Kids that were in kindergarten didn't go back to that school till they were what, grade 5, 4?

The government has the audacity to stand here and say: "If we don't have all-encompassing power of decision-making vetted through the Premier's office with Bill 15, we can't build schools quickly, because municipalities are delaying a school being built." At what point does the government stop scapegoating municipalities and others for their lack of deliverable?

It was the government's own press releases. It was the government's own legislation. In fact, the Environmental Assessment Act has been amended many times since 2018, and not once have we heard the government take ownership of the fact that they're failing. Their legislation failed.

Their actions have failed. Their actions have created a bureaucratic mess. Their actions have not resulted in a meaningful moving forward of significant projects, including government infrastructure projects. Their actions, and lack thereof, have failed to attract the capital needed to keep our economy rolling, because if it was working, we wouldn't need Bill 15. If it was working, our economy would be working in such a way that we didn't have an $11 billion structural deficit right now at a time when the government is collecting record tax revenue. They've never collected so much money.

You know when you're supposed to run a record deficit? When you actually have an economy that's struggling and tax revenues have dried up and you don't want to make cuts to health care. That's when record deficits are supposed to happen, and then you go out and build a few extra things to keep some construction sites going. That's what governments typically do.

This government has taken it to a whole new level — record tax revenue coming in, record deficit on the negative side of the equation, all operational, which very clearly demonstrates they actually don't know how to operate things. After eight years of project delays and cost overruns and projects that haven't even started, their new answer is to bring in Bill 15 and run roughshod over everybody.

So what could go wrong? What could go wrong with fast-tracking projects? Well, again, it's not so much the fast-tracking of a project that we take issue with. We absolutely agree projects should be fast-tracked. I would hope that burnt-out schools would be fast-tracked to be replaced, but they're not. I do hope the government has learned some lessons in the case of Kamloops and Parkcrest Elementary and that it doesn't take five instructional years for the Port Coquitlam school to be rebuilt.

[4:15 p.m.]

I believe we're already on instructional year 2, quickly coming to a close, that that school has been out of operation. I think they're going to be close to that five years of instructional time before that school gets rebuilt. I've heard the mayor come out firmly wanting the school rebuilt, so I can't believe that it's mayor and council that is the delay to rebuild that school.

But the government's answer is Bill 15. What could

go wrong when things can just run straight through the Premier's office and the cabinet table in the prioritization of projects? What could go wrong with a cabinet that has almost no rural representation in it, because this government failed to win very many, if any, rural seats? What could go wrong when the decision-makers don't understand the complexities and the lifestyle and the interconnectivity of those rural and remote communities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, that are advocating for projects to be their lifeline?

What could possibly go wrong with a cabinet that to this point has demonstrated very little ability to break logjams in the exact areas that Bill 15 purports to be moving them, yet they've been told about these issues for eight years? What could possibly go wrong in that scenario?

Again, the easiest litmus test on something as significant as a piece of legislation as Bill 15…. Well, there are a couple of touchpoints. Why is it so all-encompassing? If a minister was named as a minister back in November, or whatever the date was that the cabinet got sworn in, why did it take till now for the enabling legislation to create that ministry? A ministry that's supposed to be actually making sure projects are moving quickly has waited over six months to get its paperwork in to itself.

That could have come as a stand-alone piece of legislation. That could have come in beginning of March, actually mid-February, when we first sat in the throne speech. We didn't have to debate the throne speech for two weeks straight. We could have actually debated creating a ministry that had already been announced, with a minister already there and a staff.

But, no, it had to wait till the very end of the legislative session to get created and lumped in with a bill that enables cabinet and the Premier's office to pick and choose which public assets will be built when and where and how fast. And if anything gets in the way, they'll override it. That had to get lumped in with private sector investment projects that will get treated the same way.

Don't worry. There are all these provisions in place as safeguards, except for if the Premier's office feels things aren't moving fast enough or a friend of a friend really wants a project moving quickly. Then cabinet reserves the right to change the rules. They can ladder that in on projects in Bill 14. Somehow, this is going to create an investment climate that the investment community cheers and says: "Great. They finally have fixed the problem. Now we just have got to figure out if we're one of the chosen ones."

I said it on Bill 14, and I think it bears repeating on Bill 15. Again, I'm purposely not using names of firms, and I'm not using names of people, because I think they are all good people. They have jobs to do, and I'm not trying to say there's anything nefarious going on.

The nature of the beast of politics in B.C…. The reality is that we have a lot of government relations companies. They've got people that have been there for a while. They've got former MLAs from both sides of the aisle. Some are family members of people in government or in opposition.

[4:20 p.m.]

It creates a bad look. I don't know how the government doesn't see that. Without clear safeguards and guidelines, other than vague: "If we deem it in the provincial interest…."

Well, by "we," it's like the royal we. It was like when I was a kid. My dad would look out, and it had snowed. He'd say: "We should go shovel the driveway." Well, the we was him watching from the windows, and the we was me shovelling. That was: "We should go shovel." In this case, the royal we is if the Premier deems it's in the provincial interest. That's how vague this wording is. When you read "we" or "government," read "Premier" and "Premier's office." That's the problem.

Then there'll be howls of: "Oh, how dare you. How dare you even insinuate if a project moved forward and we see which companies were…." It puts companies, actually, in a very bad spot too. There's a lot of reputational risk for them. It's kind of a no-win all the way around when you actually look at it.

Then the opposition will rightfully point out questions around why one project did and one project didn't. We'll look for differences. That's our job. The way the government will look at us and howl back about how outrageous it is…. If it happens to be the Transportation Minister that stands up in question period, he'll say: "That's why you're over there, and that's why we're over here." That's how he'll end it. But it's a serious issue, and it's not addressed in Bill 15.

Those will be serious concerns we bring forward. It'll get loud in here in question period. It will get raucous. But does that actually serve the public interest well on an issue like that, when we're trying to actually figure out legitimately how one project got advanced and one didn't?

It's like when we ask access-to-treatment questions. We're not asking out of curiosity. We're asking because we have family members struggling to get care for their loved ones. We're asking on their behalf, because they don't have the ability to stand here.

When we ask those questions about Bill 15 and why one major project got advanced and a different one didn't get advanced in the near future, it'll be because we have other projects coming to us and saying that this makes no sense. They're going to insist theirs had less of an impact than the one that got moved through. They're going to insist that theirs actually had more economic benefit than the one that got moved through and on and on and on.

The government's response will be: "I can't believe you raised that. How dare you? That's offensive." Okay, so show us the proof. Show us your work. Show us how you actually evaluated this. You know what the answer back will be? "That's cabinet confidentiality. We can't touch

on that. Those documents, no, no, no. Cabinet decision-making. We can't possibly tell you how we arrived at that."

It might work for the first project, but it certainly is not going to instill confidence on projects 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 to try to come forward in this province. It's like my earlier comment about the banana republic. It's what it turns into. Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of investment, thousands of jobs, billions of dollars over the life of a project, royalties and taxes being paid through employment and other areas — at risk because the government will hide behind cabinet confidentiality on how the Premier deemed one project was worthy to advance quickly and the other wasn't.

[4:25 p.m.]

If the government was serious about fast-tracking projects over the last eight years, they ought to have used all the tools in the toolbox they armed themselves with — partly while they were trying to stop projects, ironically enough, at the same time — and actually fixed the system.

We warned government for years that the three big projects would be coming to an end at the same time, partly because of government delays on Site C and forced government delays on TMX. It created a situation where, instead of them having staggered stops, they all wound up ending at the same time. And 80 percent of GDP growth year over year over year for five years was based on those three projects. That whole time we kept asking government: "What's next? What major project is in the portal to move forward?" And there was none.

We're supposed to believe that Bill 15 is a response to a tariff war that, depending on the day, seems to be dwindling. I've got news for the government: in the last couple of weeks, Dad has come home and is sitting at the head of the dinner table now. We have a Prime Minister in place. It's an international trade agreement. The federal government, regardless of how you voted, is in charge of that.

The Premiers across this country that were trying to fill a bit of an information vacuum and void, and doing a very good job of promoting themselves…. Their role has been diminished dramatically, yet Bill 15…. The excuse is to weather tariffs.

To hear what the minister said, projects are still going to have to go through all of these full processes, just things will be sped up. Well, even at a good time frame, an environmental assessment would still be a couple of years. Then a critical mineral mine would need to decide, based on its permitting, if it could even afford to operate.

That's what happens. They get a permit, and all sorts of conditions get layered on. Then they have to look at those conditions, and they have to decide if they can actually make those conditions work, if the economics of the ore body that they're going after and the pricing and the futures market actually line up with what they can do or not. That takes some time. Then they have to go out and actually get the investment. Then they have to prep the site. Then they have to get going. Then they have to acquire all the equipment. Big mining equipment typically takes a couple of years' advanced order.

I'm not saying we shouldn't be trying to rush things forward, but let's be very, very clear. The President will have changed long before anything is generating any substantive push-back against that.

Let's remember. It might help the overall economy in a tariff war, absolutely. But you're not going to be taking people that might be impacted in the film industry en masse and saying: "Let's make you a critical mineral miner today," or "Let's get you built up in doing complex concrete construction for a hospital project because you've just lost your job because of the tariff war in production services."

I don't want people out there to think that this is the magic elixir. It might shield the overall provincial economy, but it's not going to shield a world of hurt that could be coming — hopefully not — to a great many people. That will be reliant on negotiations between the Prime Minister and the President, not the Premier talking to someone in a red state or a blue state cutting a side deal.

It's good he talks to those governors. It's good that he has a relationship with them. He absolutely should be having that. But let's be crystal clear on that. That's about trying to set a bit of a narrative to get some push-back with the President, who may or may not listen to those governors. It's not actually cutting the deal.

[4:30 p.m.]

When we dealt with Bill 7, the Attorney General acknowledged that these are international trade agreements, dealt with national government to national government, not Bill 15 and Bill 14 and Bill 7 versus the President of the United States. We just have to be clear about that.

We absolutely need to be shielding our economy. We absolutely need to be diversifying our exports. We should've been doing that over the last eight years. It's been stagnant, our diversification.

Bill 15 is not the silver bullet to solve all things. Bill 15 is not needed to build hospitals in British Columbia. Bill 15 is not needed to build schools in British Columbia. Bill 15 is needed if you want to run roughshod over municipalities. If you want to run roughshod over the direction of First Nations leadership in this province, if you want to run roughshod over the environmental groups, if you want to run roughshod over private sector development projects that are raising concerns, because they don't know what the rules are going to be, then absolutely, you need Bill 15.

If you're a Premier's office that wants that kind of power, of course you need Bill 15. But you don't need Bill 15 to build things properly and on time and on budget. What you need is a government that actually knows how to do that.

I would love to hear the logic as to how the Pattullo

Bridge is two years behind schedule because of New Westminster or Surrey, when it started when the government said it would start construction.

I would love to know how the city of Surrey delayed the Surrey hospital being built and caused it to go $2 billion over budget or whatever the cost overrun is. Or how TransLink has caused the SkyTrain out in Langley and Surrey to go so far over budget. Or how Bill 15 will magically solve all those problems, not that the government wants to talk about the community benefits agreements that have added 23 percent to every project or about their project labour agreements that have added 20 percent to every contract. No, no.

Once again, let's not talk about their own actions as a government and the impact that those decisions have had on the very things they're now purporting to want to fix. The things they're saying they want to fix are the things that they created and made a mess of. They could at least be forthright with the public about that.

If they truly think that this bill does not impact Indigenous communities the way the Indigenous communities are saying it does, let their Indigenous members have a free vote on this bill after calling it a confidence vote. Let's see what the Premier would do with that.

Will the Premier strong-arm, like he did in the leadership race, to get his way? Or will he allow Indigenous members and Indigenous allies in his caucus to have a free vote on Bill 15, to express what they think about Bill 15 and how it impacts the Indigenous communities around this province?

I think we all know what that answer is, and that's shameful. That's shameful when it's a government that repeatedly will stand up and try to lecture this side about issues to do with Indigenous nations and then force a whipped vote on their own members on the same topic areas and same issues, discounting what First Nations leadership is saying across this province about Bill 15. That is shameful in the highest degree.

It was the government that chose to make this a confidence vote. It's the government that chose to not consult with Indigenous communities ahead of time. It's going to be the Premier that is choosing to cling to power by forcing Indigenous members and Indigenous allies in his caucus to do his bidding on this vote, regardless of what they actually feel on something as core to them as Indigenous rights.

[4:35 p.m.]

That, to me, is as reprehensible as it gets for a government's actions on a bill on which they say: "Trust me. Pass it. We won't overreach with our regulation. We won't overreach with its implementation." That's the backdrop everyone is supposed to trust — this government and this cabinet.

I truly do hope the government makes it a free vote. Let's just see how solid the Premier's support in his caucus actually is. He seems to think this is going to pass. He seems to think there's nothing wrong with this legislation. He can't understand why the B.C. Conservatives would be opposed to it or why the Green Party has issues and concerns and would be opposed to it.

Well, surely he's able to explain it to his own caucus. Surely they trust him. He's asking the public to give him unlimited power in Bills 15 and 14 and 7, because he says: "Just trust me." Well, surely he can trust that his caucus believes in him enough to just vote, and it's a true, free vote.

It's time for the Premier to put his money where his mouth is. I don't think that's an unreasonable request. If he's confident that he has the backing of his caucus, he wins 47-46. It's the Premier that decided to make it a confidence vote. He decided to put his premiership on the line with this. He's insisting he knows best on how to move projects forward and just trust him and leave everything to regulation after the fact.

The time for that type of talk is over. Next Wednesday at eight o'clock, when the vote happens…. It has already been scripted by the government, as they brought closure in. We know exactly when this debate will end. We'll go into committee stage. We'll ask questions. There will be a lot of evasion by government. But on Wednesday at eight o'clock, this bill will come forward.… I believe it's Wednesday at eight o'clock; it's next Wednesday sometime. This bill will come forward for the final vote.

The Minister of Environment brought forward a very heartfelt motion to deal with Indigenous issues in this chamber — as a minister, not as a private member, which is a bit rarer to happen. They had other Indigenous members stand up and speak. We did as well. We had people stand up and speak. The government thought they had some great plan to show us not supportive of Indigenous perspectives. We had a standing vote. We all voted in favour of it.

Well, here we are a couple weeks later. We're standing up, and we're saying we actually agree with and support the position of the UBCIC. There are some pretty tight family connections between the NDP and the UBCIC leadership.

Is the Premier going to allow free votes? I would suggest by the looks on the faces of the various members that no, the Premier is not. It's interesting, though. They have no problem trying to admonish and lecture us about how we should be working with and dealing with Indigenous leadership, moving forward.

Let the Indigenous leadership in your own caucus have their own voice. Maybe they agree with you. Maybe they disagree with all the other Indigenous leadership's interpretation of Bill 15. Maybe they don't agree with Jody Wilson-Raybould's interpretation of Bill 15. Maybe they fully support the Premier on this.

We could find out on Wednesday at eight o'clock, if you

just let them vote. They could prove me wrong. The Premier would be right. That's fine. The vote would show it.

[4:40 p.m.]

The key is that the Premier would have to actually allow them to have that vote, actually allow them to have their own voice in this place and actually be allowed to speak for their own people in this place, not just the wishes of the Premier.

Again, this has all been manufactured by the Premier. This is a response to his complete overreach of Bill 7 and withdrawal and retreat. He had to re-encapsulate it with 14 and 15. Now, in the face of strong opposition, he is going to force his members, who may actually align not just with the Indigenous voices but with the environmental voices too….

What about the environmental wing and the environmental caucus within the NDP caucus? What do they think about this? Let them have a free vote.

At any rate, I thank you for the time. I look forward to hearing what our other members have to say on this bill, and I sure look forward to the free vote the Premier is going to enable the NDP to have next Wednesday night at eight o'clock.

Hon. Jagrup Brar: It is truly an honour to rise in this House today to express my full support for Bill 15, the Infrastructure Projects Act, a forward-looking and necessary piece of legislation that reflects this government's commitment to delivering the infrastructure that British Columbians expect and deserve.

This act is about more than permits and approvals. It's about people. It's about people of the province of British Columbia. It's about ensuring our schools, hospitals and critical infrastructure are built in a timely, efficient and coordinated manner. It's about helping communities, growing sustainably while advancing reconciliation, upholding the high environmental standards that British Columbians are proud of.

I rise today not only as a member of this government but as the Minister of Mining and Critical Minerals of B.C., because this legislation will also benefit the mining sector that is increasingly vital to our economic future and to the global clean energy transition.

Let me just say that these are the times that warrant the need for such legislation, as Donald Trump continues to threaten Canadians with economic war, throwing out more than a century of friendship that made both our countries prosperous. Our government has responded well, and we have strengthened partnerships with other jurisdictions and reached out to even more markets.

We are in a time of transformation. The time is always ripe to build infrastructure, but not more urgent than when our population is growing very fast. In Surrey alone, we welcome more than 1,600 people every month. Therefore, we need, of course, more schools. We need more health care infrastructure. We need more roads, more bridges and more public transit as a result of that.

Our communities are evolving, global supply chains are shifting, and the demand for clean technology and the minerals that power them is accelerating. The Infrastructure Projects Act gives the newly created Ministry of Infrastructure the tools to coordinate, prioritize and accelerate infrastructure projects that matter to people.

[4:45 p.m.]

It also provides a clear path for certain provincially significant projects, including those led by Crown corporations, First Nations, local governments and private proponents, to move forward more efficiently without compromising on reconciliation or our environmental standards.

The mining sector in British Columbia is not only a key economic driver; it is a pillar of our clean energy future. From copper to silica, molybdenum to rare earth elements, critical minerals are essential to everything from batteries and electric vehicles to solar panels and semiconductors. British Columbia is rich in these resources, and we are a global leader in a sustainable and responsible mining sector.

But even well-designated projects, projects with community benefits and First Nations support, sometimes face delay. The Infrastructure Projects Act will help modernize these systems. It creates a framework to expedite permitting for designated priority projects, including those in the critical mineral sector. It enables qualified professionals to play a greater role in lower-risk permits. It establishes an expedited environmental assessment process, one that upholds B.C.'s environmental protections while reducing duplication and delay. It also affirms our obligations under the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

Let me be very clear. This act does not weaken environmental safeguards or reduce the Crown's duty to consult. What it does is bring clarity and coordination so that Indigenous communities, proponents and regulators can work together, work together more efficiently, more effectively and get good projects moving sooner, moving faster.

We have already seen what is possible when we take this kind of collaborative, outcome-focused approach. I will give you a few examples.

Take the Osisko Cariboo Gold project in Quesnel, approved in just 13 months. That single project will bring 634 jobs to the people of British Columbia during construction and contribute over $1 billion in investment to our province. The permitting process for this project was completed in just 13 months, following a rigorous technical review conducted by a qualified team of technical experts in collaboration with First Nations. And we did that.

Another example would be the Artemis Gold Blackwater project, approved within 18 months. It will create

825 direct full-time jobs per year during the construction and expansion phases of mine development and 450 full-time jobs per year during its 22-year operating life. This mine is expected to contribute $13.2 billion to the provincial economy during its lifetime, including $2.3 billion in provincial revenue.

These are major projects creating real opportunities in rural and northern communities, projects that reflect the kind of economic development British Columbians want to see: clean, responsible, inclusive and future-focused. This legislation will help us deliver more of that.

Over the past five years, we have reduced the average review timelines for major project permits by more than one-third, by 35 percent.

[4:50 p.m.]

We also have established a critical minerals office to support the advancement of projects across the value chain, ensuring they are well-positioned to advance more efficiently through regulatory processes.

We recently implemented the mineral claims consultation framework to meet our constitutional obligations and ensure the province consults and accommodates impacts to First Nations rights and title before registering claims.

We're working on modernizing the Mineral Tenure Act in consultation with rights and title holders. This is a top priority, and we are committed to expanding First Nations partnership, shared decision-making and reconciliation through B.C.'s critical mineral strategy.

This legislation is also about enabling smart infrastructure planning across government. The Ministry of Infrastructure will now be able to support partners like school districts, health authorities and Indigenous governments in delivering major capital projects, especially where local capacity may be limited.

Whether it's grouping school projects in a single procurement process or helping coordinate permits across ministries, this act will ensure that infrastructure is delivered not only faster but more efficiently and cost-effectively. When it comes to communities, particularly in times of climate-related disasters or post-catastrophic recovery, this act provides the tools to act quickly and support rebuilding efforts without compromising standards or due process.

The Infrastructure Projects Act is not a shortcut, as the member from the other side has been saying. It's not a shortcut. It is not about bypassing consultation or public input. It's about building better together.

British Columbians expect us to deliver the infrastructure they need where they live and work. They expect us to support sustainable development, reconciliation and economic opportunity at the same time. And they expect us to lead with both urgency and care. This legislation does just that. It helps us meet the moment. It helps us get good projects off the ground. It helps us build the future British Columbians deserve.

This is about giving people in every region of B.C. the opportunity to build, work and thrive. Whether it's a new school, a new hospital or a new mine, British Columbians deserve to see progress, not delays.

For my ministry, this act means strong coordination, more efficient permitting and the ability to move responsible mining projects forward faster. It supports our efforts to attract investment, create jobs and secure B.C.'s place as a global leader in critical minerals. This is a major step in helping us realize the full potential of B.C.'s mining sector for people, for communities and for the clean economy of the future.

I commend the Minister of Infrastructure and her team for their leadership, and I am proud to lend my voice and support to this important legislation on behalf of the mining and critical mineral sector and all those who believe in building a stronger B.C.

Misty Van Popta: I'm going to open this debate with giving credit where credit is due. I believe that the creation of the Infrastructure Ministry was the right thing to do to deliver projects more effectively.

[4:55 p.m.]

Many people here know that my background is as a qualified project management professional, so I can see, or try to see, where they're going with Bill 15. Successful project management is a methodology that encompasses many things: risk assessment, management, procurement, estimating, scheduling, stakeholders and lots of communication, etc.

The very nature of moving all infrastructure projects into one ministry screams efficiency. Before, the Health Ministry, Education Ministry, Transportation Ministry delivered their own projects, resulting in many process duplications, inefficiencies and labour shortages.

I wish to acknowledge the government in making this ministry change and alignment of principles into one singular ministry. That said, it's for this very reason that I must speak against support for Bill 15.

Last week the Minister of Infrastructure posted about the positive progress made in the permitting of current projects. From what she posted, those gains seemed pretty good for the seven short months that this ministry has been in place. It is already apparent that project delivery success is made through process and procedure improvements, exactly what appears to have occurred naturally since the new ministry was formed. That is proof alone that an absolute power grab — that is, Bill 15 — is not required to gain good results. Results are through improvements to regulations and processes that have been previously in place and getting to the root of the issues.

Bill 15 is top-down. I do not doubt that the challenges experienced in project delivery over the past eight years are not things that couldn't be undone without an authoritarian bill. Information gained through project post-

mortems, consultations with contractors and internal ministry collaboration would easily identify project and process risk points and could internally be resolved.

If we truly want to obtain successful project delivery, then we need to take tried-and-true methodology to do so. This bill is not process. It's power, and that word "power" is used over 16 times in this bill.

I'm going to take a few minutes to go through this bill, mainly part by part — I'm going to leave some parts out, just for the sake of time here — so that we identify what are taxpayer risk points made in the name of project expediency.

We're going to start at part 1, "Definitions." Most look pretty benign, industry lingo. We've got "approval authority," "constraint," "infrastructure project," "measure," "proponent," "qualified professional," all pretty standard terminology. Then we get down to category 1 projects, category 2 projects, but there's no definition. It just refers to further in the act.

So what is the definition of a definition? According to Webster's dictionary, a definition is: "(a) a statement of the meaning of a word or a word group or a sign or symbol, (b) a statement expressing the essential nature of something or (c) a product of defining."

If we go to section 4, as it's called out in the act, even less definition is there. Let me read it to you. "The Lieutenant Governor in Council may, on the recommendation of the minister, make regulations to (a) designate the following as a category 1 project — (i) an infrastructure project; (ii) a class of infrastructure projects."

[5:00 p.m.]

If I'm reading that, the definition of category 1 and category 2 is an infrastructure project that is designated under section 4(1), and the definition is "an infrastructure project." It's circular. There's no actual definition of what a category 1 project or category 2 project is.

I think category 2 is defined: "designate a provincially significant infrastructure project as a category 2 project." What's a provincially significant infrastructure project? It's not in definitions. It's not outlined in the act. So what are we supposed to conclude?

Another definition, though, that is missing, which is critical in project delivery, is a definition of "owner." In my realm, the term "owner" refers to the driver of a project, the person who funds a project and requires the project. Do you know who the owner of infrastructure projects is in this province? The owner of projects is the taxpayer. It is the lack of acknowledgement of that stakeholder that is why this bill is so far off the mark.

If we go to part 2, "Minister's Powers," I think the title alone is the start of where the issues are with this section. Minister's powers — wow, let that sink in. Why not minister's role, minister's mandate, minister's jurisdiction? But no, the word chosen was "power." I might say that that word is subliminal, but the very nature that this bill is a confidence vote shouts it in your face. They want power to do what they want, when they want, how they want.

Let's go to section 2, "Minister's general powers." There's some okay stuff in here. I'm not going to attack it all. We see language like "make recommendations," "plan," "manage" and "establish." But then, buried in there, we get some other questionable items like "dispose of land" and "acquire land, on behalf of a prescribed person or entity." I didn't see that in the definitions. What is a prescribed person or entity?

Why on a prescribed person's behalf? I mean, I could possibly understand an entity, maybe a group that's not able to hold the costs of a land purchase. But a person? Again, we're missing the definition of who or what a prescribed person or entity is.

But the worst one here is subsection (h), and it says: "Exercise any other prescribed power." There's that word again, prescribed. Prescribed by whom, the minister? The minister prescribes her own power? Come on.

Section 3 is the minister's powers for category 1 projects. There are four clauses in this section, and every one has the word "power" in it. "The power to develop, construct or alter a category 1 project."

So the minister is the be-all and end-all to any provincial infrastructure project — full stop. Whoever holds the position of minister runs the show. Power to all procurement, anything — equipment, fixtures, property. It is absolutely necessary for procurement processes to be in place for projects. Procurement is one of the most important pieces to project delivery. This clause allows for lobbying to infiltrate fair and open bidding.

But the worst clause is (b): "The power to act as a general contractor or project manager." The province has not delivered a project on time or on budget, based on the original scope. Now they want to be general contractor in charge of managing everything from procuring trades and managing the schedules to overriding consultants, without any résumé to substantiate their ability to perform as a general contractor.

[5:05 p.m.]

Would you hire a general contractor to build something for you without having ever had a success story? That's what this clause does.

In private project delivery, a private project owner would and could act in all capacities of general contractor and project manager. It's their prerogative. It's their money. But in the case of provincial infrastructure, do you know who the owner is? We established that under definitions. It's the driver of the project and the purse of the project. It is the taxpayer; it is not the minister. Yet this bill is structured so that the minister is acting as both the general contractor and the manager and is now also the owner.

What an insult to taxpayers. You've removed the link and the oversight of the recipients of the projects, the key stakeholders, from any scrutiny or questioning or over-

sight. That's not only scary; it's wrong. What about conflicts of interest, acting in both capacities?

To highlight the last clause in that section, we again have the catch-all phrase of "any prescribed power." So the power holder can create any new powers required.

Part 3 is "Designation of Infrastructure Projects." Section 4 is designation of infrastructure projects. Let's be objective. Let me read it out to you and see if you feel confident knowing exactly what is designated as an infrastructure project. Again, it's "(i) an infrastructure project" and "(ii) a class of infrastructure projects."

Then we have an even more ambiguous designation for category 2 projects: "designate a provincially significant infrastructure project as a category 2 project." It's literally undefined and circular. So then it becomes the question of when it comes to category 2 projects, can they be hijacked by the minister, or is the designation of the minister…?

Category 2 projects can be private entity projects. They can be municipal projects. They are anything that is not government. So what if a private entity doesn't want ministry interference?

Then the other question is: can the minister drop a project once designated a category 2 project, after it was previously designated? There's so much ambiguous nature around what a category 2 project is and how far down the minister can go with what they can do with a category 2 project.

Part 4 is "Streamlining Designated Projects." Division 1 is "Streamlined permitting." Right away I'm going to call out why this section is even needed. The minister's own X post boasts about how almost all infrastructure projects are almost caught up in their permitting. So why do we need Bill 15? You're already doing good.

Section 6 is "Qualified professional certifications." This section replaces traditional permitting, which would have had internal eyes in the process, and leaves it in the hands of outside qualified professionals. For a government so hell-bent on absolute control of all projects, when it comes to permitting, they gave up control to qualified professionals.

Again, this bill has left the definition out of this bill. Who is it? Who gets to usurp the permits? What kind of designation do they have? Is there a baseline qualification? There are so many types of qualifications out there.

Section 7 is "Prioritization of provincial permits." This section outlines that the minister can reorder and prioritize anything in the pipeline, whether a provincial project or a private project. If the reasoning for jurisdiction and control over who gets permitted first was to clear critical project backlogs, then why isn't there a sunset clause?

Why does this minister forever get to be in control of what gets priority and what doesn't? This creates potential delays to projects rightfully in line, while opening up concerns for lobbying efforts getting priority over others.

[5:10 p.m.]

This section can also force unknown regulations to establishing permitting prioritizations to outside regulators. Now the government can overreach into regulators and dictate their work. This is wrong.

Section 8, "Reviewable projects under the Environmental Assessment Act." Subsection (2) says that the minister may order a person, board, tribunal or agency to issue approval. What if it goes against the advice of the agency or the consultant? Why, again, is this government overreaching into the entity workings and allowing themselves the ability to mandate approvals?

One area to highlight in this area is the issuance of approval under another enactment to be considered final and binding and not subject to review or appeal. How is that fair? How is that proper? How does that not raise the concerns of environmental proponents? We cannot question why environmental groups are concerned. It literally says that there is no way for them to appeal. Everything is final and binding.

Another item to highlight in this section is who certifies the certifiers. This government is outsourcing compliance to consultants it selects. That's not oversight; that's political convenience. This bill gives ministers the power to choose winners and losers in the approval process. This bill removes the public's right to challenge approvals, even those with serious environmental impacts.

Division 2, "Varying Requirements in Provincial Legislation." We'll jump to section 9, "Request for varying requirements in provincial legislation." We move into government overreach again, on municipal affairs, with this clause. Municipalities have already invested millions of dollars and hours and hours of time updating all zoning requirements mandated by Bills 44 to 47, and now this bill gives the government, again, jurisdiction to bypass the zoning and public input process in the name of fast-tracking and prioritization.

This is all for projects that are either provincial infrastructure or category 2 projects. What if a community is dead set against something in their neighbourhood and this government has deemed it a category 2 project? There was recently, a couple of days ago…. I can't remember which mayor it was, but he came out recently and essentially said: "Why even have mayors and councils if the province continues to override local governments?"

Section 9, exemption from local planning laws. This overrules the Islands Trust Act, the Local Government Act, the Vancouver Charter. One item to highlight is that cabinet may exempt, modify or override requirements, including zoning and development permits. This bill doesn't build trust with municipalities. It further erodes it.

Section 13, "Designated project completion." Project completion is difficult at the best of circumstances. It doesn't matter what project, doesn't matter how well it goes. If there's any kind of residual item outstanding, especially something that's outside of your control, you're

waiting for paperwork from a consultant. In a local case that I know of, you've got limitations due to the salmon spawning in an area. So things have to linger open until other areas that you can't control are resolved, but this clause forces a proponent to ensure that the project is completed.

When it comes to private projects that the province has hijacked, this clause says that the project cannot be used or changed to be what it was originally designated as. How is that right for a category 2 project? It's private. If a private entity chooses to change the purpose or scope of their project, they should be allowed to. It's their project, and it's their money.

The irony is that the rules are different for any project that the minister is a proponent of. If the government wants to change a project to be something other than what was laid out, this section allows them to. Rules for thee, but not for me.

[5:15 p.m.]

"Monitoring performance," section 15. Again, this section excludes projects that are in the charge of the minister. But in the realm of private category 2 projects, the minister is the one to monitor it. The minister can inspect it. This is a private project. That is like mom and dad looking over the shoulder of somebody else's child. It's not your business. This section also allows the minister to appoint their own monitors. No third-party scrutiny.

We are forced to look at this bill as it's written — full stop. We cannot take verbal intent or press releases or media decks as the full reasons behind this bill. We need to look beyond what we have seen on social media and see what's really hiding in the words written in the bill, words like "power" repeated throughout the bill.

The problem with lack of infrastructure projects in this province is not the delivery; it's the funding. If we are not funding projects, we are not fast-tracking projects. Langley and Nanaimo aren't getting their hospital fast-tracked. Why? Because it isn't funded.

We want projects built faster. We want streamlining. What we got was a centralized, antidemocratic framework disguised as modernization. I can't remember who said it, but it was classified that Bill 15 is Bill 7 in a hardhat. Bill 15 creates winners and losers, favourites based on lobby efforts. It overrides the authority of local governments which our taxpayers elected. This bill erodes trust, trust that our government is acting in our best interest, trust that is lost through overreaching power.

Project efficiency is found through improved processes and procedures, determining where we went wrong, learning from our mistakes and changing things. Bill 15 is a sledgehammer to that very thinking. It says that regardless of why things are not being built, cabinet is going to pick up a project out of the mess, ram it through and keep repeating the cycle of dysfunction.

My question is: is it still dysfunctional? With a brand-new ministry created, it suggests to me that project delivery processes would have been paramount in the structure of the department. They're already seeing results, apparently. So why Bill 15 now? Does this government hold so little faith in the new ministry that we need to put in place authoritarian measures in case things go off the rail?

When a government has had no success in its past to back up its résumé and give confidence to the taxpayer that now they deserve sweeping powers to control everything, it should be obvious why there is overwhelming outcry. Forcing closure and forcing rushed scrutiny forces those of us on this side to make the assumptions of what's buried in this bill.

If I've got something wrong here, this government needs to outline exactly where in the bill it says otherwise. We only have the words in this document to understand the intent, and all I can see is that the intent is power without oversight. We must reject Bill 15, not just because of what it does but because of the precedent it sets. Streamlining does not mean steamrolling.

Again, we're not against infrastructure — definitely not. We're just against the over-sweeping power of what this bill says. The people of Langley–Walnut Grove did not elect me to hand an unchecked power to a single ministry. They elected me to speak up. I support infrastructure. I definitely support efficiency. But we don't need to support authoritarian shortcuts. The rule of law should not be optional. Public trust should not be sacrificed on the altar of political convenience. I'll be voting no for Bill 15.

[5:20 p.m.]

I had some interesting quotes that have come out over the last week or so from different groups that have been highlighting some of the issues with Bill 15, so it can't just be pegged that because we're opposition, we're speaking against Bill 15.

We've got the ICBA. The ICBA has got probably the largest membership of not only general contractors but construction companies. When a group like that has not been consulted, it should make you ask why.

To quote Chris Gardner: "The irony is impossible to ignore. The NDP had to create an entire new ministry and bypass legislation just to cut the red tape that created it in the first place. This should have been across-the-board fixed, not a narrowly focused government workaround."

Rob Shaw, in *Business in Vancouver*: "A permit taking too long for a politically sensitive project? A minister can intervene and designate someone to approve it or even make the approval automatic. Instead of going through normal environmental reviews, cabinet can deem any project provincially significant and unlock vast powers."

To quote the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs: "Bill 15 raises concerns about projects being fast-tracked under the guise of responding to Trump's tariffs."

We're not the only ones with serious questions about Bill 15. I would hope that during the committee stage,

there will be an opportunity for revisions to make all of us more comfortable with what the intent is here because, again, what we have are just the words that are in the bill. Sixteen times the bill refers to the word "power."

An infrastructure bill should not be a vote of confidence. It shouldn't be. And I need to…. We all feel that if we're asking for confidence on an infrastructure bill, there's got to be something more to it.

I will not be supporting Bill 15, and I encourage others to follow suit.

Hon. David Eby: I'm so inspired by the amazing history of this province. You know, whenever it was needed, British Columbians stepped up when it mattered most. The work that was done in this province to build this amazing place we call home was generations in the making. It involved hard work. It involved the dams to power our homes. It involved carving highways out of the mountains, treacherous terrain. During war, British Columbians produced almost half of the cargo ships that supplied the Allies.

This history of building, of meeting the moment, doesn't have to be a tale that our grandparents talk about. This can be the story of British Columbia today, and it needs to be. British Columbia right now is going to be the economic engine of the new Canada that we all know we need — a Canada that stands on our own two feet, a Canada that is more independent of the United States, a Canada where people get those high-quality front-line services that they need and depend on.

It is time to build again, and we don't have a moment to waste. There are direct threats to our economy from our powerful neighbour, explicit decisions being made out of the White House to attack strategic and core industries in our province and in our country.

We don't have a choice. We have to strengthen our economy. We have to support our people in this province. We can't live on infrastructure that was built by our grandparents. We can't wait for jobs to be created in this province. The moment is now.

[5:25 p.m.]

Right now our government is executing the largest infrastructure build in the history of the province of British Columbia. At the same time, despite the threats from the President, we have private sector companies coming forward with proposals for projects worth billions of dollars, creating thousands of jobs in every corner of this amazing place we call home.

Now, we cannot allow slow permitting processes and bureaucratic processes to delay what we know has to happen. That will cost us at a time we can least afford it.

An example of the kinds of challenges and opportunities that this bill presents in terms of being able to address and respond in a crisis…. It's probably one of the reasons why the mayor of Grand Forks is supporting this bill. Grand Forks, devastated by flooding, had to rebuild from the ground up, had to install extensive preventative infrastructure to prevent a future flood from happening. Even just in the cleanup and rebuild process, Grand Forks had to apply for 40 separate permits to get things rolling.

For communities to respond following an emergency, for communities to build infrastructure to prevent devastation from emergencies like flooding or wildfire, this bill allows us to work with them to ensure they can get it done quickly, efficiently and effectively. The infrastructure act includes tools to accelerate priority projects, both public sector and private sector.

It's important to know that this bill doesn't come in a vacuum. It comes against the backdrop of government systematically working through a permitting system to reduce the times to approvals for all projects.

For example, we started with housing, where we've reduced approval times for major new developments by 30 percent. We have a single window for developers now so that they know where their permits are in the process, and there are more efficiencies coming. We've reduced Heritage Conservation Act permit times dramatically.

We've increased the speed of approvals of new mines. It used to take five years to approve a new mine. The most recent mine was approved at 24 months, and we still see room for improvement yet, in terms of the mining sector. The backdrop of working on permit approvals generally is taking place, but there are crucial projects for communities and for our provincial economy that can't wait.

For example, when your kids need to go to school, they need a school that meets the demands of the population, that's seismically safe, that has enough space for all the students. You really don't want to hear that your school is going to be held up for six months because the community where it's going to be located has to update their official community plan in order for the school to go ahead or that there was a ditch that was identified on the site that requires an extensive process under the Water Sustainability Act.

These are issues that we can address through the red-tape reduction that we're doing in terms of our permitting process. And we are addressing those issues, but at the same time, we're building. We're flying this plane while we're fixing it. So while we do this work, we have to ensure that we're able to deliver these critical pieces.

It means your kids will be in modern classrooms. It means that students will be in affordable student housing at post-secondary campuses across the province. It means people will be attending new-build hospitals or upgraded hospitals, critical infrastructure for health care. It means communities will be prepared for natural disasters.

Now, I know, given the history of this province, why there is anxiety from some corners about an abandoning of commitments around reconciliation, around the environment. But that is not where we're going with this. In

fact, just the opposite. We know that the work that we have to do is crucial to ensure the protection of our environment, to address the challenge of climate change, and that it is crucial to ensure that we are working towards reconciliation in partnership with First Nations.

You cannot fast-track a project in Canada unless you have the support of First Nations. Rights and title claims, section 35 rights in our province, our commitments under DRIPA mean that those commitments need to be met.

This isn't about abandoning reconciliation. This is about delivering on the commitments to work in partnership with First Nations and ensure that we're responding to the challenge of our time, which is climate change, through delivering clean, affordable energy in every corner of this province with projects that deliver the cleanest metals, minerals and resources that the world needs.

[Lorne Doerkson in the chair.]

We will not leave First Nations on the sidelines. We will not leave any corner of this province out of the share in the prosperity of this amazing place that we call home, that we can deliver on by moving faster as a province.

[5:30 p.m.]

As just an example of our commitment around this, the Minister of Energy in his call for power has ensured that we're working in partnership with First Nations. Eight of the nine projects that we're advancing are majority First Nation–owned. They'll power 500,000 homes and deliver prosperity to nations for generations. It's just an example of the kind of work that we're doing together.

Now, we're living through a time of great uncertainty and change for British Columbians, for Canadians. Despite that, there is really nowhere in the world that I would rather be to face down this global uncertainty than right here in British Columbia, Canada. We have everything we need right here to be successful.

Our ports face out to two-thirds of the world's population. The resources we have here are unmatched globally. And you can name, really, almost any resource, from our food, metals and minerals, timber — it can go on. And the people here, the amazing people of British Columbia, that are resilient, that are talented, that are trained, that are brilliant and entrepreneurial, are ready to deliver. That is why we will be the economic engine of the Canada that we're building together.

British Columbians don't retreat from challenges. We rise up to meet them. This bill will ensure that we have the tools to meet the moment and to deliver what British Columbians expect: good schools, good hospitals, good roads delivered quickly; strong economic projects that let us stand on our own two feet and deliver prosperity to every corner of this province and play our part in Confederation, supporting provinces and territories across Canada.

We're going to seize the moment, and we're going to get the job done.

Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much, Premier.

Recognizing now the member for Columbia River–Revelstoke.

Scott McInnis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Welcome to the chair.

Interjection.

Scott McInnis: And thank you to the Minister of Forests. I appreciate that introduction.

I'm going to jump around a little bit here in the points I'd like to make around Bill 15. I appreciate the Premier coming in and giving his perspective on behalf of the government on this bill, but here's what other people have to say about it.

"Bill 15 is not about streamlining. It is about centralizing power" — I'm quoting right now — "in the Premier's office. Premier Eby is acting like he has the overwhelming majority he inherited. The W̱JOŁEŁP First Nation reminds Mr. Eby that he currently only has a one-seat majority…"

Deputy Speaker: Member, I just ask you not to say the Premier's name or any other name, please.

Scott McInnis: Oh, excuse me, Mr. Speaker. I'm terribly sorry.

"…and he, as a leader, was barely able to get his team across the line in the provincial election last fall. This bill sidelines constitutionally protected Aboriginal rights and title and the Crown's duty to consult with First Nations." That's Chief Don Tom, who is vice-president of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs.

So we're at a loggerhead here. We have the Premier saying that it's no problem, we're going to fulfil our constitutional right to consult with First Nations and work in partnership with First Nations, something we all want. But Chief Tom and others who I will read here don't buy it.

"I think this is a dangerous piece of legislation, and steps need to be taken to stop it." That's Mr. Brodie, the mayor of Richmond.

"If you want to run the district of Sparwood, just tell me, and don't have a mayor and council." Mr. Wilks, the mayor of the district of Sparwood.

[5:35 p.m.]

"Over the past couple of years, we have seen the province changing the priorities in how they approach legislation. And in some cases, ideas that are developed at a political level have been rushed into law without appropriate and meaningful consultation with stakeholders." That's Trish Mandewo, the Union of B.C. Municipalities president.

"Bill 15, in its current form, grants the NDP cabinet sweeping powers to bypass environmental assessment,

municipal authorities and the jurisdiction of First Nations under the guise of fast-tracking major infrastructure projects." That's the interim leader of the B.C. Green Party.

"Overreaching. Enables the province to bypass permitting processes that expedite environmental assessment for any project they deem a priority." Mr. Terry Teegee, Regional Chief of the B.C. Assembly of First Nations.

I have several more here, but there is one I'm going to highlight. I brought it up in the House yesterday because it's local to me. I am honoured to call Kimberley my home, which is on the traditional territory of the Ktunaxa people, a very resilient people. It takes a lot to ruffle their feathers, to be honest with you. "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."

These are leaders in the province, important leaders in the province, if you ask me.

There are more, but I'm going to get into some of the points I want to make here. I appreciate the Premier saying what he had to say, but these leaders of significance have voiced their concerns, and the Premier says: "Well, we're going ahead anyways."

I'm rising today to speak to Bill 15. This legislation is misguided. It's presented as a cure for bureaucratic delay, a way to fast-track schools, hospitals and other infrastructure projects throughout British Columbia, but beneath this optimistic title and lofty promises, Bill 15 is a deeply troubling power grab. Too much control is centralized in the hands of cabinet at the expense of Indigenous rights, as we see by the concerns raised; environmental safeguards, as we see by several public concerns raised; and the voices of local communities, as seen in several concerns raised.

It is our duty as the official opposition to shine a light on these flaws and stand up for the democratic processes and values that this NDP government seems all too willing to trample.

Mr. Speaker, every paragraph of the address I'm going to give begins with your title as a reminder that these words are meant in this chamber for the public record. The concerns I will outline are shared not only by the opposition caucus but by a broad array of British Columbians, including First Nation leaders, environmental advocates, municipal representatives and ordinary citizens. They see what we see: a government that is claiming speed and efficiency as cover for sidelining accountability and oversight.

Mr. Speaker, what are we doing? We've been down this road with Bill 7 and the concerns raised about the potential power overreaches. Bill 15 may be touted as a measure to cut the red tape, but in truth, it cuts at the very fabric of transparent, accountable governance.

Mr. Speaker, the official opposition fully supports building critical infrastructure in a timely manner. We all recognize the need for new schools. We have growing communities, especially in the one I represent, Columbia River–Revelstoke. We need modern hospitals, clinics, roads, bridges, housing. That's not up for debate here.

[5:40 p.m.]

We share the frustration of delays, but we do not support ripping up the safeguards that ensure those projects are done right and fairly. We do not accept that the ends justify the means, especially when the means undermine democratic principles and, of course, Indigenous rights. Bill 15 is written not as a streamlining of processes; it is a steamrolling of processes, and it sets a very dangerous precedent.

Let's begin with the overreaching issue. Executive power in Bill 15 undermines our democratic oversight. That's why we're here. This bill grants the cabinet and various ministers unilateral authority to designate virtually any infrastructure project as provincially significant.

Now, why this is concerning to me in Columbia River–Revelstoke is because I have several critical infrastructure projects that are really important to the people I represent, specifically, two wastewater treatment plants in growing communities, resort municipalities, that need upgrading. The first one is in Kimberley, delayed to the cost of millions of dollars, the original treatment plant being built in 1967. The treatment plant sits on the pristine St. Mary River, home to westslope cutthroat and bull trout spawning grounds. Just a handful of kilometres downriver is the ʔaq̓am Band. This is an environmental disaster waiting to happen.

But the Premier wouldn't know this. I'd love to know, since he's been the Premier, how many hours he's spent in Columbia River–Revelstoke. I don't know what I would have to do, as this legislation says, to include very important wastewater treatment plants in my riding, eastern British Columbia, as provincially significant. Do I have to call the Premier and ask him? Do I have to invite him to my birthday party? I don't know. But I know he doesn't understand how significant this is for places like Revelstoke and Kimberley, because he never goes there.

This is a growing concern in the riding I represent. There's a disconnect between Victoria and eastern British Columbia. This is real.

The government may call this efficiency, but it does not sound like efficiency to the people of British Columbia. It sounds like autocracy dressed up as expediency. The powers in Bill 15 are extraordinarily broad. The bill empowers the Minister of Infrastructure or other ministers responsible to fast-track designated projects as expeditiously as possible. It allows orders in council to effectively sweep aside regulations that would normally apply, all behind closed doors.

There's no clear definition of what qualifies as provincially significant — pretty serious concern for rural British Columbia. Since the Premier doesn't visit these ridings

very often, I can't put the calculus together as to how he would see any of these projects as provincially significant.

[5:45 p.m.]

Cabinet is asking us to trust them. I've been really fortunate to build some good working relationships with members opposite, and I appreciate those relationships. But I'm not about to hand them a blank cheque of authority now and they'll fill in the details, somehow, later. With all due respect, most members on the opposite side couldn't even point out my communities on a map.

This is not how democracy is supposed to work. Laws should be made in the Legislature, not written in the back rooms after the fact. We've heard the rationale from the government.

I do appreciate the Minister of Forests having visited my community recently. It would be nice if his colleagues would join him.

The Premier and his ministers point to uncertainty caused by foreign events, blaming the potential of U.S. tariffs imposed by the President as justification for these powers. They argue that in turbulent times, government needs the ability to act fast, to cut through what they label as the red tape.

But British Columbians are not fooled by this, as we've seen in just a small number of the quotes, which are public, from various leaders throughout the province. They want us to believe them, that this is an American problem somehow. We should never sacrifice accountability and due process because it's convenient. We need to accelerate infrastructure projects without abandoning transparency and the rule of law.

This is not the first time we have seen an attempt at such overreach. Again, I know this is a debate about Bill 15, but it was just a few short weeks ago that we had the very same conversation about Bill 7 and, up until this afternoon, some of the same themes in Bill 14. The backlash for these bills has been swift and has come from all corners of this province: labour unions, business leaders, Indigenous associations and leadership, the public at large. But the government is going ahead anyways by forcing closure on the debate.

We had hoped that the government learned a lesson from that debacle on Bill 7. Yet here we are again with Bill 15, another attempt. It's slightly more subtle, however, but still a clear attempt to concentrate power in cabinet and sideline normal legislative processes. What this government calls red tape we often call safeguards, safeguards that protect our environment.

I live in the most beautiful riding in the province. I'm sorry to say that.

Interjection.

Scott McInnis: Hey, I know you've been there recently. The Forests Minister has been there. He's not arguing.

Everybody in my riding cares about the environment, so to somehow skirt normal environmental assessment processes is of major concern. We need to ensure local voices are heard and prevent costly mistakes in these processes.

Bypassing some of these necessary safeguards might save a bit of time in the short term. I'm not going to disagree with that. But there's a real threat it could cost us dearly in the long term. It risks public trust and invites legal challenges, uncertainty, conflict and division, things we don't need any more of in this province. Even some in the business community who do desire faster project approvals have raised questions and concerns about this kind of unchecked authority.

[5:50 p.m.]

One of the most disturbing aspects of this bill — I know the Premier is addressing this — as we've seen with just a handful of my quotes, is the disregard for meaningful consultation with Indigenous people. This government boasts about its commitment to reconciliation, but it's noticeably absent in this bill.

The First Nations Leadership Council, which represents the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, Assembly of First Nations and the First Nations Summit, has condemned Bill 15 in no uncertain terms. That's got to be worth something in this chamber. They point out that the province conducted no meaningful consultation with First Nations in drafting this bill.

You'd think that the leadership council would be the first phone call the Premier or the Attorney General would make when drafting this legislation, but it appears that neither of them picked up the phone. Now, I can understand this government wouldn't intentionally sidestep or infringe on Indigenous rights and title, but so far, they're not off to a good start in the consultation process with First Nations and Indigenous people in this province.

First Nation leaders call this a betrayal of the process that true reconciliation demands. Government-to-government relationships are supposed to be upheld in this process. These leaders have worked years toward a respectful partnership, only to find themselves shut out when a major piece of legislation is put forward. Indigenous voices are warning that Bill 15 threatens constitutionally protected rights. This isn't the member for Columbia River–Revelstoke or the official opposition expressing these concerns.

By fast-tracking these projects and overriding normal reviews, the government — maybe not intentionally; I want to give them credit for that — could easily violate the Crown's duty to consult and accommodate First Nations on decisions that impact their lands and waters. The bill, as drafted, has no explicit requirement that I've seen to meet the standard of free, prior and informed consent. In fact, it seems to omit any such safeguards.

It also weakens the application of the Environmental

Assessment Act, a law that is often one of the only processes where Indigenous nations can have a say or require studies on projects in their territories. As we can see by the quotes I read, not a story, Indigenous leaders see this as a return to the bad old days when government pushed through projects without regard for Indigenous rights and title, often with devastating consequences for those communities.

[5:55 p.m.]

Some First Nations have not minced words about the motive behind Bill 15. They've called it a power grab. They point out that the Premier is behaving as if he had an overwhelming mandate, as I expressed earlier, to force this through, when in fact he certainly does not.

In a statement by Chief Tom, he noted that the current NDP government holds a razor-thin majority government here. British Columbians did not give this government a blank cheque to override anybody's rights or local voices in this chamber. That's certainly what they're trying to do with Bill 15.

Another critical casualty of Bill 15 is our province's environmental protection regime and the broader public oversight of major projects. This act would arm cabinet with the authority and the ability to skirt environmental assessments and various permits under the guise of efficiency, at their sole discretion.

It sets up alternative expedited assessment processes that can be approved by a simple order in council. Well, I can tell you, that type of process certainly won't cut it in Columbia River–Revelstoke. It even contemplates automatically deeming some permits approved, if they are deemed low risk, once a project is given an overarching approval. Low risk — I'd love to see the rubric for that.

In plain language, the government is giving itself tools to cut corners on environmental scrutiny. I didn't have all day to read the various quotes that I had gathered, but there are several environmental advocacy groups that are staunchly against Bill 15.

British Columbia's Environmental Assessment Act was created to ensure that before a major project goes ahead, we carefully study its impacts on land, water, air, wildlife and communities. It ensures that the public can provide input, that Indigenous knowledge is considered and that we don't blindly barrel into a project that could cause irreparable harm.

Bill 15 threatens these safeguards by concentrating power in cabinet to wave aside the normal assessments. It opens the door to long-term environmental damage potentially. Once again, this isn't the official opposition saying this. There are countless media releases and public quotes saying just this. We fortunately have the ability to bring it on the record here in this chamber on their behalf.

By normalizing the override of a local process, Bill 15 shifts us toward a highly centralized model, where distant bureaucrats decide what's best for communities that they may know nothing about. That's too bad, because I think a lot of these projects that the government is earmarking are in rural and remote communities. I know my colleagues in the opposition who represent those rural and remote communities most certainly don't see a lot of ministers spending a lot of time there.

I want to touch briefly, in my time remaining, on the issue of regional equity and priorities. Specifically, one critique raised by my colleague from Prince George–Mackenzie says that Bill 15 would worsen the neglect of certain regions in favour of others.

[6:00 p.m.]

The cabinet in Victoria might designate projects in the populous Lower Mainland as a priority while overlooking critical needs in the North or the Interior.

In fact, this legislation, as promoted by the government, seems to have a very politicized vision of infrastructure.

We've heard that the government does not intend to fast-track certain types of projects. For example, LNG or pipeline projects were excluded from the fast-tracking regime. Are they not critical infrastructure? I think if you ask folks in northern B.C., they'd beg to differ with you. Natural gas development and pipelines are, indeed, critical to the regional economy and to our entire province's prosperity.

As my colleague from Peace River South noted, there is, give or take, $1 trillion worth of proven natural gas reserves in this province — $1 trillion. But we can't seem to get out of our own way to build the infrastructure necessary to extract and export the natural gas, which would most certainly pay for the critical social services we all want and deserve in this province.

Instead, we're going to build a few windmills here and there and expect that that'll meet the growing electricity demand this province has. Again, I'm going to be asking where we are getting these windmills from, because it's probably not in British Columbia.

On behalf of my constituents in Columbia River–Revelstoke, I'm staunchly opposed to Bill 15, and I will most certainly not be supporting it.

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Thanks to my colleague across the way for his speech. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

The irony I just want to start off with…. The member is a good guy. I enjoyed the time…. We've had an opportunity to be able to engage outside of this House. I know that, in speaking to the member, he's certainly learning lots as a new MLA and doing his best in this place and in his community to stand up for his community. I appreciate that and the conversations we have. But there is a lot of irony with what he said.

He is part of a party. Maybe by providing these remarks on Bill 15, after hearing the member across the way, he may choose to consider leaving the Conservative Party. In particular, the record of the Leader of the Opposition….

He is now painted with the same brush as the Leader of the Opposition, with a party that campaigned on ripping up UNDRIP. He spent his speech talking about the importance of reconciliation and engaging with Indigenous Peoples.

The irony is talking about fighting climate change and, in particular, environmental standards when he ran to be a part of a party with a leader, and now reports up to a leader, who doesn't believe in climate change or, at least, sometimes changes his tune and says: "Yeah, climate change exists, but it's not an existential threat."

So I appreciated his comments, but there's a lot of irony there. But that's okay. That's why we get a chance to be able to stand up in this House and say what's on our minds on behalf of our constituents. And it's a real privilege for me to be able to stand in this House and speak on behalf of the hard-working people of Langford-Highlands, who I believe overwhelmingly support Bill 15 and the work that we are doing on this side of the House.

The Government House Leader and I were chatting about the similarities between our two ridings, being suburban communities. He and I often share a lot of the same feelings. I guess the people of Langford and PoCo are similar: hard-working people; blue-collar workers that, in many cases, are building the infrastructure that we're talking about.

[6:05 p.m.]

So it's a real privilege for me to be able to stand in this House and talk about my support for Bill 15, the Infrastructure Projects Act. I want to thank the minister for her leadership in not only taking on this complex file but assembling a new ministry at the same time as bringing forward this legislation.

I'll talk a bit about what this legislation means to the people of Langford-Highlands and, in particular, my connection to infrastructure. I want to take us back a number of years. In 2011, I was a high school student at Belmont Secondary School. My high school was in downtown Langford, where now there's a strip mall and a Thrifty's. A lot has happened on that site.

My high school was falling apart. It was crowded; 2,000 students for a school that was probably built for 1,000. When the floors ripped up, instead of fixing them, they would literally go and put duct tape on the floor. Asbestos warnings were everywhere. You couldn't use the water fountains, because they literally had a big sign that said: "Asbestos warnings."

My connection to politics started with my predecessor, John Horgan. But my real connection to community politics and grassroots politics actually started in high school. I don't know if I ever told this story in my maiden speech, but I went to that school. We were doing a project on persuasive writing, and I decided my persuasive essay would be writing a letter to the Minister of Education, convincing them to replace that aging, decrepit high school with two new high schools.

Little did I know that a petition and a schoolwide walkout would somehow land me in this place. But that connection to me and my school was critical, because schools in so many ways are really the centre points of communities.

Why I mention this, in particular, in relation to Bill 15 and the Infrastructure Projects Act…. This is about building community. This is about building the infrastructure British Columbians deserve and rely on each and every day. My community, like so many communities across British Columbia, faced many challenges in the mid- to late 2000s.

In 2011, the Minister of Education at the time, George Abbott, who many in the House will know, someone who I have the honour of working with in his role as a treaty commissioner and as someone who's helping support me in my review of B.C. Timber Sales, was a minister. I remember coming up in this House, sitting somewhere up there, being introduced by John and seeing the presentation of my petition.

It was hard to get money out of the B.C. Liberals for infrastructure projects. They cut. I remember when I became a school trustee, the first budget that I had, we were cutting $4 million from our operating budget, and we were getting zero in capital budgets at that time, which was very difficult for my school district because we were growing rapidly.

The Sooke school district has been, I believe — don't quote me on this, because it has been a couple of years since I left the school district — the fastest-growing school district per capita in the province. I don't know if any of my friends from Surrey are in the Leg., but the Surrey school district often is lauded as the fastest-growing school district. But per capita, Sooke beats them by a lot.

We were taking dollars away from the classroom to fund portables, which made it very challenging for me as a relatively new school trustee to be a part of those decisions. It was a very stressful time. Things changed in 2017, when a new government came, a new horizon came.

But my experiences with infrastructure really connect back to that grassroots level in schools. I experienced a government that cut, a government that wanted to close schools. In fact, my elementary school was closed by Christy Clark and the B.C. Liberal government. It actually led my family to move to Langford.

I experienced something different in 2017, when you had a Premier, John Horgan, and now led by our current Premier, who had been bringing in substantive investments in our province.

This is important to talk about, because these investments mean an awful lot to communities. I've been to many communities. The member opposite talks about ministers not visiting rural communities. A number of

my colleagues have visited communities represented by the members across the way.

[6:10 p.m.]

I've spent more time in their communities than I've spent in my own community these last few months, because I know how important it is for me as a new minister to put the work in on the ground, boots on the ground, meeting with local mayors and council, meeting with First Nations leaders, meeting with workers, meeting with community leaders, putting that work in to ensure that I can understand the concerns, I can listen and learn so I can come back here to this beautiful Legislature, to Victoria, and start taking action on the issues that matter to people.

I enjoyed spending time in Kimberley. I got a chance to participate in a prescribed fire. Who would have thought that a kid from Langford would be given a driptorch and get a chance to be able to see the hard-working men and women of the B.C. wildfire service, the incredible work that the chief of the Kimberley fire department is doing?

I also got a chance to be able to meet with the mayor. I meet with many mayors and talk about infrastructure. I've been to communities where mayors have been represented by Liberals, Uniteds, Conservatives — it's been some time since a New Democrat has been elected from those communities — that have said: "Even though we don't have an NDP MLA, man, have you guys delivered for us."

You just have to look at the mayor of Terrace and the new hospital that's going in. You just have to talk about the investments that we've made in so many communities. Williams Lake is an example. So many communities where we have delivered. And it doesn't matter if we don't represent those communities, because all British Columbians, every aspect of this land base matters to us.

Since we formed government in 2017, we have delivered record numbers of new infrastructure projects to really strengthen the core of British Columbia, to help build British Columbia. We have started or completed work on more than 30 hospital projects.

And 80,000 student seats built or underway in my school district. That means the largest expansion of public education in the school district's history. That's two new high schools. That's a new middle school, Centre Mountain Lellum. That's several elementary schools. That's land purchases. That's building for the future.

I went from representing a school district that had one of the highest thresholds of portables to classroom seats, to actual buildings being built. We are actually building SĆIȺNEW̱ ST̓EŁIT̓K̓EŁ right now, a brand-new, 500-seat elementary school built with B.C. mass timber that is set to open this September.

The Infrastructure Projects Act helps projects like that get ahead. It helps projects like that proceed in a more efficient way. I'm going to touch on more of that.

So 10,700 student housing beds underway across the province, in major urban centres but also rural communities as well. Those are important beds for students who are going to be helping to build our province, going to be helping to ensure that we are providing them the opportunity to be leaders in our province.

And 92,000 homes, 2,500 transportation projects, millions spent to build new playgrounds.

I could go on and on about the infrastructure projects that I've seen in my travels as Minister of Forests but also that I've seen in my constituency of Langford-Highlands. Again, the largest expansion of public education in the Sooke school district's history.

The largest expansion of public transportation that we've seen in the West Shore's history: a rapid bus, significant upgrades all across this constituency. I think of the work that my predecessor did on the road out to Sooke, nearly a $100 million project there.

Countless examples. I think of the new West Shore post-secondary campus, that's going to have a new name soon, that is the first of its kind. It's going to have spots for over 1,000 students in downtown Langford. Royal Roads, UVic, Camosun College, the Justice Institute and the Sooke school district — five institutions in one building, the first of its kind in Canada.

Those are the types of infrastructure projects that we want to streamline, we want to get built faster. There's nothing that frustrates people more than seeing governments stand at podiums, make announcements and then don't see shovels in the ground. This legislation gets shovels in the ground in projects right across British Columbia. It's so important.

We can talk about what the member talked about or what the member from Kamloops Centre went on for almost two hours on. That was concerns with Indigenous consultations, concerns with the environment. I'm sorry. I can't take them seriously on those issues. I can't take the Conservative Party of B.C. seriously on those issues.

[6:15 p.m.]

It's this government, it's the people on this side of the House that brought in the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. You actually had the member across the way prior to me, I think, essentially say: "If LNG was included in here, if pipeline projects were included in here, maybe we'll support it. I'm not sure."

This is about public infrastructure. This is about getting major projects approved. And we have to ask ourselves: why is this so important now? We've been making a lot of efforts in getting infrastructure projects approved all across the province, but what's changed? In January, Donald Trump got elected President of the United States. And when he became….

Interjection.

Hon. Ravi Parmar: Well, the member across the way

can laugh, but that's true. Donald Trump became President of the United States. And on day one, he threatened our sovereignty. He said that he wanted to make Canada the 51st state.

We have to get building. We need people in our communities right across British Columbia — not just in Langford-Highlands but in Columbia River–Revelstoke, in Richmond, in Langley, in Chilliwack, in PoCo, you name it. We need them building. We need construction workers working.

I was with the building trades last week. They support this legislation. In fact, they've written a letter to the Leader of the Opposition, encouraging him and his colleagues to support this legislation. This is the important work that we have to do. It's the important work that we're doing on this side of the House.

Donald Trump is spending time saying a lot of stuff in the media, a lot of stuff. I don't know where he is today, but every so often he will continue to insult Canada. He will continue to refer to us as the 51st state. I'm sure glad that he's not showing to Prime Minister Carney the same level of disrespect he showed Prime Minister Trudeau. That's progress. But he insulted our country, and we have to take advantage of the opportunity we have to build, to build in a more efficient way, to build faster.

That means all of us working together. We've got projects in all of our communities. When we get elected here, we get elected with a colour. But we all have the same things. We all want schools. We all want hospitals. We all want public transportation infrastructure. I give the Minister of Transportation a hard time all the time about the need for more transportation infrastructure.

But we all do that because we all live in our communities, and we all want to see the best for our communities. So why not approve, why not pass, legislation like Bill 15, the Infrastructure Projects Act, that does that very thing — that is, takes projects from concept on paper and gets them across the finish line? That's exactly what we are trying to do with this legislation. It's about streamlining. It's about being more efficient.

I've had the opportunity, in my time as the chair of the Sooke school district, to manage as part of a team, to be on the governance side managing hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of capital projects. I learned a lot through that process, and it's really helped set me up for success in other projects that I'm going to have in my life.

There are incredible school district partners, incredible local government partners, you name it, that are doing this work every single day, helping to build British Columbia. I think of the work that's going on just north of me at the Cowichan Hospital. My colleague the MLA for Cowichan Valley and her constituents are going to get a benefit from it. I think the region is going to get a chance to benefit from it, not just the jobs of building that hospital but also the services that are going to come.

We have an infrastructure deficit here in British Columbia, and that is because when those guys sat on this side of the House, they didn't build British Columbia. They cut every single day. They cut. So here is an opportunity for us to build. Here is an opportunity for us to put people to work, to provide good-paying jobs to people in every corner of our province, and we're going to take every opportunity to do that through this legislation.

That's why it is such an important piece of legislation that the Premier took the leadership to speak to it as well. He acknowledged the work that has happened all across British Columbia, over decades of building infrastructure that matters to people: schools, hospitals, wind projects, you name it. Those are projects that matter to people because they put people to work and get them what they need.

It gets them the opportunity to ensure that their kids are going to quality education facilities, world-class facilities. It ensures that they are going to hospitals that are not falling apart but are brand-new.

[6:20 p.m.]

They're not going to hospitals that are old trailers. They are going to modern infrastructure. They are driving on public transportation that is built by British Columbians.

I could go on and on about the infrastructure that we've built on this side of the House, and we want to do more. In fact, we have announced, through Budget 2025, which aligns with Bill 15, the largest expansion of investment in infrastructure in British Columbia's history, $60 billion over three years. That is incredible but also terrifying, because we have to train the people, and we have to take these projects and those dollar figures, stop talking about them from concept and get shovels in the ground.

But that doesn't mean that we don't meaningfully engage with Indigenous peoples. It doesn't mean that we don't engage on the ground on environmental concerns. I was at a project in View Royal. I had an opportunity, with the member for Nanaimo-Lantzville, to be able to help open up a really major infrastructure project. It's not necessarily in my community, literally down the road from my community, but that helped support this region, the capital regional district — in particular the West Shore, where I come from.

That was a new handyDART facility. There was a lot of controversy over this handyDART facility, specifically from community members. Here was an opportunity where you had a project that was being talked about in the Ministry of Transportation for some time, and B.C. Transit for some time, and it was this government that helped get it done. It was this government that helped fund it.

But it was the people on the ground. It was the representatives from the Ministry of Transportation and Transit. It was the individuals from B.C. Transit, the planners. It was the community residents that came together, talked about the challenges and were able to build a nearly

$100 million building to help expand handyDART facilities for seniors, for people with disabilities, provide that much-needed support and take a project that was off on the sidelines, a project that was struggling to get by, and get community support.

That doesn't stop with Bill 15. Community input is so important. We all have public inboxes. People provide us their perspectives every single day. We may agree with it, we may disagree with it, but it's our job to listen. That doesn't stop with Bill 15. It didn't stop with Bill 14. This is about Donald Trump threatening our sovereignty and us taking an opportunity to build the infrastructure our province needs and our country needs as well.

I was reading the *Globe and Mail* this morning. I don't tend to read the *Globe and Mail* every single day. I tend to read the *Times Colonist,* because that's my local paper. But it was flagged for me that there was an editorial by the *Globe and Mail*. The title was: "B.C.'s Blueprint for a Fast Track for Big Projects." I'm just going to quote one line. "British Columbia has found a way forward, offering a blueprint that should be embraced by Ottawa." I encourage all of my colleagues to pull out their phones and Google "B.C.'s Blueprint for a Fast Track for Big Projects." That was from the *Globe and Mail* editorial board.

They are seeing what we are doing here in British Columbia. We are leading the way. We're leading the way on infrastructure. We're leading the way with my colleague on mining, ensuring that we can become a mining superpower, not just in Canada but the world. But we're not going to stop there. Here is an opportunity for us to take it to the next level. We have an opportunity to help build British Columbia and ensure that we are providing people the services they need, the infrastructure they need.

I saw that firsthand, in my time as a school trustee, when you had a government that cut, a government that wouldn't provide support, a government that wouldn't help move projects forward. Here we have a government that is putting money on the table. Here we have a government that is making record investments, billions of dollars of investments. Here we have a government that is asking for the support of the Legislative Assembly to take it one step further.

That is to get projects in the ground, to employ good, working British Columbians who want to help build schools, who want to help build hospitals, who want to help build playgrounds, all types of infrastructure that benefit their communities. This is what Bill 15 does.

[6:25 p.m.]

We have seen the opposition — during their debate on Bill 14, and we have seen it so far in Bill 15 — attack our Premier and attack the work that he has been doing. The Premier of the province of British Columbia has been a leader, a leader not just here in British Columbia but a leader in Canada. When I go home to Langford-Highlands and I go to my local coffee shop, the number of people that come up to me and say: "The Premier is incredible. The Premier is leading the way."

I have people telling me in Langford-Highlands that they've got cousins, aunts and uncles, moms and dads in other provinces saying: "Gosh, I wish your Premier was our Premier. I wish British Columbia's Premier was our Premier." These are people in Ontario, Quebec and other places. We are lucky to have his leadership.

The reason I raise that in particular is that the former MLA for Langford-Highlands was the Premier. He set a really high bar, and I always wondered if anyone could meet that bar. The Premier is working his butt off every day to meet that bar, and I'm hearing it on the ground. He is putting the work in. He is getting projects approved, like a new university in Langford, like new schools, like health care infrastructure, and it's just the start.

We have an opportunity in the times that we live in to take real action. I talked about this in my remarks on Bill 14. We have an opposition that doesn't have a vision. We have an opposition that is taking every opportunity to say no to everything. This is a real change from what I thought may have been Conservative ideals and values. I thought Conservatives wanted to build. I thought Conservatives wanted to build infrastructure. I thought Conservatives wanted to put people to work. Clearly, that's changed.

That's okay, because we're on this side, and they're not. On this side of the House, we are going to take every opportunity in our time in government to build the infrastructure, to put people to work, to ensure that we can have quality schools, that we can have hospital infrastructure, that we can have public transportation on high-quality infrastructure. That is the work that we are doing on this side of the House because that is the work that British Columbians have sent us to do.

That is important work, and that is important work that all of us hold a piece to, whether we sit on this side of the House or sit on that side of the House. We all get emails, we all get letters, and we all get the occasional person stopping by our community office providing their perspective. I hear about it all the time in my constituency office. I welcome it from the people of Langford-Highlands, different perspectives.

Through this legislation, through the leadership of the Minister of Infrastructure, through the leadership of our Premier, we are going to pass this legislation. We are going to get projects built faster. That is what we are trying to do with this legislation.

I would welcome the Conservatives and I would welcome my friends from the Green Party to join us. Do they want to be the party of getting projects built, or will they continue to show us in this House and continue to show British Columbians that Conservatives and other members have simply become the parties and the MLAs that deliver nothing, the parties and the MLAs that are not willing to put the work in to build the infrastructure our

province needs and clearly have become, in this case of the opposition, the party of no?

We are going to take every opportunity on this side of the House to build B.C. That's why we've been sent here. That's why we're going to continue this important work. I'm so proud to be able to provide my support for Bill 15.

Lawrence Mok: Today I rise to speak against Bill 15, the Infrastructure Projects Act. Under the guise of speeding up critical infrastructure development, this bill actually represents quite a troubling centralization of power in the hands of the government.

This NDP government has framed the bill as a pragmatic solution to permitting delays, but I have many concerns regarding overriding local governance, weakening environmental oversight and reducing transparency in project approvals. We should all be able to agree that transparency in project approval processes is a very important part of the process, which should be prioritized.

[6:30 p.m.]

At its core, Bill 15 will enable the government to fast-track what it considers designated infrastructure projects by overriding and compressing dozens of laws, policies and bylaws which were designed originally to ensure that the process does its due diligence, to ensure that public participation and engagement with stakeholders is respected.

But this bill now uses vague and sweeping definitions of terms, such as "constraints," which will give cabinet the unprecedented authority to bypass any statutory requirements except for Indigenous consultation. It is very concerning that statutory requirements will be allowed to be overridden by unilateral ministerial order, a great example of opaque executive decision-making.

Deputy Speaker: Members, could we have the conversations outside? We've recognized the member for Maple Ridge East. I'd like to hear his comments today.

Go ahead, Member.

Lawrence Mok: The centralization of such vast powers raises immediate red flags, and I'm sure it would raise the same red flags for this government if it was us, on the other side of the aisle, enforcing this type of power centralization. While they may argue that this is bold leadership and is necessary to finish infrastructure projects, Bill 15 is more than just speeding up permitting. It effectively sidesteps the necessary checks and balances that exist precisely to prevent the misuse of government power.

Equally concerning is this bill's impact on local democracy. Municipalities and regional planning bodies, which are closest to the communities affected by major developments, may see their procedural safeguards overridden by cabinet with minimal consultation. This isn't collaborative by any means. It creates a top-down approach that only sidelines local voices and flattens public accountability.

Bill 15 is not simply a tool that breaks permitting logjams. Instead, it allows for unchecked authority that frequently we cannot accept. It gives cabinet the authority to concentrate decision-making power into their small circle, sidelining regulators, local authorities and the affected communities. We must ask ourselves: at what cost does efficiency come? In a province that values transparency and accountability, Bill 15 is definitely a step in the wrong direction.

We have heard the government perspective. They are trying to sell the idea of expediting permitting, framing this bill as a non-partisan issue and claiming that by cutting red tape, they can streamline the delivery of these projects. However, in the context of the fact that this NDP government has had eight years to cut red tape, this justification is simply not enough to allow this type of power grab to go unchecked. Why has it taken eight years for this government to finally decide that the solution to their inefficiency is to override provisions to break through project delays?

It makes me wonder whether they have run out of options and their last idea is to just override regulations. It's simple and concerning. In fact, every major NDP-led project is already over budget and behind schedule, so this bill will only be giving the same group more power to override rules and fewer rules to follow overall.

This type of power centralization reminds me of another bill. In fact, Bill 15 looks very similar to Bill 7 and is just as concerning, especially since this version doesn't even come with a sunset clause. This is, essentially, Bill 7 packaged as an infrastructure bill.

[6:35 p.m.]

But the thing is this. Bill 15 is not about building infrastructure. In fact, it is about building unchecked power. Now cabinet will be able to rewrite zoning bylaws, override regulations and even sideline local municipal councils without public consultation or any public meetings. Any rational British Columbian would look at that and take issue with it. Practically, this can play out in many ways, including the minister acquiring land, gifting it to private entities, acting as the builder on said project and also picking out the consultants who ultimately approve the projects.

Before I dive deeper into more specifics, implications and issues, I want to start with three areas of concern that demonstrate precisely why there is an overreach of power in this bill.

Firstly, this bill allows for basically any statutory requirement, except for the clauses on Indigenous engagement, to be rewritten by orders in council. There's no objective threshold or standard. As long as the minister considers the negotiations to be stalled, they can go ahead.

On top of that, there's no test on whether this judgment

is reasonable, nor any third-party review of the decision after the fact. There isn't even an expiry, which means these replacement orders can continue to survive even if a project loses its designated status later on.

Secondly, the minister has the authority to act as developer, as general contractor or even as project manager. This means that the minister who sets the policy, issues designations and overrides permits now also has the authority to execute construction itself. This blurs fiduciary lines, raises concerns regarding the fairness of procurement processes and also threatens cost overrun accountability.

Lastly, with interministry land transfers, a single minister can redirect land that another portfolio, such as Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, was safeguarding, as long as the other minister consents. But with cabinet solidarity, that consent is pretty much guaranteed.

Together these provisions represent a troubling concentration of unchecked power in the hands of a single minister. The ability to rewrite statutory requirements through orders in council, without objective standards, oversight or expiry, allows for the indefinite suspension of established regulations based solely on the minister's judgment. This alone undermines transparency and democratic accountability.

Finally, the provision for interministry land transfers further consolidates power with cabinet solidarity, effectively ensuring consent. One minister can have unchecked power over any land transfer.

Together these changes dismantle essential checks and balances, sideline independent oversight and prioritize political expedience over public interest and responsible governance.

Now I want to move on to talk about some of the more general and overarching concerns.

First, there are some overbreadth and vagueness terms used in this bill. Key terms such as "approval authority," "measure," "provincial permit" and "qualified professional" remain undefined until cabinet releases regulations. This lack of clarity creates legal uncertainty for municipalities, for Indigenous nations and the general public.

[6:40 p.m.]

The bill's vague language invites broad interpretation and the potential for powers to expand well beyond their original intent without public consultation or legislative oversight. This undermines confidence in the law, making it difficult to anticipate how and when it will be applied. Without clear definitions, stakeholders are left navigating an unpredictable legal landscape, increasing risk and diminishing trust in procedural fairness.

Second, the bill centralizes nearly all significant decision-making power in cabinet, allowing ministers to define key terms like "category," "designated," "specified" and "proponent" without legislative input or independent review. This unchecked discretion effectively sidelines the legislative processes and the accountability we, as opposition, provide, eliminating essential checks and balances.

By removing procedural thresholds and consolidating definitional authority, the bill permits political actors to shape entire regulatory frameworks behind closed doors. This type of centralization not only erodes democratic accountability but also increases the potential for arbitrary or politically motivated decisions. It prioritizes expedience over transparency, reducing the public's ability to challenge or even understand how major decisions are made.

Third, I see the conflict-of-interest potential in this bill. The bill grants cabinet the power to name private entities as approval authorities or qualified professionals, blurring the line between regulators and regulated parties.

This opens the door widely for proponents to work under a regulatory framework shaped by friendly or aligned parties, raising serious conflict-of-interest concerns. With no clear safeguards to ensure independence or impartiality, these designations could compromise the integrity of project assessments. The risk is that regulatory oversight becomes a formality conducted by actors with a vested interest in project approval, rather than public interest. This undermines trust and weakens the legitimacy of the approval process.

Fourth, the bill also gives cabinet the authority to define specified authorities in a way that includes local councils, regional boards and trust committees, and allows new bodies to be added at will. This means that cabinet can override local planning tools, such as official community plans, development permit areas and regional growth strategies.

By centralizing this power, the legislation strips municipalities and regions of their ability to shape land use in accordance with local priorities and democratic processes. It risks sidelining the nuanced community-specific considerations that local governments are best positioned to address, replacing them with one-size-fits-all provincial directives.

Fifth, the bill somehow allows regulatory or environmental safeguards to be bypassed whenever they may impede a designated project. This permissive threshold is dangerously low, requiring no concrete evidence or justification, only a speculative risk of delay or complication.

Such vague criteria render important constraints effectively optional, undermining the purpose of protections and public consultation. The absence of an evidence-based standard allows broad ministerial discretion in removing rules that might otherwise serve as critical checks. In practice, this creates a fast-track mechanism for development that sacrifices due diligence and accountability in favour of speed and political convenience.

[6:45 p.m.]

Even just looking at the definitions outlined in part 1 of this bill, we see how it is written in favour of rapid min-

isterial intervention due to broad and vague…. These meanings are in the statute.

While the flexibility afforded by these definitions may shave time off of project timelines, it does so in a way which opens the door to political favouritism, a weakening of professional and municipal oversight and a blurred boundary between regulator and developer. Speed must still be balanced with accountability, and this bill lacks stronger statutory limits and clearer legislative criteria.

The title of this bill essentially gives the minister a sweeping and largely unfettered mandate to be able to acquire land, spend public money and even become the builder for the projects that cabinet designates. This is an example of textbook power centralization, especially since there are no guardrails, no mandatory public reporting or any competitive procurement rules to follow. It allows for the erosion of municipal decision-making.

Moving on to part 3 of the bill, which addresses orders in council. With an order in council, permits can be overridden, local planning exemptions can be bestowed at will and environmental reviews can be expedited on any project without any scrutiny at all. The combination of vague eligibility criteria, broad class-based applicability and selective waiver-style exemptions creates the perception of politicized project selection. This undermines regulatory certainty for proponents not seen as favoured and places unchecked, non-reviewable authority in the hands of cabinet.

To address these concerns, the legislation should include clear statutory designation criteria along with mandatory requirements for public consultation and publication. These safeguards are essential to ensure transparency, fairness and accountability in how projects are identified and approved.

Part 4 of this bill is a guide on how normal checks can be bypassed. This section allows cabinet to swap statutory reviews for consultant sign-offs, detect hard stop permit timelines, rewrite zoning and, worst of all, issue unilateral orders to declare a project as legally compliant. Again, I don't doubt that this could improve speed, but there is far too much unparalleled power that's now concentrated in political hands. The lines between legitimate streamlining and deregulation are now blurred. Safety and accountability measures, including public notice, independent monitors, objective tests and even sunset clauses are simply not to be found.

Part 5 carries forward Bill 15's fast-track approach into the health, education and post-secondary sectors by giving cabinet broad authority to expedite property transfers with minimal oversight. While this could speed up the delivery of urgently needed hospitals or classrooms, it also undermines the fiduciary independence of sector boards, obscures the true financial impact of land transfers and creates opportunities for politically motivated allocation of public assets. These significant decisions can proceed with little transparency, limited public input and no meaningful legislative scrutiny, raising serious concerns about accountability and long-term stewardship of publicly-owned land.

[6:50 p.m.]

Part 6 of this bill serves as the core of executive discretion, removing standard offence provisions and granting cabinet broad powers to make and delegate regulations. It enables critical compliance elements such as qualified professional certifications, permitting timelines and environmental assessment exemptions to be created or altered without transparency or public input.

With no mandatory penalties, no required consultation and the automatic adoption of external standards, this framework creates a highly flexible infrastructure regime. However, that flexibility comes at a cost. It exposes the system to politicization, legal ambiguity and potential enforcement gaps, weakening both accountability and the rule of law in project oversight.

Finally, part 7 solidifies Bill 15's authority over nearly a dozen sector-specific laws, replacing the more limited 2003 streamlining legislations with a significantly broader and open-ended framework. It also introduces an accelerated environmental assessment track under environmental law.

Taken together these changes diminish local decision power, weaken governance structures across sectors like health, education, environment and municipal planning and erode important procedural protections. All of this is implemented through regulation, without any built-in sunset clause or mandatory review process, entrenching long-term impacts with minimal democratic oversight or accountability.

Next I want to talk about what others are saying about this bill. Now, let's ask ourselves this question. Obviously, as opposition, we cannot and will not support this blatant overreach of power. But when outside sources, including top stakeholders and the media, also question the feasibility and application of this bill, raising multiple concerns, you would think that that would raise enough alarm bells.

The media is calling this bill a hardhat, an unlocking of a vast slate of powers to push forward any project that they deem of provincial significance.

The Union of B.C. Chiefs has also raised concerns about how projects can be fast-tracked under the guise of responding to tariffs. But the watering down of the EA process causes concerns with the upholding of this government's promise to align laws with UNDRIP, which stands for United Nations declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Independent Contractors of B.C. calls this bill ironic. They discuss how the NDP has created a new ministry just to pass legislation to cut the red tape they put there themselves in the first place. In addition, they mention that permitting delays and red tape are slowing down

nearly every type of construction, whether it be homes, roads, energy or bridges.

But rather than an across-the-board fix, this government has decided to implement a focused workaround. The answer, they explain, is to eliminate unnecessary delays for all projects, not just those favoured by government. We need real reform to also restore investor confidence in the province.

[6:55 p.m.]

UBCM has also raised concerns, especially on the piece about local governments. They question whether local decisions by the minister to overrule local government processes will result in direct financial impacts on the local government. One important point to note is that UBCM is concerned with the fact that, as proven in the past, a fast-track approach that skips over key consultation is more likely to lead to unintended consequences, which mirrors our main concern directly.

To conclude, Bill 15 establishes a far-reaching, centralized framework that allows the province to designate projects and then streamline, override or replace nearly all provincial and local approvals that could delay them. Supporters may view it as a necessary response to B.C.'s persistent permitting delays. Critics will argue it represents a sweeping consolidation of power that sidelines local governments, weakens environmental oversight and marginalizes independent regulatory bodies in the name of efficiency.

Ultimately, the bill's real impact will hinge on how responsibly or aggressively cabinet chooses to exercise its new designation and override powers once enacted. With so many stakeholders taking issue with this bill, as well as us, as opposition, pointing out all the issues this bill creates with accountability, transparency and fairness, it is surprising that this government is still pushing through with Bill 15 as it stands.

Bill 15 undermines open government, weakens local democratic control and introduces political uncertainty into the project approval process, conditions that ultimately deter business investment in British Columbia.

For all these reasons, I therefore will not and cannot support Bill 15.

Lynne Block: Today I stand before you to speak about Bill 15, the Infrastructure Projects Act.

On the surface, the government claims this bill gives the new Ministry of Infrastructure the legal tools it needs to cut red tape and streamline the delivery of major public projects such as schools, hospitals and transit infrastructure. It sounds good. It really does. After all, government has a lot of catching up to do after eight years of putting band-aids on much of the infrastructure needs around the province.

The government has not kept up with the needs in this province, whether it be schools, bridges, hospitals, care homes or transit. Every year they fell further and further behind to where we are now: desperation on the part of the government.

So let's make a brand new ministry, the infrastructure projects, and let's make it look like we are finally taking action. But let's not let anyone know that there is no money and that we have to borrow more, and let's not tell anyone as to where we shall begin or how much money all the projects will need or even what projects we intend to do.

Because some people do not fully understand the ramifications of this bill, they truly believe that all the much-needed infrastructure in this province, all of it in their community, will be built — the bridges, the schools, the hospitals. How will they feel when they realize they've been misled?

[7:00 p.m.]

The NDP position it as a non-partisan administrative necessity following the creation of a new ministry, arguing that stronger authority for the ministry, such as acting as general contractor or overriding delays, allows for better coordination and accountability when large projects encounter issues.

The government promotes the idea that consolidating projects like school builds or modular classroom purchases into fewer, larger contracts will create efficiencies and lower costs, which suggests the bill is part of a broader effort to speed up permitting for provincial infrastructure and frame streamlining or override provisions, such as section 18, as necessary tools to break through project delays. They even point to sections like 9(1), 9(2) as being beneficial to municipalities by clarifying responsibilities, reducing duplication and easing approvals for some local projects.

However, let us be clear. Despite the government's narrative, Bill 15 is not truly about building infrastructure; it is about building unchecked power. It is described by some as a cabinet coup disguised as a construction plan and a cabinet power grab. It has been explicitly called Bill 7 on steroids and simply Bill 7 in a hardhat. This is because this legislation is seen as the NDP attempting to resurrect the authoritarian powers proposed in Bill 7, but with a crucial difference. Bill 15 has no sunset clause.

Was the government hoping that no one would notice, that giving the title of Infrastructure Projects Act would give it some credibility, some substance that belies the fact that not one piece of infrastructure is outlined, nor the costs of any so-called planned projects? We are asked to trust them. We are asked to trust them, and how has that worked out so far?

This bill gives the Premier and his inner circle sweeping powers to override laws, local governments and the public without oversight. The minister is granted ultimate authority over anything deemed infrastructure, which can include roads, SkyTrains and hospital construction.

Ultimately, responsibility doesn't lie with the people or democratic processes.

Let's examine those deeply undemocratic aspects of this legislation, as highlighted by concerned voices. Cabinet can rewrite zoning bylaws, override regulators and sideline local councils, municipal councils, all without a single public meeting. Forget official community plans. Local planning, community priorities and even Islands Trust rules can be erased overnight by regulation.

Ministers can intervene to address delays for designated projects by overriding the municipality and all those pesky elected local officials. The Union of B.C. Municipalities has noted that the process leading to this legislation was rushed and lacked meaningful consultation with UBCM or member local governments. They warned that a fast-tracked approach that skips consultation is more likely to lead to unintended consequences.

UBCM also raises critical questions. If a minister overrules a local government process, resulting in a direct financial impact, will a local government be made whole by the province? Furthermore, if the province intervenes in local government regulatory decision-making, the legislation is not clear whether the province will take on the liability of their intervention and subsequent decisions.

This bill represents a troubling trend of legislation that concentrates power. There is a severe lack of oversight, transparency and accountability. There is no objective threshold for ministerial intervention. The minister only has to consider negotiations stalled. There is no test of reasonableness, and no third-party review for the minister's actions. Not acceptable.

The minister can act as developer, general contractor or project manager. This means the same minister who sets policy, issues designations and overrides permits now executes construction. This blurs fiduciary lines, raises serious procurement fairness concerns and threatens cost-overrun accountability, not to mention conflict-of-interest possibilities.

[7:05 p.m.]

This bill allows interministry land transfers where a single minister can redirect land that another portfolio, such as Environment or Indigenous Relations, was safeguarding. Consent from the other minister is technically required, but cabinet solidarity virtually guarantees consent.

The minister can acquire land, gift it to private entities, act as the builder and even pick the consultants who are approving it. If a permit takes too long for a politically sensitive project, a minister can intervene, designate someone to approve it or even make the approval automatic. Cabinet can unilaterally move a politically sensitive project to the front of the line. Virtually any statutory requirement, with the potential exception of Indigenous engagement clauses, can be rewritten by order in council. The replacement order survives even if the project later loses its designated status.

This legislation is totally contradictory to the principles inculcated in the honourable and varied and storied parliamentary practices of this venerable place. Bill 15 hands sweeping, unprecedented powers to the NDP cabinet. It would let a minister unilaterally declare almost any project provincially significant and then bulldoze it through, no matter what local communities or this House might have to say.

This is so controversial that we are seeing the province unite from all regions and sectors. Stakeholders that are unlikely allies have come together to oppose this bill. Think about that. It really tells the story of how many people are upset with the cavalier ways in which this government, with a slim majority, has been governing our great province. It demonstrates exactly why the powers this bill requests should not be granted by this House.

This House is entrusted with the responsibility of governing with checks and balances that are there for sound, tried and true reasons. We have to respect people's wishes, and that is why we have to reject this undemocratic bill and the excuses behind this power-grab legislation. Our zoning laws, community plans, environmental reviews — all those pesky checks and balances that protect the public tossed aside with a stroke of this NDP or one of his minister's pens.

What are various organizations and individuals saying about these critical flaws in this bill? Chris Gardner, president and CEO of the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association, highlights the irony: "The NDP has had to create an entire new ministry and pass legislation just to cut the red tape they created in the first place." How ironic. He argues that this bill is a narrowly focused government workaround instead of an across-the-board fix for red tape that affects all types of construction, including homes, roads, energy and bridges.

Gardner states: "Simpler is better. The answer is to eliminate unnecessary delays for all projects, not just the ones favoured by the government." He also points out that government procurement is broken, with major projects consistently behind schedule and over budget, yet this bill gives the same group even more power and fewer rules.

The Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs raises significant concerns about projects being fast-tracked under the guise of responding to tariffs and, critically, watering down the environmental assessment process. They are concerned that the province is not upholding its own interim process on alignment of laws with UNDRIP or UNDRIP itself.

Jody Wilson-Raybould has predicted that this bill will lead to "more lawsuits from proponents and First Nations, more uncertainty and poorer economic and environmental outcomes."

This NDP government has lost the confidence not only

of business and local government but even of environmental voices who once supported them.

Stand.earth has called on the government to immediately change course on Bill 15 and other fast-tracking legislation, describing the developments in the Legislative Assembly as deeply concerning, calling it a power grab that undercuts democratic debate.

[7:10 p.m.]

Tegan Hansen, senior forest campaigner, views this move as a dangerous willingness to override commitments under the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act and B.C. residents' rights to engage with projects that will impact their community. She unequivocally states: "This is fundamentally undemocratic. Steamrolling human rights and environmental assessments is never acceptable."

Sven Biggs, Canadian oil and gas program director, argues that while building new clean energy is important, it "cannot come at the expense of our province's commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples or environmental regulations." He suggests the Premier and cabinet should be fast-tracking a new, stronger climate plan rather than "engaging in power grabs and political games."

Sunil Singal, climate campaigner, contends that the province is moving forward in bad faith to sidestep important checks and balances built in to ensure meaningful consultation with local communities and First Nations. He argues that ramming through bills like Bill 15 creates more economic and environmental uncertainty.

The Wilderness Committee is equally critical. One of the campaigners states that Premier Eby has "lost the plot on who he works for…."

Deputy Speaker: Member, I'll ask you not to say members' names, please, in this House.

Lynne Block: Thank you. My apologies, Mr. Speaker.

They state that the Premier has "lost the plot on who he works for — the people who can barely afford rent right now, not the billionaires looking to exploit B.C.'s ecosystems." She finds it incomprehensible why a so-called progressive government would remove our rights to defend the environment and the economy from corporate interests.

They compare policies like Bill 15 to hardly any better than what Trump is rolling out down south. She argues the government has forgotten commitments already made to Indigenous rights, endangered species, ecosystems and climate action, stating that, "if those priorities conflict with destructive megaprojects, it's not up to Eby and his cabinet to unilaterally decide. That's exactly what environmental assessments and consultations are for."

Even the B.C. Green MLAs have also criticized the bill. The MLA for West Vancouver–Sea to Sky states that Bill 15, in its current form, "grants the NDP government sweeping powers to bypass environmental assessment, municipal authorities and the jurisdiction of First Nations under the guise of fast-tracking major infrastructure projects." And the MLA for Saanich North and the Islands notes that this is part of a "troubling trend of legislation from this government that concentrates power and reduces oversight."

While Indigenous engagement is theoretically protected, critics argue that compressed timelines and cut corners within the streamlined process make consent impossible in practice. The concerns raised by UBCIC and Stand.earth about not upholding UNDRIP commitments underscore this potential failure.

The stated goal of cutting red tape and streamlining infrastructure projects is a smokescreen for an unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of the minister and cabinet. This bill bypasses democratic processes, removes essential oversight and transparency, undermines local governments and threatens to override environmental protections and meaningful consultation with Indigenous people. It grants fast powers without the necessary checks and balances, relies on subjective ministerial discretion rather than objective criteria and consolidates roles that should be separate.

The Union of B.C. Municipalities warns of the unintended consequences when local decision-making is overridden by Victoria. This NDP Premier and his inner circle want to rule by order in council, sidestepping the democratic process at every turn.

We've seen this before in history, haven't we? It's a thirst for power. We are a democracy, and I believe this government is forgetting this.

As we are all here, we should be able to agree universally. British Columbians have a right to transparent, accountable government. Instead, this bill offers government by decree. The NDP is essentially asking us to sign over a blank cheque of authority, trusting that they'll only use it for good projects. Trust them? We've got ballooning budgets, botched project after project, and true costs…. We have no idea, sometimes, what we get from the public. Absolutely not.

[7:15 p.m.]

The way the NDP is pushing Bill 15 forward reeks of arrogance about our democratic norms.

They dropped this sweeping bill on May 1 and want it law by the end of the month. We barely have started the work of this House after the October 2024 election, and now this NDP Premier threatens the will of the electorate by trying to rush in unprecedented powers for his and his NDP party's own ends, ignoring that he has had no public referendum or mandate to suggest that this is what the vast majority of British Columbians want or would sanction.

It's undemocratic to the core, very undemocratic. No

meaningful consultation with municipalities took place. The Union of B.C. Municipalities notes the process was rushed. It warns that Bill 15 provides cabinet with the extraordinary powers to override regulations at the local level.

Debate in this House getting cut short suggests a level of desperation on the part of the NDP administration. So what do the NDP Premier and cabinet do? They clamp down on debate, call it fast-tracking and hope people are too distracted to notice that their rights are being trampled. This is fundamentally undemocratic.

The Premier knows full well that British Columbians are out there struggling to navigate an economy which the NDP has helped bungle with overspending, mismanagement and disastrous economic stewardship for the past eight years. It is a very sad reality that people may not have time to see the red flags to their futures and our democracy that this NDP legislation represents.

We must ask: why is this NDP government so desperate to grab these powers now? The answer, sadly, is as cynical as it gets. They are trying to distract from their failed economic record and reckless spending by blaming foreign actors and concocting external threats.

No foreign government forced the NDP to tie our infrastructure in knots with endless new rules and red tape in the past. No outside actor compelled them to spend beyond all reason. Those were choices this Premier and his government made. Now they're using the consequences of their own failures as an excuse to seize more control.

It's not just the official opposition or a few advocacy groups sounding the alarm. The opposition to Bill 15 spans the entire spectrum of stakeholders in this province. When the Green Party, the ICBA, the UBCM and the official opposition are all saying the same thing, that this bill is dangerous and undemocratic, then perhaps it's time this NDP Premier stops pretending otherwise. I'm urging every MLA in the House who respects democracy to reject this bill, to defend the rights of your constituents and to defend our province.

I just wanted to note a few things. In West Vancouver, we have now a brand-new West Van Place for Sport for track and field. It was a collaboration between the West Van district and the West Van school district.

We had transparency, we had oversight on it, and we had accountability — key, because I am delighted to say that with those, a person was hired to come in every day and watch carefully exactly what was happening. That is why that West Van Place for Sport was built on time, on budget, extremely well and will last for a lifetime. So that's what happens when you have accountability, transparency and oversight.

We have some projects in the education system coming in. We have $4.6 billion over the next three years for building, renovating and seismically upgrading schools. Some of the projects are: prefabricated schools in 16 school districts, $392 million; Smith secondary school, Langley, $203 million for construction; Olympic Village elementary, Vancouver, $151 million for construction, adding 630 new seats. What I also want to add is that Hazel Trembath is finally being rebuilt after their costly fire.

[7:20 p.m.]

However, these are all in early planning or early development stages, except for a few of them. They're basically beginning. My fear is that these budgets…. Because we won't have oversight if this bill goes through, because we don't have transparency if this bill goes through or we don't have accountability if this bill goes through, this will balloon all out of order.

For example, post-secondary education. We have Vancouver Community College, $315 million; Royal Roads University, $108 million; Okanagan College, $57 million; Simon Fraser University, $34 million. If we do not have accountability, transparency and overrides on this, I fear that those budgets will be absolutely ballooning.

One of the members across the aisle, earlier in their speech, took us down memory lane with infrastructure issues when they were a school trustee and there were budget cuts. This was quite a few years ago, because he's a little bit older now.

What was interesting was that he felt that that was terrible then. But I say that was then, and this is now. The taking action…. After eight years of them being in power, so many school budgets and programs have had to be drastically cut because of this government's budgeting.

I won't go there. However, I do want to point out a couple of things that have had so-called oversight, transparency and accountability and are not doing very, very well.

For example, major health care project cost escalations. Richmond Hospital redevelopment, original estimate, $860 million; current estimate, $1.96 billion. It hasn't even started construction yet. Cowichan District Hospital, original estimate, $350 million; current estimate, $1.4 billion; status, under construction. The second Surrey hospital, original estimate, 2022, $1.72 billion; current estimate, more than $2.88 billion. We're still in the planning and early development stages.

Transportation infrastructure projects. Broadway subway, original budget, $2.83 billion; original completion date, 2025; revised completion date, late 2027; status, under construction, delayed due to labour disputes and tunnel-boring challenges, not because of the tariffs. Just noting that.

What will happen if we have this bill going through? No oversights in the future, no transparency and no accountability. I dread to think of the billions that will be wasted then.

Now, going back to the education system, what the member across the aisle was talking about…. The education system has not been properly funded over the years. It

should have kept up with the increase in students and increase in infrastructure needed. Nw they are intending to do a few infrastructure projects, but will they be enough?

Every single school district in this province needs more money, and some of that money needs to go to infrastructure. They should have kept pace year after year. They had the ability. So, yes, that's with oversight, transparency and accountability. This bill does not include those facets for future projects in infrastructure.

I challenge the NDP to scrap this bill, to listen to the people in B.C., to listen to the environmentalists, to listen to the First Nations.

If the government truly wants to get, as the member said across the aisle, shovels in the ground and take it to the next level, if they really, truly want to build the infrastructure in our province that is truly badly needed, they would work with all groups and organizations and the critics on this side of the aisle — that's our job; we are critics — and bring in a new bill for the Leg. which is not a power grab, which does have transparency, which does have accountability, which does have oversight and is not a disregard of democratic processes.

[7:25 p.m.]

I challenge the government to scrap this flawed bill and bring in one that is transparent, accountable and has the much-needed oversight, because this bill is not real reform. It is a government workaround for problems they helped create. It prioritizes government-favoured projects over addressing systemwide delays.

As the opposition, it is our role to be critical of the government and to hold the government to account. That is exactly what we are doing here in this debate. For these reasons, Bill 15, the Infrastructure Projects Act, must be opposed. It is a threat to democratic governance, environmental protection and the rights of communities and Indigenous nations.

We must demand a transparent, consultative approach to improving project delivery, one that strengthens, rather than dismantles, the processes designed to protect the public interest and the environment.

I thank you for your time, Mr. Speaker, and for the members' in the House.

Tony Luck: It's a real pleasure to be standing in the House today to speak to Bill 15. I just want to remind everybody before I start…. I really appreciate the words of my colleagues here today. They've laid out some really good groundwork for me to build on and talk about.

Before I'd like to begin, I'd just like to remind everybody about a quote we're all very, very familiar with. No surprises here, but it was from Lord Acton, who once wrote: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." It's a very simple truth, and one that has echoed in different forms across democracies for centuries, because whenever we give too much power to a few people, without checks and balances, without transparency, we invite not progress but overreach. We invite not reform but control.

This is why I rise today in strong and unambiguous opposition to Bill 15, the so-called Infrastructure Projects Act. Despite its title, despite the government's attempt to dress this up as a technical administrative bill, Bill 15 is not about shovels in the ground, as we've heard from many of my colleagues here. It is not about speeding up hospital construction or school repairs. Bill 15 is about something much more serious: the centralization of political power, the bypass of democratic safeguards and the quiet replacement of public scrutiny with ministerial discretion.

These are kind of scary words, in my lexicon. I'm not too fond of some of these words here that we're hearing in this bill.

Why would we trust this government's infrastructure agenda when their track record shows exactly what their failings are over the last, dare I say, 30 years? I'll draw some attention to that shortly here.

As a bit of a student of history, I like going back and analyzing and looking at history, and I'd like to do that for a few minutes. I want to go back over history. I want to anchor the rest of my speech in this bit of historical connotation here.

We must remember too…. I'm going to go back 30 years. It is with the NDP government, a previous government. It was 30 years ago, but I don't believe the ideology has changed at all when it comes to administering massive projects like what they're talking about — infrastructure things and that kind of thing.

[Mable Elmore in the chair.]

I just want to recall and bring to memory a number of projects the NDP has struggled with over the years. I don't want to say "failed," because some of it got done. Some of it didn't. Some of it did fail. But let me just go over quickly and give you a bit of a history lesson to anchor the rest of my comments on.

We all remember the fast ferry debacle back in the 1994-2000 era. Intended costs, $210 million. Final costs, $460 million. Late delivery, flawed design, unfit for service and sold for $19 million.

The B.C. Hydro power line to Vancouver Island, mid-1990s. Over budget, extensive delays, criticized for poor planning and lack of needed assessments.

So 2017 to present, former Premier and current Premier. Site C dam — we've talked about this before — was first opposed by this government, the NDP government. First opposed to that. They ran, I think, a campaign saying, "No, we will shut it down," and everything. But of course, once they get to it and start looking at the books, it's a little difficult to do. Estimated cost of that was $6.6 billion and a final cost around $16 billion.

[7:30 p.m.]

As I go through each of these examples, there's some familiar language with each of the projects as we go through there. Familiar language, Auditor General flagged oversight and risk management gaps.

Ah, the Massey Tunnel replacement delays. NDP cancelled a ready-to-go, ten-lane bridge in 2017, which would have been built and completed about three years ago. The people would not be sitting in traffic to this day if that bridge had been built back then. Once again I think ideology got in the way of better judgment on that project.

ICBC rate freeze and financial losses. Rate suppression policy led to $1.3 billion in 2019. Internal reforms lack transparency. Policy reversal followed public backlash.

Broadband expansion mismanagement connecting British Columbia. Delays and inconsistencies delivering in rural areas, despite federal and provincial funding on those. Auditor General flagged lack of performance monitoring.

Oh, let's go to B.C. Housing scandals. In 2022-2023, forensic audit revealed conflict of interest, poor financial oversight and inadequate governance linked to senior management NDP-appointed boards.

Pandemic PPE and ventilator procurement issues, 2020, very recently. Millions spent on untested and unusable PPE and ventilators. Lack of transparency in vendor selection and procurement.

Are you starting to see a theme here that kind of worries us on this side of the House? When this bill here is going to give unfettered access for the ministers or this government to be able to do basically what they want, there's a track record that we're really concerned about.

B.C. legislative security scandal, 2018-2020. Mishandling of corruption and spending irregularities. NDP slow to act. Initial attempts to block independent investigation.

My colleague here just mentioned the Cowichan District Hospital. Originally projected at $867 million, the cost has increased to $1.5 billion, almost double. Cariboo Memorial Hospital, Surrey hospital. The list goes on and on.

This list is an indictment about a government past, present and, most unfortunately, maybe future unless we can stop this bill, get it thrown out of the Legislature and just ripped up. It has shown it cannot run a lemonade stand. We heard that many times that this government is incapable of running a lemonade stand. History has shown that.

This is not legislation for people. It's legislation for a cabinet, a cabinet of control. It grants the Premier and his chosen ministers the ability to do what would, under normal rules, require hearings, debate, consultation and community consent. Did you see when I gave you that history lesson how a lot of that was missing in all of those projects? Not the odd one but all of them. It will allow them to do this permanently by regulation, with little to no oversight from this House or the public.

As far as I know, we still live in a democracy. This House is important in the way British Columbia acts and works and proceeds. Parliamentary oversight is so important in the way projects and that are done in the province of British Columbia.

It is, in every meaningful sense, a reboot of Bill 7, a piece of legislation so shocking in its implication that even this government had to pause and rethink. But instead of truly retreating, they have come back with a harder-to-spot version of Bill 7.

I think a lot of us are out talking to our constituents in our ridings and everything. There was a lot of anger about Bill 7. I'm thinking, as we get out meeting with our constituents again, there's going to be a lot of anger about Bill 15 too. Do yourselves a favour. Let's rip up that bill today.

Bill 15 is Bill 7, as some people said. I think journalist Rob Shaw said it's Bill 7 in a hardhat. It cloaks itself in language of efficiency and streamlining, but at its core, this bill empowers a single minister to act as project manager, land acquirer, contractor, regulator and compliance officer, all while eliminating the checks and constraints that protect communities, ecosystems and taxpayers from the abuse of power. It builds nothing except a closed loop of exclusive control.

[7:35 p.m.]

Now, let me be very clear. I support infrastructure. This side of the House supports infrastructure. We support getting rid of red tape. We support making things more efficient. It only makes sense. From a group that's more business-oriented and understands business, this is an important way we build the province both privately and publicly, as we move forward.

I support building hospitals and schools and transit systems as well. These meet the needs of today and tomorrow. But I do not support government or edicts by decree. That is not democracy, and democracy right now is failing if this bill is passed and moves forward. When you remove transparency, when you sideline input, when you bypass municipalities, override environmental reviews and turn ministers into judges of their own projects, you aren't streamlining. You're steamrolling.

I think I've mentioned a number of times an analogy around the fox auditing the henhouse. Now the fox not only audits the henhouse; it's going to build the henhouse. It's going to make sure that everything is in the henhouse. This doesn't make sense, as we move forward. A government should not be allowed to be the fox in the henhouse.

Let's be honest about what this government is really doing. They're not just trying to fix slow permitting. Heaven forbid. We've heard a number of times how they've caused most of the slow permitting.

Look, if you want to improve some permitting, let's go to the forestry sector. We don't need to change the rules or the laws. We just enact what we've got here and get some permits out in the rural areas so we can get some trees cut.

That doesn't take a change of Legislature. We can get that done today.

What are they talking about that things are moving too slow? It's their own rules within their own cabinets that are doing this. That needs to change. Instead they brought forward a bill that allows cabinet to declare any project designated with no clear criteria. Designated, no criteria for what they're designating. Replace the role of regulatory bodies with government-approved consultants, no oversight. No. We can't even get a terms of reference from the Minister of Health. It doesn't make sense.

But they want to do this without…. We're going to, on this side of the House, hope everything goes okay? Force regulations to prioritize politically sensitive projects; overrule or ignore local development planning and zoning. Well, that has kind of already happened with Bill 44 and some of the other bills that we've seen: Bill 44, Bill 36 and that. They're already overruling local municipalities, professional groups and that. This is just an extension of that.

They even want to do more. They want to bypass environmental reviews and make those bypasses permanent. You know, I just think if this side of the House had suggested that a couple of months ago, that side of the House would probably be pulling their hair out or lighting their hair on fire. You can't be getting rid of environmental rules and regulation and issue ministerial orders that rewrite the rules without returning to the House.

This isn't a construction blueprint; it's a constitutional back door. It's a power grab, and it's not just us saying it. Industry groups, legal analysts, Indigenous leaders, former allies of the government, even journalists who usually offer the NDP the benefit of doubt are all sounding the alarm on this bill.

Before I go clause by clause into what this bill does, before I detail how it erodes trust, concentrates authority and overrides community control, I want to remind every member of this chamber of something. We are all elected not just to build things. We are elected to build things the right way: transparently, accountably and with the consent of all those that we govern. If we lose that, if we lose those principles in the name of expediency, we won't just lose the trust of the people. We will lose the right to call ourselves a democratic Legislature.

Let's now take a deep look into what this bill actually does and how, clause by clause, it centralizes power and eliminates democratic safeguards. Bill 15 doesn't just suggest a new approach to infrastructure. It replaces the system of planning, approval, oversight and public participation that British Columbians rightly expect from this government. On October 19, 2024, we were all elected to represent our constituents and represent what was best for this province in a democratic process.

Let's begin with clause 2, the minister's general powers. Under this section, the Minister of Infrastructure is granted broad authority to establish policies, plan and manage infrastructure projects and acquire land on behalf of the government or other entities. The power includes the ability to dispose of public land or, as the legislation puts it, make land available to any prescribed person or entity.

[7:40 p.m.]

Hmm. That's an interesting concept with no oversight. I'd love to be a minister and give away land with no oversight. Wouldn't any of you?

This just isn't making sense. Under this, no requirement for public consultation, no requirement for legislative debate, no transparency on who benefits or who loses. This means that a single minister could seize Crown land and hand it over to a politically-favoured developer. Don't say it won't happen. Where are the rules that say it won't happen? Where's the oversight?

The public would have no mechanism to stop it. That's not how public assets should be managed. This government should know that better than any government. That's not democracy. That's a land transfer regime under ministerial decree.

Then we get to clause 3, which allows the minister to not only manage projects but to serve as the general contractor of project managers. Now if you recall earlier in my statement, I said — it's kind of, you know, I'm going on a stretch here — that I think this government isn't able to manage a lemonade stand. But here the ministers are going to manage major infrastructure projects in the province. How many of them on that side of the House have project management degrees? How many of them have been in the private sector and had to actually build something?

Let me repeat that. The same minister who designates a project, who defines its scope, who selects the professionals involved now also has the power to build it themselves or oversee those who do. Imagine a city councillor rezoning property, issuing the building permit, then turning around and awarding themselves the construction contract. That's the kind of conflict of interest this bill enshrines in law.

I remember when I was a realtor, I did not do anything. I would recuse myself from any council meetings or anything. But I was accused at the time of being one of those rich developers. I was not a rich developer, believe me. But even the sniff of people thinking that you're a rich developer doing things got hackles on the neck of many of my voters in the town of Merritt.

So I can't imagine what's going to happen when this bill passes, this kind of legislation. I can't imagine the kind of language we're going to hear when we're out on the hustings in a couple of weeks, talking to our constituents about this bill.

Now let's move to clause 4, which allows cabinet, on the recommendation of a minister, to designate any infrastructure project or class of projects as category 1 or 2. And what qualifies a project for designation? Whatever

the government says. There are no objective criteria, of course. Why would there be? We'll just make some decisions. We'll flip a coin. We'll roll some dice and decide.

This bill doesn't require a test of urgency. It doesn't require cost-benefit analysis. It doesn't require a finding of public need. It simply requires a minister to make a recommendation and for all of cabinet to huddle in their room and agree to the recommendation. Once that designation is in place, all the override powers begin.

That brings us to clause 6, what may be the most quietly dangerous section in the entire bill. Here the government introduces the concept of qualified professional certifications. These certifications issued by individuals selected by the government can replace permits that would normally be issued under environmental or planning laws. Hey, let's just take this one and move it into this one. No oversight, no transparency.

Let me be blunt. This is a recipe for regulatory capture. Who certifies the certifiers? What standards apply? What accountability exists if those professionals make mistakes or, worse, act in bad faith? This bill doesn't say anything or bring that to the attention of anybody. It simply says that this government's approved, qualified professional signs off on something. That signature becomes legally binding, as if the relevant agency had issued the permit itself. That is not streamlining; that is outsourcing public accountability to hired consultants.

[7:45 p.m.]

Next we come to clause 7, which allows the minister to order regulatory agencies, which that are supposed to operate at arm's length from political direction, to prioritize designated projects. If that prioritization isn't fast enough, the minister can recommend cabinet take prescribed actions, a political phrase for overriding orders or demanding or telling somebody to do something.

In practice, this means if a politically sensitive project is stuck in red tape, the minister can force it to the front of the line, regardless of what professional planners or regulators think is safe or responsible. Is that the kind of project we want moving forward in British Columbia?

Clause 8 then takes this one step further. Under this section, if a designated project also qualifies as a reviewable project under the Environmental Assessment Act, the minister can simply order the issuance of the required approvals. Let me quote directly from the bill here: "The issuance of an approval under another enactment is final and binding and not subject to review or appeal."

Final, binding, not subject to appeal. That's like arresting somebody and saying: "Done. Once you're convicted, you have no appeal rights. We've taken all appeal rights for somebody that might be convicted of a crime." This is the same kind of idea here. This strips away the ability of communities, environmental groups or even Indigenous nations to challenge approvals they believe are flawed, rushed or unlawful.

Then we reach Clause 9, which gives the cabinet the power to exempt designated projects from three provincial statutes. Why don't we just get rid of all the statutes? Wouldn't that make it easy for everybody? That includes the Islands Trust Act, which protects environmentally sensitive coastal communities; the Local Government Act, which governs how towns and cities plan for growth; and the Vancouver Charter, which grants the city of Vancouver its local authority.

Bill 15 allows these laws, developed through decades of debate and democratic process, to be waived by regulation. Cabinet could override a community plan, erase zoning protections or bypass local consultation with no vote in this chamber. This is the chamber of last resort. This is the chamber that protects British Columbia for this kind of legislation — flawed legislation.

Clauses 2 to 12. This bill grants a minister the power to seize and transfer public land. It allows them to act as both regulator and builder. It lets cabinet designate projects with no public criteria. It replaces regulators with consultants. Are there any criteria around what consultants, when those consultants will be hired, friends of the family, whatever it is? We're not sure because, as we understand, there are no rules within the legislation.

It can force regulators to comply with political timelines, remove the right to appeal environmental approvals and allows whole sections of planning law to be suspended. This is not reform. This is not modernization. This is centralized rule by regulations, by override, by executive power. And if this House allows it, we will have rewritten the relationship between government and citizens in this province, between provinces and municipalities, between projects and process, all in the name of streamlining.

So far we've seen how Bill 15 concentrates power, how it allows ministers to acquire land, designate projects, override regulators and silence local planning. But it doesn't stop there. Clauses 13 through 20 reveal the fullest extent of what this bill is trying to do and how deeply it seeks to entrench that power permanently, well beyond the life of any individual project, because this isn't just about speeding up approvals. It's about remaking the rules and making sure those rule changes stick.

Let's begin with clause 14. Under this clause, once a designated project has replacement measures, meaning laws or regulations that have been overridden, then any person involved in the project is exempt from penalties for not complying with the original rules.

Is that kind of like a "get out of jail free" card? I used to play them in Monopoly, right? You'd have that "get out of jail free" card. This is what this is sounding like. This is Monopoly. This is unbelievable. Are we talking about a game here? That's what it seems to be here.

Let me quote directly from the bill again: "No person is liable to any fine, penalty or offence for failing, during that period, to comply with the replacement constraints."

Unbelievable. Think about that. Your "get out of jail free" card.

I want one of those. Can I get one of those out of the Legislature? That would be fantastic. That way I can speed when I drive home this weekend. That would be great. Sorry, "get out of jail free" card.

If a bylaw is overridden and environmental standards are replaced and someone breaks those original rules, they are immune from consequences, not just excused. Not just given discretion; legally untouchable.

[7:50 p.m.]

Legally untouchable — this is legal immunity for noncompliance, so long as the minister gives it a new name.

Laws are only as strong as the enforcement behind them. If the government can simply say those rules no longer apply and shield itself and its allies from penalties, what's left of our regulatory system? I think I said earlier: "Let's just throw all the statutes out." Why have any rules?

That brings us to clause 15, which addresses project monitoring. At first glance, this looks like an oversight. This minister may appoint someone to monitor how a designated project is proceeding. That sounds reasonable, right? Well, let's look a little deeper, but read closely. Who chooses the monitor, the minister? Who defines their terms of reference, the minister? Who does the monitor report to, the minister? And who is exempt from monitoring altogether? The ministers themselves. The buck stops here, I guess. That's how it looks like. The buck stops here with the minister.

That's right. If the minister is the one managing the project, there is no requirement for monitoring — no third party, no report, just political self-regulation. That is not accountability; that is theatre.

Now we come to clause 19, one of the most concerning powers in this entire bill. It allows ministers, if they determine that an agreement cannot be reached with a regulatory or local government, to unilaterally replace legal constraints on a project. They simply draft replacement measures. They'll make up a bill. They'll make up some legislation and make them legally binding. No vote in this House, no municipal veto, no legal appeal. That "get out of jail" card — I love it.

Once those replacement measures are in place, they do not expire. That's the other sad part about it. They do not expire — in perpetuity. My "get out of jail" card is in perpetuity. Let me quote again: "Whether or not the infrastructure project loses its designation, compliance with the replacement measures is considered to be compliance with the constraints they replace." In plain English, even if the project is no longer considered special or urgent, the new rules still apply.

This is not just streamlining one project; this is rewriting the law for every project that follows. Who must treat these replacement measures as if they were law? Local governments, provincial regulations, environmental bodies, land use planners — all of them must pretend that the original rules never existed, as long as the minister says so. That is not how a democratic system of government is supposed to work.

Let's say the minister wants to override a local floodplain projection bylaw. Under clause 19, they can do so unilaterally, even if the project changes or is cancelled in the future. That's permanent, executive-led deregulation. This is why legal experts and good governance advocates are raising red flags everywhere, because when the government has the ability to make ad hoc legal changes that outlive the urgency that they were created for, we are no longer operating under precedented rule of law. That means all previous laws don't matter, because we'll just override them.

That's just cold comfort for some of the things we've listened to here. What good is a formal explanation if the times of permitting structure are being cut out at the knees? When projects are fast-tracked and public input is eliminated, where is the room for meaningful Indigenous consultation? The Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs put it clearly in their recent statement. Bill 15 raises concerns about projects being fast-tracked under the guise of responding to Trump's tariffs and watering down the environmental assessments.

This is not just a concern for municipalities. It's a concern for Indigenous nations, for environmental groups, for local business peoples, for homeowners, for anyone who believes the rules should apply equally and transparently, not by ministerial discretion.

Let me repeat the key takeaways from this section of the bill. Once an override is issued, it can persist permanently. Once a law is replaced, the replacement becomes untouchable. Once a minister decides compliance has been achieved, no appeal is possible.

This is not a modern permitting framework. It's a regime of permanent exemptions built not to streamline good projects but to protect bad ones from democratic resistance.

I'm running out of time here, so I'll wrap up here quickly.

[7:55 p.m.]

Veteran journalist Rob Shaw didn't mince words when he wrote in *Business in Vancouver*, and I believe I quoted this earlier: "Bill 15 is just Bill 7 in a hardhat." I think as we've gone through and have examined this, we can see that that's happening. He says: "A permit taking too long for a politically sensitive construction project?" No problem. "A minister can intervene and designate someone to approve it or even make the approval automatic." A local government holding things up? No problem. Ministers can override the municipality and "all those pesky elected officials."

We're pesky elected officials on this side of the House, because we're demanding democracy back in this House. We're demanding that this bill be scrapped because this

is an anti-democratic bill. We're the pesky politicians on this side of the House. Can you believe that?

In conclusion here, I just want to make one small comparison. I think we've got the Premier all wrong. Maybe we are misreading the Premier. Maybe the Premier has an admiration for Donald Trump. Why do I say that? It's because Donald Trump, the day after he was elected, came in, sweeping powers, and changed so many darn things.

I'm beginning to wonder, as I read this paper…. I thought about it as I put it together. I'm going: "You know what? I think we're missing the Premier. I think he likes Donald Trump….

Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Member.

Tony Luck: He likes the power that Donald Trump is exacting.

Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today.

Ward Stamer: I appreciate the time to be able to speak to this bill.

I find it actually quite difficult and disturbing that we're actually having this conversation in this House today, when the amount of time that we've spent not only debating Bill 7…. We've been debating Bill 13. We've been going clause by clause through those bills and finding just a huge number of mistakes, some that were not very well planned, some of them not very well-thought-out.

Quite frankly, looking at Bill 15…. I know my colleagues have mentioned it in detail many times, so I'm not going to go over it to the same extent they have, but I honestly can't believe that I'm actually standing up here tonight having this discussion.

When you look through this bill and you start reading all the powers that this government wants to take place and have, I ask myself: why are we even here? Seriously, why are we here, when you look at 154 years' worth of Confederation, building the foundations in this province, and then having something like this that says: "Just trust us"?

I had a similar conversation the other day with Bill 14. Same idea inasmuch as that we really, really need renewable electricity. That's the premise of getting rid of any environmental assessments, any opportunities to have meaningful engagements with First Nations, with public consultation, experts, people that have legal responsibilities and rights to the areas that are going to be in question with those projects. And then we get this.

Quite honestly, I've never seen anything like it. I don't know why this isn't being distributed through every social media, every main street media that we have in this province, because when Bill 7 came along, and section 4, that gave this government overriding powers on just about everything that occurs in this province, under the guise of possibly an economic meltdown because of a perception from a U.S. president that he was going to be implementing these terrible tariffs….

We have no idea what the impact is, what the costs are, how many jobs we're going to lose, not being able to put food on our table, which is another issue we can talk about relating to this bill.

[8:00 p.m.]

Honestly, I've never seen anything quite like it. Everywhere we look in here, there's a gotcha. Everywhere we look in here, there are powers to the Lieutenant Governor to either go along with what the government wants to do in changes to regulations or laws or allow the minister themself to do the same thing.

Now, we could spend hours, I'm sure, talking about this. I heard speeches from the other side talking about that we're the party of no. Well, quite frankly, there is no way anybody should be supporting this, even members on that side. Not only does it give unregulated power to the minister for all these projects that are perceived to be necessary and be done yesterday, the reality is that it's the Premier's office and the cabinet that will actually be calling the shots.

It won't be some of the members from the rural areas. It won't be some of the members from downtown Surrey. It won't be some of the members on the Island. It's going to be the cabinet that's going to be making these decisions, even when we talk about the land.

In the section on land, if I may…. I know land is a pretty important discussion for all of us. I think it says…. Just allow me, if you may. I'm trying to put this together. It talked about that the minister can acquire land, gift it to private entities, act as a builder and pick the consultants to approve it. It also says that they can buy land, lease land or take control otherwise. What exactly does otherwise mean? What is otherwise?

Does that mean that we don't really have to follow the laws anymore? That if there's an opportunity where there could be a law broken, previously, from previous governments, previous sessions of the parliament, that they can just rewrite the laws? We haven't heard anything from the other side, particularly even from the minister, to say that what I'm saying isn't true. Their argument may be, "Well, we're not really planning on doing that," or "You're getting ahead of yourself. This isn't really what we're talking about." Well, that's exactly what we're talking about. This is exactly what we're talking about.

When we talk about we're the party of no, we're actually a party of yes. Yes, we believe in British Columbia. Yes, we believe in doing things properly. Yes, we believe that there should be streamlining. We had an assurance from this side, from the government, about all the things that they were going to be able to improve upon as soon as we sat in the House. Of course, they didn't want to have to sit in the House until February, but that's beside the point.

As soon as we got in the House, we were going to streamline and cut all the red tape, get rid of all the unnecessary bureaucracy that they've created over the last eight years, and we were going to get things done. Well, what exactly have they done in that period of time? They'll argue that we've tried to slow down legislation. They're going to argue that we didn't give them enough time to put a proper bill together without having these superpowers. But I would argue we've had more than enough time. They've had more than enough time, and this is what we get: a Bill 7 version on Bill 15 with superseding powers.

Now, I know we've talked about all the groups that are, so far, against it. We've had leaders of First Nations. We've had the legal groups. We've had business. We've had the Union of British Columbia Municipalities, UBCM. We have towns and we have cities that have spent an incredible amount of time trying to make sure that they have that even balance in their cities and in their towns and in their villages.

I was a mayor, so I take great pride in being able to say that in Barriere, the town that I was part of, we don't have any real long-term debt. We were able to manage that. We were able to manage within our means. One of the reasons why we did — not because it was the right thing to do, but it was also part of the charter — is that we have to balance our books. When I hear from the other side, particularly from the Finance Minister, that they're working on balancing a budget… When? Quite frankly, I can't see it in this century.

[8:05 p.m.]

Nowhere in this Bill 15 does it talk about any cost overruns or any expedited costs that were going to be in relationship to this. We are told that because of streamlining and cutting red tape, it's going to be cheaper. Well, we haven't seen that at all. Not one bit.

If we want to talk about the money side of things, this government is looking at approximately a $14 billion deficit this year. Now, the reason I'm bringing this up is because it's a direct correlation to what has been promised in Bill 15, with all the schools, all the roads, all the hospitals that are going to miraculously be built if they have this piece of paper. That way they don't have to worry about any laws, any opposition. They can just go ahead and build it.

Well, I have copies of our budget. This just came out on March 31. That's not even two months ago. I don't see any large-scale builds in that budget. If this is so forward-thinking and this is what's necessary in building this province to where it should be, I don't see anything in Bill 15 that directly relates back to costs.

Now, excuse me if I'm worried about costs or anyone on this side is worried about costs. But let me ask you a question. If you're going to go out and buy a car today, isn't that the first thing you're going to want to know? How much does it cost? How much do I have to put down as a down payment? Can I make a trade-in? What's the interest rate? How am I going to pay it back?

This is no different than when we talk about infrastructure. We ask our municipalities to do an asset management plan. We try to come up with a cohesive, build-it-proper plan for our communities. In most cases, our communities do a pretty good job. Nowhere does it talk about a plan. This isn't a plan. This is just an opportunity, an excuse, to just say: "We're going to have a blank cheque, and trust us. Trust us that we're going to get it done. Trust us that everything we do properly at the beginning will work its way through."

Well, we've already seen in the last couple of days, in Sicamous, where a contractor is now in a situation with a First Nations band because there seems to be a discrepancy in the contract that was laid to build that new replacement bridge in Sicamous. Again, I'm sure that that contract was done on faith, but obviously, there are some challenges to that contract.

Who's to say that the minister, with this in her hand, writes out a new contract, and we're not going to have the same problems with it? What's going to happen if there is a problem? I'm looking through this bill, and I'm looking at some of the language when it comes to…. Part of it talks to project performance, and then it talks about the expedited completion of designated projects. It says that the minister may require every approval authority having jurisdiction in respect of the constraint to take up reasonable actions to ensure….

It looks like I have an opportunity to sit down. Do I get an opportunity to reserve my time? Just sit down?

Deputy Speaker: Member, did you want to continue?

Ward Stamer: No. I'm fine with it.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: Okay. I'm not seeing any further speakers.

We'll move second reading, the vote.

Division is called.

[8:10 p.m. - 8:20 p.m.]

[The Speaker in the chair.]

The Speaker: Members, the question before the House is second reading of Bill 15 intituled Infrastructure Projects Act.

I also remind all the members online to make sure your audio, video is on.

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 — 44

Sturko	Kindy	Milobar
Warbus	Rustad	Banman
Wat	Kooner	Halford
Hartwell	L. Neufeld	Van Popta
Dew	Gasper	K. Neufeld
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. Bowinn Ma: I move that the bill be committed to the Committee of the Whole House to be considered at the next sitting of the House after today.

Motion approved.

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

In the Douglas Fir Room, I call continued estimates for the Ministry of the Attorney General.

In the Birch Room, continued committee stage debate on Bill 13.

[8:25 p.m.]

[Mable Elmore in the chair.]

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

Deputy Speaker: I'll call the House back to order. We're continuing second reading debate on Bill 14, the Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act.

Teresa Wat: It is again my honour to continue my comments on Bill 14, the so-called Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act.

Well, this morning I was talking about what I thought about this bill. I want to make it once again very clear that I rise in firm and unwavering opposition to this legislation not because I am against the development of renewable energy in B.C. but because I'm against the centralization of power, the erosion of democratic oversight and the blatant hypocrisy that this bill represents.

Let's not kid ourselves. Bill 14 is not a conversation based on principle. It is a political calculation. This is not about the environment. It's about control. Why now? Why this bill? The answer is simple. This government is out of ideas.

Their legislative agenda is among the thinnest in memory, only 15 bills in this session. That's not a vision for the future; that's a mission of intellectual bankruptcy. When a government runs out of ideas, it inevitably reaches for more power. That's what Bill 14 is — a desperate attempt to centralize authority in the Premier's office, bypassing the Legislature, bypassing local governments and bypassing the public.

This bill gives the Premier and cabinet sweeping power to override existing regulations, ignore local land use plans and unilaterally impose decisions on communities. It strips away consultation, suspends hearings and neutralizes due process. It reduces the role of our 93 democratically elected members of the House to little more than spectators in decisions that affect the livelihoods of thousands.

I must ask the members opposite: is this what you were elected to do? Were you sent here by your constituents to rubber-stamp power grabs from the Premier's office? Were you sent here to be bystanders to the erosion of local autonomy and environmental protection? Are you pushing back on the Premier's office at all?

[8:30 p.m.]

History will remember you as the government that pushed through the most anti-democratic legislation in our lifetime. Shame on you if you do. That's what the bill demands of you — to surrender your responsibility, to silence the voices of our communities and to consolidate power in the hands of a few senior bureaucrats and political insiders. That's not democracy. That's not representation. That's not leadership. That's something entirely different.

I stand here today not as an opponent of renewable energy but as a defender of democratic principle, due process and good governance. If this government truly believes in renewable energy, then bring forward legislation that expands capacity while respecting local voices. If this NDP government believes in progress, then pursue development with transparency, not through political trickery. If this NDP government believes in democracy,

then let's preserve, not erode, the role of the Legislature, because once you centralize this kind of power, it's very hard to take it back.

If we as the elected officials don't stand against this now, we may one day find ourselves unable to stand at all.

This bill, if passed, will hit rural British Columbia first and hardest. Once again, this NDP government governs as if British Columbia ends at the boundaries of Vancouver and Victoria. But let me make it very clear. It does not. It includes Vanderhoof, Quesnel, Lillooet and Kitimat. It includes Smithers, Fort Nelson and Princeton. It includes thousands of communities where people live, work and raise families and where the natural resource economy is not just an economic driver but a way of life.

Bill 14 gives unelected bureaucrats the power to suspend or cancel long-standing licences and permits without explanation, hearing or opportunity for appeal. These aren't theoretical authorizations. These are hunting and guiding licences. These are tenures that support ecotourism and conservation. These are permits that provide livelihoods for Indigenous outfitters, family-owned wilderness companies and local businesses that have operated responsibly for generations.

Imagine being a second- or third-generation guide-outfitter whose family has spent decades navigating the wilderness, building a business rooted in conservation, cultural heritage and responsible stewardship, only to have it all undone by a single bureaucratic decision, with no hearing, no evidence, no appeal and no compensation. This government often claims it's pro-worker, yet here it is bringing in legislation that allows it to destroy a livelihood with a stroke of a pen, without due process, without procedural failures, without recourse. What's pro-worker about that?

I find it particularly ironic that this legislation is championed by a Premier who once served as executive director of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association. In 2011, he spoke passionately about the importance of due process and the dangers of unchecked state power. But now, as Premier, he brings forth a bill that will allow governments to cancel legally issued licences and permits without hearings, without compensation and without any transparent framework for appeal.

[8:35 p.m.]

What would the civil liberties champion in 2011 say about the Premier who now seeks to dismantle civil protections and democratic oversight in the name of expediency? The disconnect is staggering, and British Columbians are noticing.

I represent the riding of Richmond-Bridgeport in Richmond. The ALR covers nearly 5,000 hectares, roughly 39 percent of Richmond's total land base. This land is not just green space; it is active farmland. It is a foundation of our local food system. It is a legacy passed on by generations of farmers who have committed to cultivating the land so British Columbians can feed themselves with dignity and independence.

But under Bill 14, ALR protections are undermined. This legislation grants cabinet and the Energy Regulator the power to override existing land use plans and fast-track projects on ALR land without following the established consultation and environmental review processes. The very safeguards that were created to protect farmlands from sprawl and encroachment are now being brushed aside under the banner of streamlining.

Let's be clear. That's not streamlining; that is steamrolling. This bill makes it possible for renewable projects, however well-meaning, to pave our prime agricultural land, interrupt irrigation systems, disrupt local farming operations and divide parcels that were never meant to be fragmented. The result? A slow and steady erosion of the food-producing capacity we claim to protect.

British Columbians do not want to choose between clean energy and food security, and they shouldn't have to. A responsible government would pursue both. A reckless one would sacrifice one for the illusion of the other. This bill, sadly, chooses the latter.

Worse still is the complete lack of protection for environmental standards in this legislation. Bill 14 provides government and regulators with the ability to selectively apply or completely disregard regulations under the Environmental Management Act, the Heritage Conservation Act and even the Safety Standards Act. That means regulators can approve a level 3 energy project, regardless of scale or location, without requiring a full environmental assessment, without applying critical safety protocols and without meaningful oversight from local governments or Indigenous communities.

This is not a minor procedural issue. It is a catastrophic retreat from the hard-won principle of environmental protection in our province. Even Richmond mayor Malcolm Brodie told me last Saturday that he has serious reservations on the content of the legislation and the lack of consultation.

Let's consider what this means in practical terms. It means a project could be fast-tracked without a proper spill contingency plan. It means culturally significant heritage sites, including Indigenous or even Chinese pioneer burial grounds and archaeological zones, could be bulldozed under the streamlined permitting process.

Environmental assessments and safety standards are not bureaucratic red tape. They are essential safeguards that protect lives, land and livelihoods. They ensure that development is responsible, not reckless; that it is sustainable, not extractive; that it supports long-term prosperity, not short-term political gain. By giving cabinet and the Energy Regulator the power to waive the standards at their discretion, this bill creates the perfect conditions for regulatory chaos, legal challenges and public distrust.

[8:40 p.m.]

That distrust is well earned, because this government has already proven that it will centralize power and hide decision-making when it suits their political interests. Just ask the Canadian Association of Journalists, which awarded the B.C. NDP government the outstanding achievement in government secrecy. That's not a partisan accusation; it's a documented fact.

Now this government wants to consolidate even more control over environmental permitting projects, siting and safety standards, all without any guarantee of public reporting or legislative oversight. That's not how responsible government works. We must not allow government to conflate climate urgency with autocracy. We can build reliable infrastructure without bulldozing the democratic institutions that give legitimacy to those projects. We can move quickly without abandoning caution. And we can lead on climate without losing sight of the people and principles we were elected to serve.

Bill 14 is not a clean energy bill; it is a government control bill. If we allow it to pass in its current form, we are not only compromising environmental standards and rural economies; we are compromising the integrity of this very House. As if the democratic erosion, environmental negligence and threats to rural livelihoods were not enough, Bill 14 also opens the door to something even more dangerous: political favouritism, regulatory inconsistency and potential corruption.

Let us be clear. The sweeping discretionary powers granted under this legislation are not accompanied by clear criteria, enforceable standards or mechanisms to guarantee fairness. That is a recipe for political gamesmanship.

Under Bill 14, the energy regulator and cabinet can subject projects of equal size and scope to vastly different rules: one facing extensive permitting hurdles, the other gliding through a fast-track process.

There's no requirement for consistency, no requirement to explain deviations and no requirement to ensure that similar proposals are treated similarly. That means well-connected developers with the right lobbyists, especially those with close ties to the governing party, could find their application quietly advanced, while others are buried in red tape. Is this streamlining? No, this is institutionalized favouritism.

We've seen it before, and we are seeing the warning signs once again. Lobbying transparency in this province is already lacking. The same insiders who once claimed to be for the people now make their living behind closed doors as consultants, as lawyers, as lobbyists, whispering into the ears of cabinet. Now, with Bill 14, they have more influence than ever with fewer checks, less transparency and no public oversight.

British Columbians do not want to live in a province where their elected representatives hand over power to unelected lobbyists and bureaucrats, where rules are arbitrarily applied and clear access to decision-makers is reserved for the politically well connected. With Bill 14, the opportunities for corruption increase dramatically because the accountability mechanisms are being stripped away.

It's not just about public perception; it's about tangible harm. Imagine being an entrepreneur, maybe in the clean tech sector, maybe in rural B.C., with a viable energy project. You do everything by the book.

[8:45 p.m.]

You meet the requirements. You follow the timelines. You invest your capital. You hire local workers. And then you watch as a politically favoured competitor leapfrogs over you, approved in half the time, exempted from fees and granted regulatory waivers you were never even told about. This is not innovation. This is not fairness. This is not what this province was built on.

If this government truly believes in renewable energy and a green economy, then it must believe in the foundational principles that make long-term investment and innovation possible: fairness, clarity and consistency. But this bill undermines all three.

Let me also emphasize something that has been largely ignored in government statements about this bill, the total absence of meaningful consultation with Indigenous communities. Many of the lands potentially affected by these so-called streamlined projects lie within or adjacent to territories where First Nations have legal or cultural interests. Yet nothing in Bill 14 guarantees that Indigenous nations will have a meaningful say before a permit is approved, a licence suspended or a project pushed forward. This is not reconciliation; this is paternalism disguised as progress.

This government claims to respect Indigenous rights. It claims to honour the principle of UNDRIP. But Bill 14 makes a mockery of those claims. It empowers regulators to unilaterally override local concerns, including those tied to sacred sites and traditional-use areas, without binding consultation or consent. This is not just morally wrong; it is legally reckless. It sets this government and future project proponents up for costly legal challenges, delays and public backlash. It undermines the very certainty this bill purports to establish.

The solution to red tape is not to abolish accountability. The solution to slow permitting is not to bulldoze over safeguards. The path forward on renewable energy must be responsible, equitable and democratically legitimate. Bill 14 fails all three checks. It is not a framework for smart strategic development. It is a blunt instrument for centralized control, and the people of British Columbia deserve better.

The choice before us today is not whether to support clean energy. The choice is whether we are willing to sacrifice democratic accountability, local input and legal fairness on the altar of centralization. I urge every member of this House, especially those across the aisle, to think long

and hard about what Bill 14 represents. Strip away your talking points. Set aside the partisan script. Look at what this legislation empowers the government to do.

If you believe in public consultation, vote against it. If you believe in rural economic stability, vote against it. If you believe in transparency and fairness, vote against it.

Let's not be the Legislature that looked the other way while democratic laws were dismantled. Let's be the Legislature that has the courage to say: "We can do better." There's a reason why immigrants such as myself have decided to call British Columbia our home. We must do better, and British Columbians deserve no less.

Noting the hour, I ask for adjournment of the debate.

Teresa Wat moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

[8:50 p.m.]

George Anderson: Committee of Supply, Section A, reports resolution and completion of the estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Development and reports progress on the Ministry of Attorney General and asks leave to sit again.

Leave granted.

Reporting of Bills

BILL 13 — MISCELLANEOUS STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2025

Nina Krieger: Section C reports Bill 13 complete without amendment.

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

Hon. Brenda Bailey: Now.

Third Reading of Bills

BILL 13 — MISCELLANEOUS STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2025

Deputy Speaker: The question is third reading of Bill 13, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act.

Motion approved.

Deputy Speaker: Bill 13 has been read a third time and has been passed.

Hon. Brenda Bailey moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Deputy Speaker: We're adjourned until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

The House adjourned at 8:51 p.m.

Proceedings in the Douglas Fir Room

The House in Committee, Section A.

The committee met at 2:16 p.m.

[Nina Krieger in the chair.]

Committee of Supply

ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT *(continued)*

The Chair: Good afternoon, Members. I call Committee of Supply, Section A, to order. We are meeting today to continue the consideration of the budget estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

On Vote 18: ministry operations, $2,442,836,000 *(continued)*.

Amelia Boultbee: I would like to invite my colleague from Courtenay-Comox to ask a few questions.

Brennan Day: My first question is about the growing crisis of drug use in government-funded group homes. These homes are supposed to be safe havens for vulnerable children. But staff and advocates are reporting open substance use and no enforcement of basic rules.

How is this budget addressing the rampant drug and alcohol use in group homes? Why are dry care homes not the standard for our most vulnerable children?

[2:20 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I want to welcome the member and thank him for the question.

I think we can all agree that the toxic drug crisis and the impact that it's having on our province, in particular our youth, is incredibly concerning and devastating. We need to take a cross-government approach to combatting that. There are multiple points of interaction with the youth that we need to look at to really get to the heart of the challenge that we're facing today.

With respect to specialized homes and contracted care, there are a number of things that we need to look at. First and foremost, we need to look at the needs of the individual youth. An individual youth in a home — the expectation is that there is direct staff working with that youth on a safety plan to ensure that they are safe.

We want children to live, first and foremost. So when a youth unfortunately has a substance use issue, we have to do everything that we can to get them the treatment and the care that they need, and we need to safety plan around them so that the worst outcome doesn't happen, which is that they are no longer alive, given the increasing toxic drugs that we are seeing in our communities. That is first and foremost.

There are a number of practice guidelines that the ministry has implemented for social workers, to ensure that there are a number of interventions that happen on a one-to-one basis. With respect to a contracted care home or a specialized home where there are significant concerns, it's important for people to report those significant concerns. Then it's the ministry's responsibility to do a protocol investigation around that resource, look at whether there are improvements that need to be made, changes that need to be made.

At the end of the day, it is a contract. We need to look at that contract to ensure it's following our protocols and our guidelines that are expected.

If there is a specific resource that the member is aware of, I'm happy to take it in my office and to work with the member on the issues.

[2:25 p.m.]

Brennan Day: With respect, deferring to the contractors seems to be a bit of a habit with many of the ministries.

We know that operators are burning out, staff turnover is absolutely through the roof, staff retention is terrible, violence in the workplace is common and the only thing growing faster than the cost of running these homes is the number of crisis calls coming from them.

I'll ask a different way. Can the minister tell us what metrics the ministry is actually using to measure safety and sobriety in group homes? How are you holding operators accountable when these publicly funded homes become unsafe for both the children in care and the staff operating in them?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want to start by saying that if the member has an allegation that a child is unsafe in this province, we all — whether that be a service provider, an operator, a community member, an MLA — have a responsibility to report that real safety concern. If a child is at risk of neglect or their safety is at risk, that needs to be reported. So if the member is aware of a specific safety concern, I encourage him to make that report.

With respect to what we are doing to ensure that resources are compliant with ministry standards, I have talked about protocol investigations. So ministry staff will look into the resource. They will do an investigation. Those protocol investigations are published publicly and are available to the member and to any person in the public to review the outcomes of those investigations and the requirement for compliance, going forward.

Brennan Day: Respectfully, I think the budget estimates process is here to look at systemic issues and lack of funding towards those results. So I'll keep going down this path of questioning because I do believe we have a systemic issue within MCFD, staff turnover being one of them, reporting transparency being another. And certainly, we can have that conversation outside of this House as well.

Changing the channel a little bit here, though, can the minister confirm exactly how many children are currently in care or custody of the Ministry of Children and Family Development? What percentage of those children are Indigenous, and how many are placed in privately operated group homes?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Those numbers have been asked and answered. In respect to the resources that Indigenous or non-Indigenous children are placed in, we wouldn't have access to those specific numbers. It's dependent on the individual circumstance. But as far as the number of children in care, the number of Indigenous children in care, those numbers are available publicly. We've canvassed that in this estimates process.

Brennan Day: I'll let my colleague follow up with that at a later date.

We're going to move along to the transition from MCFD to adult services like Community Living B.C. It's billed as a bridge, but we know from experience that that's more of a cliff for the individuals in care that require that transition. It's inconsistent, most of the time inadequate and made far worse by chronic shortage of staff and home-share providers as they transition out of the MCFD system.

Can the minister confirm what percentage of youth who require ongoing care actually make it over the bridge into adult support programs? How many are falling through the cracks into homelessness or further instability?

[2:30 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I'm actually really proud of the work that our ministry has done with former youth in care and young people exiting care. I mean, I'm a mom of a 19-year-old. We know that today it's much harder to be independent as a young person and continue to need support from their parents, and that's no different for young people who are exiting government care.

So our SAJE program, which was named by young people, stands for strengthening abilities and journey to empowerment. It's fairly new. What I can say is when we formed government in 2017, we were spending $6 million

on supporting transition of young people out of government care — and about, approximately, 800 young people.

Today we're spending well over $42 million and, this year alone, have supported 4,000 young people with supports exiting government care. One hundred percent of former youth in care are eligible for income supports to help them be independent — we are seeing very promising outcomes from that — and not only eligible for income support but medical benefits, cultural support, housing support. Our government waived tuition waivers for former youth in care, so I think we're actually doing some transformational work when it comes to young people who are transitioning from care into adult life.

The questions for CLBC and transitions for youth who have support needs and disabilities would be better for the Minister of Social Development where CLBC has the responsibility. I know that that is also a concern for families. It's one that I'm very aware of, and it's one where there is work that needs to be done as well.

Brennan Day: This is why there's so much criticism of MCFD and the CLBC model not being under Health anymore, because the buck-passing is absolutely detrimental to children aging out of that system.

Additionally, the 4,000 people supported in that transition do call into question your total numbers of how many people are in the care of the ministry. So I'll let my colleague litigate that a little bit further here today.

I have one final question for the minister. It's a pretty basic one, but I'm going to caution the minister to choose the words very wisely, because I can fill a gallery with caregivers, home-share providers and advocates from across just my riding who will be happy to correct misstatements in question period.

Can the minister state with confidence right here today that the ministry is adequately staffed and funded to monitor and support and care for every child in the care of MCFD and that the ministry knows where all of those children are today?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I'm just going to respond to the first part of the question, and then I will consult with staff on the second part of the question.

First of all, the number 4,000 is the number of young adults that we are serving aged 19 to 27. I'm happy to have a respectful conversation about our numbers and where we get them from and provide them transparently to the members opposite. I'm not here to hide anything or hide numbers. I'm here to provide that to the members opposite.

[2:35 p.m.]

The comment around passing the buck I have to push back on a little bit. I have been an advocate for children and youth with disabilities my entire life. I will never pass the buck. But I am not the minister responsible for services for adults with disabilities. I am happy to have a conversation on work that we can do in the ministry to better support transitions, but I think that it is appropriate for the minister responsible to answer questions that pertain to their ministry.

I will ask my staff for the second part of your question.

I will say that the question has been asked and answered with respect to missing children.

I do also want to highlight what I have spoken to before in the House around my limitations, as the minister, to share information under the Child, Family and Community Service Act. When I seek out information or am provided information by staff that is obtained under that act, I'm not able to share the specifics of it.

So there may be times where members of the Legislature may get different information or conflicting information that I am able to look into and get information under the act. I'm then no longer allowed to share that information.

With respect to the question around if there are any current children missing, the question was asked, and it was answered.

Brennan Day: I wasn't going to ask a follow-up question, but I think I have to.

The question that needed to be asked was…. And I'll state it again, the first part of the question, which is certainly budget-related. Can the minister state with confidence right here today that the ministry is adequately staffed and funded to monitor and support and care for every child in care under this ministry?

[2:40 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: In response to the member's question, I would say that for ministry staff, MCFD direct service staff, we have 4,092. That's just staff providing direct services. That doesn't include all of the staff and FTEs within our 11,000 contracts in the ministry.

I don't have the numbers at my fingertips, but over 20,000 people are working in this sector, providing supports for children and youth and families, with an additional $321 million to MCFD alone this year in year-over-year increases. We've seen the budget increase more than 2½ times to provide services for children and youth in this province.

There is always more work to be done. When I was in opposition, it was a different government and a different minister standing here. There were always questions and discussions around how we do better, how we deliver services better. This has been a conversation, with respect to these services, for decades, and I acknowledge that. I'm proud to be in this role because I think there is an opportunity for improvement and to do things better.

We have lots of work to do on a number of fronts, but

I do think that we are making the investments necessary and that we are moving in the right direction.

Brennan Day: I'll pass this back to my colleague for Penticton-Summerland to follow up. Thank you for the minister's time.

Amelia Boultbee: I'm glad that the minister mentioned transparency about the number of children in care. I would like to read a quote from Alan Markwart from the Representative for Children and Youth. This is from a public meeting that took place on April 2. He said:

> "If you look at the slides in the deck, the ministry will tell you that the number of children in care has decreased, that it's almost half of what it was 15 years ago. It has gone from roughly 10,000 down to 5,000. If you look at the chart, that would imply there's less work. But that is in fact not the case.
>
> "What has happened is that the number of kids in care has gone down, but the number of kids in out-of-care options — for example, being supported by grandma or auntie or cousin — has increased in parallel. When you look at the total, it has been roughly 10,000 for the last 15 years consecutively.
>
> "In fact, social workers tell us that doing these out-of-care options actually is more work than bringing a child into care — the point there being that the workload and caseload really hasn't changed over the last many, many years."

Can the minister confirm if this is correct?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: We have seen the number of children in government care go down, and those in kinship and family care placements go up. That is a good thing. We know that children have better outcomes when they're connected to their community, their culture and their families.

We also know that the medical complexities of children, the mental health challenges, the behavioural challenges have grown. So I would agree with the member that we still need considerable resources to support the children and youth in our entire care system. We understand that.

We have moved forward in a transformation of our specialized homes and support services. We recognize that the way that we do care has changed considerably over the last number of decades, and the way that children need support and how we support them is different today than it used to be in the past.

Amelia Boultbee: The Ministry of Children and Family Development has a legal and moral obligation to ensure the safety and stability of every child and youth who enters its care, yet year after year we see data that points to a system where that obligation is not always fulfilled, particularly for children who experience placement breakdowns or repeated disruptions, or who go missing entirely.

[2:45 p.m.]

According to the provincial government's own online reporting, 15 children in care died in 2023, and six more died in the first half of 2024. These numbers include deaths by suicide, accident and those ruled undetermined. Of the 15 children who died in 2023, nine were Indigenous. As of April 2025, the province has not yet released updated statistics for child deaths in care for the second half of 2024.

These figures are normally published online and provide important transparency around outcomes for children in care. Given the significance of this information, timely public reporting remains essential. These are not just numbers. Behind each one is a child who had already been identified as vulnerable, who had been taken into care by this government, yet who still died under its watch.

The Representative for Children and Youth's May 2024 update on missing youth revealed that in 2023, the RCY received 1,553 reports of children and youth going missing from care, involving 425 distinct individuals, with eight dying while missing. As the RCY stated: "Young people report leaving placements due to feelings of not belonging, trauma, exploitation, mental health struggles and substance use issues."

These youth are not running from care. They are running from systems that are not designed to hold them safely. Despite years of discussion, there is still no provincewide strategy to ensure placement stability, no real-time alert system for high-risk youth who leave care and no mandatory continuity of care planning across transitions. The result? Youth bounced between short-term care contracts, hotel stays, emergency placements and shelter beds, with each move increasing disconnection and risk.

The RCY's *Don't Look Away* report highlighted that these failures are often institutional, caused not by front-line neglect but by structural gaps, lack of planning and systems that respond too slowly or not at all, yet despite the warnings, we are still asking the same questions about oversight, response and accountability. When a child in care goes missing or worse, it is not their disappearance that should prompt action; it's the breakdowns that led them there.

In 2023, the province recorded 15 deaths of children in care followed by six more in the first half of 2024. Can the minister confirm whether these children were previously identified as high risk? What oversight or care planning processes were in place prior to their deaths?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: That was a very long question. Can I ask the member to repeat the last part of the question, so that I can ensure we have the correct information.

The Chair: Member, could you please repeat the question?

Amelia Boultbee: In 2023, the province recorded 15 deaths of children in care, followed by six more in the first half of 2024. Can the minister confirm whether these children were previously identified as high risk? What oversight or care planning processes were in place prior to their deaths?

[2:50 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: There are a couple things for me to respond to in the question.

I think, first and foremost, I just want to underscore — we've talked about this before — that these numbers represent and signify children who were loved, who were cared for, who mattered, who had people who were working with them, who cared for them.

I have worked with staff members who have worked for years with children who have passed away. It is a very difficult circumstance. We have youth workers and front-line staff who do their level best to support youth, to support children, and when the unimaginable happens, it is devastating for those staff and devastating for everybody who is connected with them.

[2:55 p.m.]

It drives our need in our ministry for continual quality improvement, continually to look at everything that we've done, to look at our systems, to look at our policies, to look at our procedures, to change things continuously.

The number that the member brought forward, the 21 youth…. Those deaths are reported publicly, and the cause of death is publicly available. Each one of those youth, regardless of the cause of death, would have a care plan, and that care plan would include whether or not that youth was high risk.

If that youth was identified as high risk, then there are a number of things that could be in place for that youth. There are specialized high-risk youth workers and specialized teams that work with youth.

I'm talking about the 15 in 2023 and then the six that were talked about of 2024.

We have after-hours teams in service delivery that provide emergency services.

When a child leaves their resource, they are contacted by their guardianship worker, and a plan is put in place that is monitored by staff, by team leads, to do whatever we can to ensure that there is a safe placement for the child.

There are always things that we need to look at, things that we need to improve on. Our practice reviews are published publicly and available for people to look at what was found in that practice review, what recommendations were made and how we're moving forward in a better way.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Before acknowledging the member, I'd like to note that I have been providing a fair deal of latitude to the scope of debate. I would just encourage the member and all members to ensure that questions are relevant to the vote under consideration, which is related to expenditures for the ministry for the year ahead.

Thank you all.

Amelia Boultbee: The questions I am eliciting are in relation to the budget. Everything here requires money, every policy decision.

I would just like to say that the breakdown of numbers that I have from the RCY…. I think they have the most updated information. It seems like MCFD uses a calendar year for deaths, whereas B.C. coroner's office uses a fiscal year and the RCY uses a fiscal year. The numbers on the coroner's website are out of date, and as I previously stated, we don't even have the last six months of data from MCFD, so for that reason I'm using the RCY's data.

This is from their annual report that was tabled on April 2 and which was released in February, so I have no reason to believe that these numbers are out of date.

Of the 103 children who died while receiving services from MCFD, 42 of the deaths were deemed natural; 25 of the deaths were deemed accidental, of which 13 of those were drug overdoses; 20 of the deaths were undetermined; nine were suicide; and seven were homicide.

Aside from suicide and homicide, which are self-explanatory, undetermined, accidental and natural…. It's very difficult, reading that, to know what that actually means. In fact, the only way that, as far as I know, I'm able to obtain the death certificate is…. If I go to the B.C. coroner, I need the first and last name and the place of death.

My question to the minister: where in the budget can I find the line item or line items specifically that address the disproportionate number of children who die while receiving services from MCFD? It is about a third of all child deaths in the province.

My second question is: in the spirit of transparency, will the minister commit to providing me with the death certificate for each of those children — not their name, which is a privacy violation but, for instance, "natural death by" — and provide me with the reason for that death, for all 103 children?

[3:00 p.m.]

Point of Order

Hon. Brenda Bailey: As acting House Leader, I have a point of order. I'm wondering if the member opposite could help me understand the relationship between a request for a coroner's certificate and the funding of the budget at hand. I'm just not following how those are linked.

The Chair: I invite the member for Penticton-Summerland to respond to the point of order.

Amelia Boultbee: I think the point of order is ridiculous and my question is self-explanatory. I've been watching all the estimates take place every day up until this point, and if it's even remotely tied to the budget, it's absolutely been allowed and not been out of order. So if that's the case, this would be a complete change of the rules as far as I've observed from many, many hours of estimates this session.

The Chair: I'll reiterate what I said earlier, which is that I have provided a fair degree of latitude to the debate, but I ask that questions please relate to the vote at hand, which is expenditures for the ministry for the year ahead.

Trevor Halford: Can I just get confirmation? It looks like my colleague is asking questions specifically relating to children in care and, as sensitive as it is, children that have lost their lives that are in care of the ministry, and that ties exactly into the ministry of MCFD. We are discussing the MCFD and those budget implications. We are not discussing the Ministry of Finance and the budget implications in there.

Interjection.

Trevor Halford: These questions seem absolutely relevant to the budget. They may be inconvenient for the minister or the House Leader, but they relate exactly to the ministry's responsibility, the minister's responsibility and the budgetary numbers that come within that ministry.

And you say that that is not somehow tied. I am completely missing something from the acting House Leader and the minister, who, obviously, is having trouble defending her budget. So I'm kind of at a loss of why we are here right now.

Hon. Brenda Bailey: As I stated, the question that I framed for the member was to help me understand the relationship for a request to access to coroner information as it pertains to the budget for the ministry. I'm not seeing…. The member who's now speaking…. He has said it's clear to him. If that's so, I would just invite an explanation of how those two things are linked.

The Chair: Could we just take a moment.

I'll just repeat that it is incumbent on all members to clarify how the question at hand relates to the vote under consideration. And it's incumbent to make that clear to me as Chair and to all of members of the committee.

So I invite you to answer the question and to just clarify the link between your question and the vote related to the budget for the year ahead. Thank you very much.

Amelia Boultbee: Thank you, and with all due respect, I answer questions to the Chair. I don't answer questions from anyone else standing up and randomly interrogating me in this process.

My answer to the Chair is that I believe it is self-evident that the results that this minister is supposed to be delivering under the budget that she's tabling — the $2.4 billion budget that she's tabling — relate to the safety of children and whether or not her ministry can keep them alive. That's the connection.

The Chair: I'd like to pause for a five-minute recess, please. We will reconvene at 3:10. Thank you.

The committee recessed from 3:05 p.m. to 3:12 p.m.

[Nina Krieger in the chair.]

The Chair: I call Committee of Supply, Section A, back to order. A reminder that we're meeting today to consider the budget estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Point of Order
(Chair's Ruling)

The Chair: I will now make a ruling on the point of order.

I have determined that the question is in order, and I will let debate continue.

Again, I advise the member and all members to ensure that you make clear to the Chair and to the entire committee how the question relates to the debate at hand, the vote at hand, which is about the budgets for the upcoming year.

Thank you, and please proceed with your response to the question.

Debate Continued

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Thank you, Chair.

I want to acknowledge that the topic is a very challenging topic, and I understand the passion behind it. I think it's a difficult topic to talk about, and we are all concerned about child deaths.

I would hope that there would be some professional courtesy to understand that as the minister, I never don't think about these things. I wake up and think about child deaths. I go to bed and think about child deaths. It's a constant part of my role to defend the ministry, to ensure that we're doing consistent quality improvement.

I would say that with respect to the question and how the question was framed, the ministry posts child deaths two times per year, December and June. We do that because it's the coroner's responsibility to determine the cause of a child's death. The member opposite knows that, because we have discussed it and have canvassed it. I sent

a letter to the member on March 31 answering all of these very questions about child deaths, providing breakdowns. I absolutely have, and I can resend it.

I think that, understandably, there are concerns around child deaths. We are responsible to report on those child deaths. We are responsible to work with the coroner's office where there are questions.

[3:15 p.m.]

With respect to our budget and what we invest in child safety, family supports and children in care, as has been canvassed in these estimates, when we formed government in 2017, $603 million was spent on this line item. Today we are spending over $1.3 billion on these supports and services.

If we want to talk about investments in child safety and keeping families together, we are continually doing the work in transformative ways, and we will continue to do that work.

Amelia Boultbee: With all due respect, I'm not here to worry about the minister's feelings or anyone's feelings other than the families and the children affected and the taxpayers who are affected by this $2.4 billion budget. Unless something got lost in the mail, I've never been provided with a breakdown as to each cause of death for all 103 of these children. I will note that I'm citing a report from last year. It's from 2023/2024.

Seeing as the ministry reports in the first half of 2024, this data should be available. So I'm going to ask the minister again — and if she's already sent it, then it should be an easy yes — if she will provide my office with a breakdown: natural deaths, a breakdown of each one of those causes of death; accidental deaths, a breakdown of each of those causes of death; and so on.

Will the minister commit to doing that?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: That breakdown is the responsibility of the coroner's office, and the member can request that information from the coroner's office.

Amelia Boultbee: I actually did ask the coroner's office, and he told me to ask this ministry. Maybe there needs to be a discussion between your ministry and the B.C. coroner's office, because I'm getting the runaround. I'm a member of the opposition, and I have a right to ask these questions and get answers, and I expect those answers.

What is the average time children are missing before being reported?

[3:20 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want to provide some information on the policies and standards for the member opposite. We have a number of policies and standards and practice guidelines that address missing youth that are in ministry care. That includes children and youth in care policies, resource work policies, standards for foster homes, standards for staff, children's residential services, standards for youth support services and youth agreements, reportable circumstance policy, practice guidelines when a child or youth in care is missing.

These documents include guidance on expectations of caregivers when a child or youth is missing, including when to contact the child or youth's worker, provincial centralized screening, as well as police; responsibilities of the child youth's worker, including working with the caregiver and police, as well as completing a reportable circumstance report; responsibilities of the child and youth's worker when the child and youth is no longer missing.

There are a number of reasons that a child or youth may leave their resource. This is a reportable circumstance, and it is done as soon as there is an awareness that the child is not with their resource. It is done immediately. Often, the youth is located within hours, and we have stringent policies around it.

Amelia Boultbee: I didn't hear a number in there. Is the minister aware of the number of average days that a child is missing before they are reported missing? Yes or no?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: A child that is missing is reported immediately.

Amelia Boultbee: Okay, according to the Representative for Children and Youth, on average, children are missing 30 days before they are reported missing. Where in the current budget is an allocation to move this number up so that, in fact, children are reported immediately?

[3:25 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I would say to the member that there is some misunderstanding of our policy and our data and how we report things. I've talked to the staff about how we'll work with the Representative for Children and Youth to bridge those discrepancies and our policies and our procedures around what happens when a youth in care isn't at their resource or goes missing and what work happens and how we're tracking that.

I think that there is a gap in our understanding of how things happen and what is reported. So I've asked staff for us to have a briefing with the Representative for Children and Youth to look at that difference and that gap in what we understand to be true and what is reported.

I will also say that, with respect, the fact sheet has been provided. Budget 2025 provided a budget increase of $268 million to child safety, family supports and child-in-care services. A number of that is increased oversight of the child protection system. That includes extended family or community members and care agreements, foster care, post-adoptive services, improving how child

protection work is delivered through process and practice improvements but also more front-line and oversight staffing levels, the continued creation and implementation of the provincial director of child welfare to look at systemic practice.

[3:30 p.m.]

So that increase to our budget really is to improve our policies, our practices, to ensure that children are kept more safe. We'll work on the issue of the numbers and how children leave a resource, what happens in that timeline and what the timelines are and the discrepancy.

Amelia Boultbee: I will look forward to that clarification from the minister once she's able to sort that out with the RCY so we can get a better idea, because the data I was provided led me to believe there was quite a long lag time between when the child went missing and when the report actually took place.

In fact, I'm aware that…. I believe it was sometime last year the ministry brought in a new policy that said it has to be done within the first seven days.

I'm glad the minister has brought up real-time tracking because that leads me to my next question. Is there any ability for real-time tracking of children in care? Specifically, the idea that's been brought to me by social workers is simply giving them a cell phone that has location services turned on and that there's a rule that when they're not in direct supervision, their location has to be turned on. Has this idea ever been brought forward?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: We do provide cell phones for all youth in care. I think it's a fabulous idea. Well, I mean, I have tracking on my own teenagers' cell phones. Teenagers, youth, have the ability and the autonomy to turn that tracking on or off as they so choose. I wish that it could be mandatory. I don't see how it could. But we do provide cell phones to all youth, and the youth would have the autonomy to agree to or disagree to that.

Amelia Boultbee: Before I move on to a different topic, I would just like to close the loop on the deaths. I just want it noted…. And I'm hopeful that there's already an awareness about this at the ministerial level. Of the 103 deaths that occurred in the fiscal year 2023-2024, 20 of them are undetermined. This is five times higher than the provincial average.

I have actually asked the B.C. coroner why. What I was told is that I needed to go through the ministry and ask. I understand that this is somewhat of a grey area because it's the B.C. coroner's office that makes the determination. However, it is MCFD that receives this information, which I think is very alarming and should be sending up a red flag to the minister.

Is this sending up a red flag, and if so, what is the minister going to do to get to the bottom of why this number is so high?

[3:35 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I want to underscore again what we have talked about previously with respect to the 103 deaths. So 14 of those deaths were children in government care. The rest of those deaths were children who were receiving any type of MCFD services within the 12 months. This could include children that have a number of complexities, that are receiving medical care, that are receiving mental health care. There are a number of things that could be happening for those children.

I also need to just say again that the classification of deaths is determined by the B.C. Coroners Service. The classification of "undetermined" is a death which, because of insufficient evidence or an inability to otherwise determine, cannot reasonably be classified as natural, accidental, suicide or homicide. That classification may change as the Coroners Service does more work.

I would say of the 14 deaths of children in government care, there is an investigation that MCFD does in every single one of those circumstances.

Amelia Boultbee: I do understand the definition of "undetermined." I'm well aware. My point is that whether or not the child is receiving services or actually in a government facility, there has to be some public accountability for what happened there. When the rate of undetermined deaths is five times higher than the provincial average, with due respect, I think this is cause for concern.

If I were the minister, I'd be going to the coroner's office and saying: "Why is it so high?" It should be the provincial average. Deaths of children should not be mysterious. So I would highly encourage the minister to take it upon herself to look into that.

Can the minister provide a five-year breakdown of all deaths and injuries by agency, contractor and authority?

[3:40 p.m.]

Hon. Jodie Wickens: That granular information is not rolled up in a portal. I suggest, if you want that information, that you send for it in writing.

Amelia Boultbee: I appreciate that, and I will send for that information in writing.

My anecdotal, back-of-the-napkin calculation, on the basis of evidence that I've reviewed, indicates that it is the same agencies, contractors and authorities over and over again, which I think is cause for concern and significant public interest.

Every child deserves the stability of a permanent home. For children and youth in government care, permanency through adoption, guardianship or family reunification is not a bonus; it is a fundamental outcome that determines

long-term well-being. Yet in British Columbia, adoption is no longer being treated as a serious priority. In fact, the data tells a story of retreat, not return.

In 2014 and 2015, under the previous government, the Ministry of Children and Family Development launched a strategic adoption initiative, in partnership with the Representative for Children and Youth. That initiative was backed by new funding, a published adoption report and public targets. In April 2015, the minister announced an additional $2 million investment boost to accelerate adoption timelines, reduce backlogs and help more than 1,000 waiting children find permanent homes.

At that time, the results were clear. In the fiscal year ending in 2016, there were 362 completed adoptions: 187 Indigenous and 175 non-Indigenous. By 2024, the number of adoptions had dropped to just 96 in total placements, with only 53 Indigenous and 43 non-Indigenous children adopted. That is a 73 percent collapse in adoption placements over eight years.

The question is not whether adoption matters. The question is why this government has walked away from it.

[3:45 p.m.]

Why has there been no high-profile adoption strategy, no new investment and no provincial target since 2017? Why, despite ongoing overrepresentation of Indigenous children in care, has there been no serious public effort to work with communities to expand permanency options?

The Ministry of Children and Family Development is cutting $4.1 million from the 2025-2026 budget. This is not just a budgetary adoption, it is a deliberate withdrawal from the commitment to provide stable, loving homes for our most vulnerable children. At a time when the need for permanency is critical, this government is choosing to retreat further, undermining the very foundation of child welfare.

My question: how many children are currently on the wait-list for adoption in British Columbia?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: We did talk about this a little bit yesterday where I expressed to the member that we have not cut adoption services, point-blank, and that the number of children being adopted has decreased, so the budget has decreased. Every single child in our care has a plan for permanency, and our family preservation rate has increased. The goal is always for a child or youth to be placed with their family or to be reunited with their family, and those rates are increasing, which is a good thing.

As far as numbers with respect to adoption, when we formed government in 2017, there were 276 children placed for adoption and 1,449 children eligible for adoption. Today, in 2024-2025, we placed 69 children for adoption, and 561 children are currently eligible for adoption.

[3:50 p.m.]

I want to note that I am someone who was adopted themselves. I truly value the importance of adoption, and I think that there is a role for adoption to play. However, it is just one option in a number of the interventions that we are taking to ensure that children feel belonging, connection and closeness to family.

Amelia Boultbee: I just want to point out that it is institutional gaslighting at the highest level to continuously say that there are no cuts. The minister is trying to make a distinction between a service cut and a budget cut. I'm being very clear that this is a budget cut. At no point did I say a service cut, although I do think they're somewhat synonymous.

It is in black and white in this budget that over $40 million was allocated for adoption last year, and this year it's $36 million. That number is less. That is a budget cut of over $4 million. So I just want it noted for the record that the minister is not being very clear when she says: "We're not cutting services."

I find it very disturbing that there are hundreds and hundreds of children on the wait-list for adoption, and the amount of money being allocated is going down.

My question to the minister is: what is the real plan to get those children that are on the adoption wait-list actually adopted while they're cutting over $4 million from this budget?

The Chair: Member, before I hand it over to the minister and her team, I would like to point out that "gaslighting" is not parliamentary language, and I'd like to invite you to withdraw your comment.

Amelia Boultbee: I will not withdraw my comment.

The Chair: So for the record, you are not withdrawing your comment, which has been ruled unparliamentary language?

Amelia Boultbee: I disagree that it's unparliamentary language. It's accurate language, and I stand by it.

The Chair: Member, it's not a matter for debate. It is not parliamentary language, and you're choosing not to withdraw it.

Amelia Boultbee: I respectfully decline to withdraw.

The Chair: Okay.

Because the member is not abiding by the ruling of the Chair, I now have the authority to ask the member to withdraw from the room.

Amelia Boultbee: Does it end debate?

The Chair: It does end debate on estimates.

Seeing no further questions, I thank the minister and

all the members, and I ask the minister if she would like to make any closing remarks.

We'll take a five-minute recess and reconvene at 3:58. Let's round it out to four o'clock. Thank you.

The committee recessed from 3:53 p.m. to 4:03 p.m.

[Jessie Sunner in the chair.]

The Chair: Hello, Members. We're going to continue. I call the Committee of Supply, Section A, back to order. We are continuing the estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Reann Gasper: The ministry's stated goal, as outlined on page 5 of the service plan, is delivered services that are inclusive, accessible and responsive to all children and youth in British Columbia. But when it comes to children and youth with support needs, the ministry's own documents show a different reality.

On page 122 of the ministry's own transition binder, in November 2024, it states that only a third of 100,000 children who require CYSN or CYMH services are currently being supported. That means more than 66,000 children, including those with autism, FASD, Down syndrome, complex physical needs or developmental delays are being left out of a system that is supposed to include them.

[4:05 p.m.]

And the gaps are not just a matter of funding. They are systematic and structural. On page 71 of the transition binder, the ministry notes that it is piloting a new CYSN service model in four specific regions: Central Okanagan, Haida Gwaii, Prince Rupert, Terrace-Kitimat and Bulkley Valley–Stikine. In these areas, eligibility is determined by functional needs and not diagnosis.

But outside these pilot areas, the legacy system still applies. On page 72 of the transition binder, the ministry outlines that access to services, such as the autism funding program and the At Home program, remains tied to formal diagnosis or clinical eligibility criteria, maintaining a service model where access is conditional rather than based solely on functional needs. Families without those specific diagnoses often face higher barriers, even if their child support needs are equal or greater.

On page 74, the ministry acknowledges that almost all the children with neurodiversity, which is 91 percent, do not receive mental health interventions in a typical year. The same page highlights the need to examine service silos between CYSN and CYMH, citing growing complexity and demand.

What this shows is a province where eligibility depends on geography, where access depends on what diagnosis a child receives and where systematic fragmentation continues to leave children behind. Families are still navigating the same fragmented systems, wait-lists and diagnosis-based access that have excluded children from support for years. Without a systemwide shift, those barriers will persist.

My first question: given that the ministry's stated goal is to provide inclusive, accessible and responsive services to children and youth, as outlined on page 5 of the service plan, can the minister explain how the ministry reconciles that commitment with the admission on page 122 of the transition binder that only one-third of children in need of CYSN or CYMH services are being served?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I welcome the member, and I welcome the question.

There are quite a few things to respond to in that question. First and foremost, I am acutely aware of services for children and youth with support needs in our province and the challenges that families have faced for decades in equitable access to services, the silos that exist, the importance of early intervention therapy and the power that that has on changing the trajectory of children's lives.

We have engaged in an extensive consultation process over the last two years, talking to families, to parents, to caregivers, to experts, to really engage in what building a better system would look like in partnership with parents, caregivers and experts. We know that there is very important work to be done.

I want to clarify for the member a couple of things about the numbers and how we deliver services in my ministry. With respect to the one-third of the 100,000 children, that only refers to children receiving services directly from MCFD staff. So that would be an MCFD social worker….

[4:10 p.m.]

That doesn't reflect the number of children who are actually being supported, particularly in community.

In community, we have a number of programs and services that are available that are not diagnosis-specific, that can be self-referral, that are low barrier. In fact, over the last number of years, while we have been looking at how we change this very complex system, we've invested in those services — so more speech and language pathologists, more physiotherapists, more occupational therapists.

We've seen lifts in the member's own community at her child development centre, the Fraser Valley Child Development Centre. So that work is being done.

When we formed government in 2017, the investment in children and youth with support needs was $331 million. This budget year it's $648 million. I think that while there are complexities and while there's a lot of really important work that needs to be done and transformation needs to happen, we recognize that children can't wait, and we are endeavouring to invest in those services in community currently.

We have seen lifts to those specialized services, to the number of hours of services that children can have access to, streamlining assessments for families and also provid-

ing crucial developmental support in general programming in our early childhood development programming.

Reann Gasper: My question is: in light of the answer provided, the government program that is provided — do they communicate with the other programs that you just referenced? Is there a communication that happens to track what is happening in the communities? What I'm hearing from my community is very different.

I'll leave it at that.

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I would acknowledge to the member opposite that what she's hearing in her community around challenges…. We've canvassed a number of challenges in this estimate. They are real challenges.

Families are experiencing stress and burnout and fragmented systems and systems with barriers. That's why I'm very proud that I have a strong mandate to strengthen and realign children and youth with support and mental health needs services. With the health system, work across ministries, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, the Ministry of Education…. There is a lot of work to be done to coordinate those services.

With respect to the organizations that deliver these services in community, those organizations do communicate with their local offices, with their local CYSN social workers and with the ministry. There are annual reports. There are quarterly reports. There's tracking of number of children served within organizations.

There's a provincial organization called the B.C. Association for Child Development and Intervention. That organization advocates on behalf of community and works closely with government to identify gaps in areas that we need to work more collaboratively together.

I just want to offer that I recognize the challenges and appreciate the concerns that come forward. A number of MLAs in the Legislature have sent emails, have forwarded constituent concerns. I have received those. I've acknowledged those. We are working diligently to look at how we transform our system going forward.

The Chair: Recognizing the member for Penticton-Summerland.

Personal Statements

WITHDRAWAL OF COMMENTS MADE IN THE HOUSE

Amelia Boultbee: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise on a point of order.

I would like to withdraw my previous comments.

The Chair: Thank you. So noted.

Debate Continued

Reann Gasper: Thank you to the minister for the answer. [4:15 p.m.]

The ministry notes on page 71 that it is piloting a new CYSN service model in four specific regions. Can the minister confirm whether families outside of these pilot areas continue to be assessed under the older, diagnosis-based eligibility model and what that means for access consistency across the province?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: The pilots are just that. They are pilots. We are collecting information on the evaluation of those pilots. I would say, in general, that the services that are available in those pilots with respect to children and youth with support needs are also available in our child development centres. They aren't always consistent across communities, and the suite of services that are available needs to be more consistently aligned. But those services are still available in other communities. We are looking at the delivery of those pilots, what we can learn from those pilots and what that means in the system moving forward.

Reann Gasper: On page 72 of the transition binder, the ministry outlines that access to services such as respite, homemaker supports and behaviour intervention remain tied to a child's formal diagnosis or IQ score. Given the ministry's piloted shift towards functional needs-based eligibility in select regions, does the minister believe it remains appropriate to continue using diagnosis-based eligibility across most of the province?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I just want to underscore to the member that there are a couple of things. Firstly, I want to recognize that diagnosis can play an incredibly important role in how a child is assessed, what their needs are and what types of interventions might be effective for that child. I just want to emphasize that diagnosis does play an important role, particularly for children and youth who are neurodivergent or who have needs, because the interventions that then are implemented may be different based on that diagnosis. So that will be a really important role in our work moving forward.

We do recognize, and we've heard from engagement, the challenges with a heavily diagnosis-based system. Also, within a diagnosis, there are a variety of needs. There is a saying in the autism community: "When you've met one child with autism, you've met one child with autism." No two children are similar. They may need very different things. There is a recognition that we do need to transform our system based on that. It's not a one-size-fits-all for every child just because they have a certain diagnosis.

I have heard the frustration from families. I understand the challenges that are experienced and have worked very diligently with provincial partners. There are provincial

organizations that are experts in diagnosis-specific things: the Pacific Autism Family Network; on Slocan, a provincial organization for very medically complex children; the Down Syndrome Research Foundation; the Asante Centre for children and youth with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. All of these provincial organizations and experts have information that they can provide, with us, to move forward in really good ways in how we build a stronger and more cohesive and accessible system.

I do recognize the concerns that the member is bringing forward. We are working to engage with the parents, experts and everybody involved to look at how we move forward.

[4:20 p.m.]

Reann Gasper: Thank you to the minister for the answer.

On page 74 of the transition binder, the ministry acknowledges that almost all children with neurodiversity, which is 91 percent, do not receive mental health interventions in a typical year.

What steps has the ministry taken to address this gap, and are mental health intervention rates now being tracked regionally?

Hon. Jodie Wickens: This is another issue that…. We certainly have heard extensively through our consultation process with respect to neurodivergent children and youth having access to appropriate mental health services. It is a challenging topic in the sector because traditional mental health services aren't always appropriate for neurodivergent youth. It's certainly a new area that experts are exploring and developing.

That being said, there are a number of things that we have done in the interim to try and address some of those gaps. We have allowed for the allowable expenses for direct funding to include mental health services, clinical counsellors. In some circumstances in our community, in community organizations like child development centres where we have increased FTEs for foundational programs, we've allowed those organizations to include mental health support.

MCFD has also developed training and resources for parents, educators and providers to support the mental health and well-being of neurodivergent youth. We have piloted a program that is called the enhanced early intervention program. What that does in child development centres is include developmental specialists and mental health clinicians at the youngest stage of a potential mental health challenge to work very intensely with that child.

[4:25 p.m.]

This is probably one of the most important things that we can do around mental health — get to it as early as possible. That team will work with that child and that family all the way to integration with our integrated child and youth teams in school. We have 39 of those teams across the province. We are absolutely trying to build out our supports for children and youth with mental health. It's really important for us to invest as early as possible.

I would also say that appropriate developmental support and the appropriate support for children and youth that are neurodivergent is one of the most important things to prevent mental health issues from happening. We have seen an increase in our budget for children and youth with mental health, our CYMH budget, and we will continue to invest in those services.

Reann Gasper: Thank you to the minister for the answer.

Just noting my time, if it would be okay if I could just read two more questions…. Then if we have time, the minister can answer, or she can reply written as well.

My two questions. What portion of the ministry's 2025-2026 operating budget is allocated specifically towards services for children and youth with support needs, and will the minister table the regional breakdowns associated with those investments? That's the first one.

The second one would be: given the systematic fragmentation between diagnosis-based and needs-based service models identified on pages 71 and 74 of the transition binder, can the minister explain when families can expect a full transition to a constant provincewide needs-based eligibility framework? That's a mouthful.

Those are my two questions, and we've got three minutes.

Hon. Jodie Wickens: Just to provide the whole number for the member, for the 2025-2026 budget, there was $642.882 million allocated for children and youth with support needs. The regional breakdowns I can provide separately. We don't have them on hand readily.

Then as far as a better system, a needs-based system, one that supports and strengthens children and families, it's a part of my mandate, and work is underway. As soon as there's more information on that, I will provide it.

Reann Gasper: Thank you to the minister for the answers to the questions. That's all I have.

The Chair: Seeing no further questions, I ask the minister if you would like to make any closing remarks.

Hon. Jodie Wickens: I would. Thank you, hon. Chair.

I want to reiterate that it is an absolute honour and a privilege for me to be in this role as Minister of Children and Family Development. We've canvassed some really challenging topics, and I want to emphasize that I know that children and families are connected to my ministry at the most challenging times of their lives. The respon-

sibility of this role, the responsibility of this ministry is not lost on me.

I know that our government understands the important role of investing in our children and our youth and ensuring that we are taking care of our most vulnerable. I am proud of the work that we are doing. I know that there is always more work to be done, and there's always better that we can do.

I will get up every single day that I'm in this role and do my level best to push our ministry staff — I think they can probably attest that I endeavour to do that — to work with community members, with service providers, with families, to honour voices. There are people that are counting on me. I understand that, and that responsibility is incredibly held near and dear to my heart. My goal as minister is that in the time that I have here, I do everything that I can to fight for better services, better quality of services and that we move forward in good ways.

With that, I end the debate.

The Chair: Seeing no further questions, I will now call the vote.

Vote 18: ministry operations, $2,442,836,000 — approved.

The Chair: Thank you, Members.

We'll now take a five-minute recess to prepare for the next ministry. We'll reconvene at 4:35.

The committee recessed from 4:30 p.m. to 4:36 p.m.

[Jessie Sunner in the chair.]

ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Chair: I call Committee of Supply, Section A, back to order. We are meeting today to consider the budget estimates of the Ministry of Attorney General.

On Vote 14: ministry operations, $750,254,000.

The Chair: Minister, do you have any opening remarks?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Yes, thank you. I'm really looking forward to this estimates debate. Before I start, I just want to acknowledge the whole team in the room. I think what we'll see in this budget, and it will come out through the discussion, the amazing work that a team of people does to deliver on our justice system, access to justice, Indigenous justice across the province and anti-racism. Some of them are here today.

I want to acknowledge Barbara Carmichael, our Deputy Attorney General; Alex Chandler, assistant deputy minister and EFO; Paul Craven, assistant deputy minister, justice services branch; Haiqa Cheema, assistant deputy minister, multiculturalism and anti-racism; Colleen Spier, assistant deputy minister, Indigenous justice secretariat; Jenny Manton, assistant deputy minister, court services branch.

This will be Jenny's final estimates. I'm sure she's looking forward to…. No, I'm sure she loves the estimates process.

I'm sorry to embarrass you.

She'll be leaving in a month. I'm really grateful for her time and service.

Also, Trevor Shaw, assistant deputy minister, B.C. prosecution service; Chris Mah, assistant deputy minister and chief information officer; Dan Chiddell, executive director, court services branch; and Eva Ross, legal services branch.

Thank you so much for being here. I know there are probably people listening out there that are also there to support us, and I'm appreciative. Thank you.

Steve Kooner: I'd also like to thank the Ministry of Attorney General staff. I know it's a lot of hard work.

Also, I'd like to thank the Attorney General for being here to answer questions on the estimates.

As the official opposition critic for Attorney General, I rise today with serious concerns about the state of public safety and the administration of justice in British Columbia. The hard-working people of this province continue to suffer the consequences of a justice system that is failing to hold repeat violent offenders accountable.

[4:40 p.m.]

Despite this government's announcements and measures to address calls for bail reform, the reality on our streets has not changed. Violent repeat offenders are being released with disturbing regularity, and regular British Columbians are paying the price.

Firstly, there is no measurable evidence that this provincial government's approach is making our communities safer, streets safer. The photo ops and half-measures taken by this government have failed to change the facts affecting everyday British Columbians. Violent crime remains a daily threat, and bail in B.C. remains a revolving door.

Equally alarming, after accounting for inflation and population growth in British Columbia and looking at the total budget of the Attorney General's office for the forecasted budget coming up, there isn't a real increase in the ministry's overall budget and more specific budget related to the administration of justice in this province.

The Attorney General's total budget is $900 million forecasted. If you combine factors such as inflation and the population growth, factor those numbers in, those amount to about 5 percent. If you look at the total budget from the last budget that was a total budget, it was about $877 million. You factor the 5 percent, and that takes you above the $900 million. It takes you to about $920 million,

I believe, after you factor those two factors in, in terms of inflation and population growth.

With population growth, you do require more services because you need to serve more people. That, on this side of the House, is really problematic when the budget, in our respectful opinion, falls short.

The current direction that the Attorney General's office is moving in, in terms of budgeting and properly resourcing items that need to be resourced so we can have proper public safety within this province is being underserved.

At the very core of our justice system is the operation of the courts — recruitment and retention of prosecutors and sheriffs. We've seen news stories over the last year about sheriffs. We've seen discussions from stakeholders talking about shortage of front-line Crown prosecutors. We've seen issues with sheriffs. There was a strong issue over this last summer about the shortage in terms of sheriffs. There's an ongoing issue with that. There still seems to be somewhat of a shortage, and there's a deep problem with retention of sheriffs in this province.

Courtroom closures have occurred. Trials have been delayed or dropped. These are well-known facts, and these are facts that we have to deal with. Yet, this current government continues to boast about justice reform while ignoring the crumbling infrastructure and refusing to support the people working to keep the failing system afloat.

I will be using my particular time today to end these estimate proceedings to ask the Attorney General and the Deputy Premier to explain these contradictions about budget measures in terms of the total budget and how they're allocated within different parts of the budget and how they will actually address or not address certain items that are needed to kind of reinforce our justice system here within the province.

It's of utmost concern. There are a lot of people in this province that are worried about public safety, and we are seeing the media reports on an ongoing basis. It's not just once a week. It's not just once a month. It's like on a daily basis that we're hearing this. People are concerned.

The focus is going to be, from my part, on public safety issues and general administration of justice issues as well and to deal with budgetary matters in that regard.

Trevor Halford: I want to thank my colleague the member for Richmond-Queensborough for allotting me a little bit of time here.

[4:45 p.m.]

My questions will be quite specific regarding…. We canvassed today in question period, specifically, Michael Bryant. When was the last time the Attorney General met with Michael Bryant? Was it in his role since he's been under contract with the province of B.C. since February of 2025?

Hon. Niki Sharma: This question is not related to anything in my budget or anything in this budget estimates of when and how and who I have meetings with. So if I could have some guidance from the Chair about that.

The Chair: Members, in the estimates process, members are generally expected to canvass ministry operations, services, programs and spending plans for the 2025-2026 fiscal year.

Trevor Halford: Maybe I'll phrase this in a bit of a different way. We know Michael Bryant was appointed as B.C. Legal Aid CEO in September of 2022, and we know that there was a sudden departure of April 9, 2024. We've also got media reports here which I'll reference in further questioning.

I would assume, while the minister held the position of Attorney General…. I know the question I asked was related to his work that he is now under contract with, that I believe has begun in February of this year.

My question to the minister: when was the minister informed about Mr. Bryant's departure of April 9, 2024?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I still fail to see the relevance of this. The hiring or the HR decisions of the head of Legal Aid B.C. is the responsibility of the board of that organization and doesn't relate to this estimates and this budget process.

Trevor Halford: With respect, to the Attorney, the majority of funding from B.C. Legal Aid comes from the ministry. I believe that to be correct. I would also assume that the board regularly updates the Attorney General on something as critical as a departure of a CEO.

This gentleman was hired September of 2022. We had a very short press release that was issued on April 9, 2024. My question to the minister is, and it does relate because there's a funding element to this: when was the minister notified of his departure?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Yes, I meet with the board of Legal Aid B.C. That's part of the role of Attorney General. This question doesn't have relevance to this current estimates, as I believe that that note that the member says of the departure was in the last fiscal year, '24, not this current estimates that's before us.

[4:50 p.m.]

Trevor Halford: I believe this is absolutely relevant. Was the minister ever informed by the board of any concerns regarding Mr. Bryant's behaviour that may or may not have led to his departure from B.C. Legal Aid, yes or no?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Again, not relevant to this estimates and budget. But I will say that the interactions

I have are with the board and have had with the board. Their hiring processes and any changes in their hiring processes is up to the board.

The Chair: Member, could you please help me understand the relevance of your questions to the 2025-2026 fiscal year?

Trevor Halford: Yeah, the relevance is pretty simple in my mind.

We have a gentleman that was CEO for two years of a government-funded agency, B.C. Legal Aid, who had a sudden departure on April 9 of 2024, okay? We'll ask questions about severance in follow-up. But that person, that individual, is now being contracted by the province for six months of work at $150,000.

Being that this is the Attorney General and being that she would be the one giving advice, I would assume legal advice, to cabinet, to the Premier, that this gentleman was — we're trying to figure out — suddenly departed…. We have some speculation on why, which we'll get to. I would assume that the Attorney General would be aware of that information.

I would assume that the Attorney General would, at some point, make the Premier or cabinet aware of that, prior to giving a contract to said individual for six months of work, which at that point there was no public release on, no press conference, no news release issued — a $150,000 contract, with no terms of reference and no mandate.

My question is very simple. We have a person that had a sudden departure from an agency that is funded by the Attorney General, okay? That person is now an employee of the government of B.C.

My question to the Attorney General is this. I'm assuming that the board would have briefed her on any concerns they had regarding said employee, who is no longer there and is now currently working for the province of B.C.

My question is very simple to the minister. Did the minister flag any concerns regarding this individual, Michael Bryant, to the Premier or cabinet prior to the execution of the contract that Mr. Bryant is currently under?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I do appreciate that the member wants to dig into a very speculative narrative that he's presenting to me today, but this is all highly unrelated to the estimates.

He's asking for general policy, which I think probably we all know at this stage. If it's related to an individual and employment or HR issues, it's not a matter for discussion in a public forum as this, and neither is confidential legal advice that our team might provide to anybody related to anything.

I'll just leave it at that.

[4:55 p.m.]

Trevor Halford: Was the minister at any time made aware of any complaints that were received about Mr. Bryant? Is the minister aware of any severance that had to be paid because of Mr. Bryant's behaviour or to Mr. Bryant?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I am not aware of any of the things the member asked.

Trevor Halford: Just a final question on this. Is the minister aware of why Mr. Bryant left B.C. Legal Aid on April 9? Is the minister aware of the circumstances of why Mr. Bryant left or departed that organization, April 9, 2024?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Not relevant to estimates and, again, an HR issue that is between the board and who they hire as CEO.

The Chair: Member, it's the Chair's view that this is not relevant and falls outside the scope of what can be canvassed in the estimates process. I invite you to pursue a new line of questioning.

Trevor Halford: Yeah, a new line of questioning.

Would it not be under the minister's purview to…? She doesn't have to give me the answer if she…. Let me rephrase that. She doesn't have to tell me the conversation, but I would assume, though, that it would be the Attorney General's job to give advice to cabinet or to the Premier about an individual who would be under contract by this government. I would assume that the Attorney General would have an obligation to flag any concerns regarding a said individual to the Premier or to cabinet prior to that individual being hired. Is that correct?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Again, not relevant to estimates. I think it's a highly speculative line of questioning, and I can't disclose personal info on HR issues of anybody in this discussion.

Steve Kooner: My line of questioning will be related to budget pressures and public safety risks, moving forward, in terms of the next several questions I have.

In regard to budget reality, can the Attorney General…? The Attorney General's operating vote is frozen at roughly $900 million for the next three straight years. As I mentioned in my initial introduction speech, given inflation and population growth, isn't that a stealth cut of about 5 percent in real per capita terms?

After factoring in, as I said earlier, inflation and population growth, if we're at $900 million for our total budget, wouldn't we be cutting the budget? A question for the Attorney General.

[5:00 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: Budget 2025 is investing $22.9 million to continue strengthening the justice system.

That includes an increase of $10.347 million for shared recovery wage mandate, $4.209 million for new staff to support the increase of the superior court judicial complement as a result of vacancies being filled, $2.637 million for the Mental Health Act rights advice service, $1.5 million for increased security for Vancouver law courts, $1.479 million for virtual bail and related costs and $1.992 million to support various initiatives of the ministry, including sheriff support, superior court operations, French divorce proceedings, the activities of the investigations and standards office and the executive support services.

I will note, to the member's comment about the $900 million over three years, the general process of Treasury Board is…. Every year, for budget, ministries have an opportunity for caseload pressure submissions, which are the area where you take into account how things might have changed that year. The member was asking about population growth, but it also could be increasing level services or something has changed. You have the potential to go back to Treasury Board to ask for those kinds of caseload pressures.

Steve Kooner: In the next few questions, I want to ask about vacancies and recruitment, because they're highly relevant in terms of the staffing that we need to have, related to the Attorney General's department.

As of today, how many full-time-equivalencies are vacant in the Crown counsel department for Crown prosecutors by region?

Hon. Niki Sharma: In 2023, there was the largest, at least in recent times, hire of Crown counsel in B.C., with 40 Crown counsel that were hired, 20 for ReVOII and 20 for filling other spots. I'm informed by the head of the B.C. prosecution service that at this stage, the year-end FTE was operating at over budget, meaning that the positions are filled. That's 112 FTEs, barring any regular turnarounds.

[5:05 p.m.]

If somebody gets appointed to the bench, which unfortunately happens to some of our best Crown counsel, then of course the prosecution needs to fill it. They're filling the positions that are needed at an appropriate time.

Steve Kooner: I believe the Attorney General mentioned 112 full-time equivalent Crown counsel. Out of that 112, how many of those are front-line Crown counsel?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Just to correct what I was talking…. That helps explain it a little better than I did before. The year-end FTE usage is 1,123, and that's compared to budgeted, which is 1,011. The way it generally works with Crown counsel is they, of course, have to respond to cases as they come. So if there are major cases or something that requires counsel to fill, then that's a contingency process that fills those. Right now, we have more FTE Crown counsels working, and they're all front line. Crown counsel and staff obviously, but the Crown counsel are all front line compared to the budget of an FTE target, which was 1,011. That's the status.

Steve Kooner: Back to that question, 112 full-time-equivalents were hired. Out of those 112, all of them were front-line Crown prosecutors?

Hon. Niki Sharma: That was my mistake that I put that number 112 out there. That's just the difference between the number of Crown counsel that are currently working, which was the 1,123, and the 1,011 that are in the budget. That was what I was talking about, when sometimes you go higher because of major cases. You may need more Crown counsel.

Steve Kooner: Just to confirm, the total number of Crown counsel right now is 1,023 Crown counsel.

Hon. Niki Sharma: That 1,000 number that I was quoting includes about 576, so 52 percent, which are Crown counsel, and 275, which is 48 percent…. Oh sorry, that's the breakdown of them. That's about the estimate of what Crown counsel ratios are, about 52 percent. Then, of course, there's all the support staff and policy and all those other people that might be part of the team.

Steve Kooner: I understand that there is 576 Crown counsel. Out of the 576 Crown counsel, what's the number for the front-line Crown prosecutors?

Hon. Niki Sharma: All of them are front line.

[5:10 p.m.]

Steve Kooner: Initially, a number was provided, 1,023. That's the total number, with the staff. With the Crown prosecutors, 576 is provided as the number of Crown prosecutors.

Just to go back, just so that I'm clear in terms of the recent hires…. Since 2023, there were Crown prosecutors hired. I believe there's a number. Could the Attorney General just confirm that number? How many of these were recent hires?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I think we're going to need more guidance on what you mean by recent.

Steve Kooner: Earlier, there was a year referenced. I believe the year was 2023. What was mentioned was that there were, I believe, 20 new Crown prosecutors hired for

ReVOII and another 20 that were hired. There were a lot of numbers that were supplied, but I believe there were some numbers supplied. That was mentioned.

In 2023, there were Crown prosecutors hired. I believe there were 40 hired at that time. Are those the ones that are recent, or were there more hired after 2023?

Hon. Niki Sharma: It's a very hard question to answer because they're always hiring at the B.C. prosecution service. They're always hiring because…. I mentioned the needs of the system, but also, if somebody gets called up to the bench, they need to hire. If somebody's on leave…. It's just a constant process that they manage — the numbers and how many hirings they need.

Steve Kooner: If there are currently 576 Crown prosecutors and we're told that they're all front-line, what's the retention rate? How much of a turnover is there, year to year?

[5:15 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: The prosecution service is not reporting a retention issue. There's no direct retention rate number because it's not an issue in the service, but they do have retirements that come up. I'm told that from January 2024, there were 15 Crown counsel retirements, for example, that needed to be filled. From January 1 to March 31, there have been zero. That gives you an idea of retirement loss, but generally, no retention.

The stats thta I think show the growth of the prosecution service over time are that in January 2021, there were about 1,010 FTEs, and that takes us up to the number I reported earlier about the number of FTEs. Well, this one for January 2024 — I'll just give you this one — was 1,123, so there has been a general growth over time of the service.

Steve Kooner: The Attorney General has mentioned that there have been some retirements. There have also been appointments to the bench, so some Crown counsel have left as a result of that. What other reasons have there been that Crown counsel have left?

Hon. Niki Sharma: It's a very hard question to answer for such a large number of people. There could be any number of reasons why people leave. They're moving to another province. They've decided to change their practice of law. For personal reasons, they're leaving. We wouldn't be able to track that or provide an answer.

Steve Kooner: What we do know is that 15 Crown counsel retired as of January 2024. There was, I believe, a number that was known, how many were actually appointed to the bench. Other than retiring and other than appointments to the bench, what is the other number of the remaining ones who did not leave because of retirement or as a result of being appointed to the bench?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I'm told by the prosecution service that we just don't have that level of detail with numbers. But what I will say is that what's clear is that they don't have a retention issue in the B.C. prosecution service. Every time they make a call out for hiring, they get many applications.

At this point…. I mentioned the total FTE number as being resourced at a level higher than what's in the budget in terms of FTEs because of the importance that our government puts on making sure that that Crown prosecution service has the resources it needs to meet the demands of the system.

So there is no retention issue that's being reported from them, and we have the right tools in place to make sure that that system is well supported.

Steve Kooner: I thank the Attorney General for that response. I'd just like to have a follow-up question to that answer. If there is no retention…? Once a Crown gets hired, what's the average time that that Crown stays?

[5:20 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: I'm told that the major source of retention is retirement. I think that's very telling of the service in general, and I talked about some of the stats there. To give you an idea of how senior and how long people are there, as of March 31, 2025, 64 percent of all active Crown counsel were at a level of CC3, so that means 12th year of call.

Steve Kooner: In the hierarchy of Crown counsel…. I was just told all Crown counsel are front-line Crown counsel, but isn't there a hierarchy? There are some senior counsels that don't go to court 100 for first appearances. There must be some sort of hierarchy where there's the front line that are in bail court all the time versus the more seasoned ones that are just working up bigger cases. Is there a hierarchy amongst those so-called front-line Crown prosecutors?

Hon. Niki Sharma: There are dedicated Crown that would do bail hearings, but generally speaking, every Crown is ready to do the whole range of things, whether it's a trial or an appearance or whatever matter might come up in a criminal proceeding.

[5:25 p.m.]

Steve Kooner: I understand that the Crown counsel are ready to do all tasks related to it, but in practice…. Theoretically that might be the case, but practically speaking, do all Crown counsel go and handle bails on a regular basis? Do they go to court 100 on a regular basis?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The answer is really…. Generally speaking, Crown are all front line. We talked about that earlier. They're ready to do anything necessary in the matter that they have conduct over. In some smaller Crown counsel offices, that means they do everything. There's a team, especially in smaller communities where they are in conduct on whatever matter, and they are doing all the work.

If they are in a bigger office, then there may be specialization that happens where some Crown are doing some other ones. And, of course, there are very experienced senior Crown counsel that will take on really complex cases.

Steve Kooner: What's the average caseload per Crown prosecutor? Does that vary?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The prosecution service does not keep such a stat, because it's actually very unhelpful to understand how to inform their work.

Just to explain why an average wouldn't make sense, you could have one Crown counsel that is just doing one murder case. That murder case is complicated. It's going to take a long time to get to the end of that process. They are actually just…. The number would be one for them. But it doesn't actually mean that they're not doing just as much work as somebody who has files in a particular area that could have 300 files, but they move through the system quicker.

The kind of average that the member's asking for is not a helpful number that the B.C. prosecution tracks, but there is a process in each office to understand assignment of cases. Somebody at that exact level can think about what number of these types of cases this person can take on, what number of that type of case this person can take on so you have the appropriate level of assignment.

Steve Kooner: For a bail court in particular, could the Attorney General provide a number for a bail court? The Crown prosecutors that handle bail court specifically — is there a file load number that they have to deal with?

[5:30 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: There are about 1,500 to 2,000 bail hearings that happen a month, and that, of course, varies. But the real thing that I think the member knows, probably, as a lawyer is that bail has to be dealt with immediately. So it is a matter of those Crown counsel in whatever region knowing that they have to respond to a bail hearing quickly.

I'm told that the way that is managed is that if there is a specialization, like a comprehensive bail program, and there's a targeted group that is working through bail, then if they need extra help — like "there's too many on this list; I need more people" — they talk to their team. Then more Crown counsel might be deployed to make sure that that particular list in that day or that week can get properly dealt with.

The other thing that I would say is that virtual bail, which was an innovation that we introduced, has really helped with court resources and court efficiency. Virtual bail is a process that opens up courtrooms in a way that wasn't before.

What would happen previously in a lot of regions is bail, since it needs to be held immediately, as soon as possible, would disrupt the rest of the trials that might have been on the docket for that day. So the introduction that we've had across the province of virtual bail has been a really strong innovation to make sure that bail can happen quickly in the least disruptive way and the least resource-intensive way because it can happen virtually.

This is especially key in more remote parts of the province. So it really helps the Crown counsel team assess how they can tackle their resource allotment for whatever bail hearings are happening.

Steve Kooner: The Attorney General referenced that, as a lawyer…. Yes, I've practised criminal defence law. I've dealt with a lot of Crown prosecutors in my career. But my understanding was that there was a file load. There was a file load. There are a certain number of files some Crown would have.

Maybe things have changed since I've practised criminal defence law. So has there been a recent change? There is no file quota anymore per Crown counsel? I know that in different firms and stuff, everybody has a file quota, and everybody has a certain set of files that they deal with on a regular basis.

I just want to make sure that my understanding is correct. There is no longer a file quota within the Crown counsel department.

Hon. Niki Sharma: Just to confirm with the member that the B.C. prosecution service doesn't run a quota system on bail.

Steve Kooner: All right. I'd like to continue the similar line of questioning throughout.

Now, continuing, going from Crown counsel to the sheriffs within the court system. I was just asking about how much staff there is in the Crown counsel department in terms of front-line Crown prosecutors and Crown prosecutors.

[5:35 p.m.]

I would now like to know: how many sheriffs are there in B.C., in our court system?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I really, really love the opportunity to talk about sheriffs, because they do such an important role in all of our court system. Having been travelling around various courts around the province, I've seen how

they show up for people and keep the system running. I'm always impressed by the work that our sheriffs do.

I'm also impressed by the work that court services branch has done over the last probably about two years to focus on recruitment and retention of sheriffs. That work that's been a concerted effort by many people, one of whom is retired — Paul Corrado, who put that effort into lifting up the sheriff's service and recruiting — has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of sheriffs we have in our system.

Just to say that currently the number is 569 sheriffs in our court system. To help show the amount of effort and the amount of very smart tactics that have been used to recruit all across this province, we went…. Now we receive an average of 600…. I think it was like 600 applicants the last time we had a recruitment session for sheriffs, and we're running way more training programs to get our sheriffs up into the courtroom.

So 24 recruits joined the staff complement in March 2025. A class of 33 recruits — and I just want to give a shout-out to the Justice Institute of B.C., which helped us increase class sizes so we can get more sheriffs trained — is expected to graduate in June 2025, and another 36 recruits will start July 2025. A class of 24 recruits will start November 2025. And every posting, we're getting a lot of applicants.

Just to give you a marker of the success that the program has had in recruiting much-needed sheriffs in the system, a year ago, in June 2024, there were 492 sheriffs. We've gone, in that amount of time, to 569 sheriffs, with many more recruits coming in in the next few months.

Steve Kooner: I believe the Attorney General mentioned that as of June 2024 there were 492 sheriffs that were in position, and now there are 569, so there's been an uptick of approximately around 80 sheriffs since approximately a year ago. Out of the 80 increase, how many have actually left since June of 2024?

[5:40 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: Just to point out that that number of 569 is a net number. It's including any that might have gone on to other things.

Steve Kooner: Is the Attorney General able to provide me a number of how many sheriffs actually left since June of 2024?

Hon. Niki Sharma: One of the things that we were noticing in the sheriff services is that because they're so highly trained and they're so effective at their job, they are a prime recruitment target for any other growing police forces, for example, that are out there. So retention has been….

We've been focused on recruitment and retention. Retention has been an issue, and it's something that we are putting targeted ideas and resources towards. I'm happy to, at some point, maybe show the member, in his role as critic, the report that we did on the changes that we're making on the recruitment and retention side.

Our retention rate since the same time period that the member is talking about…. Is it 2024? I'll double-check that. So 58 sheriffs had left during that time. That's a loss rate of 10 percent, around there.

But that 569, again, is net. I think I might have misspoken. That is the current workforce, already subtracting the people that have left.

Steve Kooner: Out of the 58 that left since June of 2024, how many of those were only on the job for a period of under one year?

[5:45 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: Not long ago we put into place a recruitment and retention bonus for sheriffs, and the way that works is that every six months, there's a $5,000 payment to the sheriff. It keeps sheriffs, hopefully, excited and staying in their job for longer.

There also are other measures that we've put that are retention measures, one of that being that if a sheriff leaves their post in less than two years, then they would, in a prorated fashion, pay back some of their training costs. So there are measures in place to keep sheriffs in their jobs, and we want them to stay because they're so valuable to us.

There is no stat on one-year retention that I could provide the member, but I can say that, in 2024, the average tenure rate was 5.36 years, and in 2025, the average tenure rate for sheriff, how long they've stayed, was 5.64 years. Just to say the number that I provided earlier was about how many left, and it wasn't since June 2024. It was for the calendar year of 2024. There were 58 sheriffs that left.

Steve Kooner: It would be helpful if we had a bit of a benchmark, in terms of previous years and now, of how many are actually leaving. Actually, I guess, a better benchmark would be…. We have a figure here: average sheriff stays on for approximately five years. I'd like to know what was the benchmark, say, five years ago, and what was the benchmark, say, ten years ago. I want to see what trend has been happening. Has it been five years throughout this whole period?

Hon. Niki Sharma: In terms of how far I can go back with the stat that I provided and what's available is that in 2020, the average tenure was 5.39 years, so you can see it's been relatively the same. In terms of attrition rate, I think the data — and it's not a surprise; I've talked about it before — is that we have a retention issue that we're strongly working on with sheriffs, because they're so highly recruitable.

I remember that when I first became Attorney General, my team was telling me stories of how police would actually start their recruitment right after sheriffs graduated. They would show up to try to recruit them because they're so highly trained and they're so skilled in what they need that they make a good workforce for other peace officers. So this has been a challenge for the court system.

In 2017-2018, the attrition rate was 9.8 percent, so roughly around the same as the stat that I gave earlier. When we designed the strategy, it started with a report that we did, an in-depth review of what we could do to support the service, initiated by court services branch and Jenny, who is just here. And that gave us a really good idea of what we needed to action to make sure that we had recruitment and retention of the sheriff services.

[5:50 p.m.]

We are actively changing a lot of the things that came out of that. Just last…. Maybe a couple of legislative sessions ago, I introduced changes to their ability to use blue lights if they wanted to pull over, which is something they asked for. We've put a lot of other retention ideas that we're working through about scope of practice on the table, so we can work on the retention side of it. And the recruitment and retention bonus that we put in not long ago helps to show them that they're valued and we want them to stay on the job.

Steve Kooner: I think the Attorney General offered to show me a report. I think it had to do with retention. I'd like to take the Attorney General up on that offer and have a chance to look at that report.

I heard about percentages, and I heard the number of 5.3 years. Just to make it clear, 5.3 years of tenure as an average for staying on before moving on has been the case since 2017 through to 2020 through to now. That's always been the same, correct?

Hon. Niki Sharma: There are two things I was talking about. One is average tenure. And the numbers that I provided we only have since 2020. That number was tracked.

And then the attrition rate that I was talking about was, I think, since 2017.

I think that it's fair to say…. Because I think the number for 2020 for tenure rate was 5.39, which is not that much different than the one that is the more current one.

Steve Kooner: Would the Attorney General say that retention has been more of a problem with the new recruits versus more senior recruits, or is it the same across the board?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I have no information that differentiates between newer or further down recruits, just the idea that they are, as I mentioned, a very good workforce that a lot of other employers look to recruit from.

Steve Kooner: Can the Attorney General elaborate on some of the findings of the retention report? What sort of things does the Attorney General's department have to do in order to be more effective at retaining these sheriffs?

[5:55 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: I will be happy to provide the member with the full report because I won't be able to summarize it all in the time. I'll give an idea of some of the recommendations that we have actioned.

The first one was pay, increased pay. I already mentioned the recruitment and retention bonus that we put in place to increase the pay for sheriffs, and that was another one.

Another recommendation was to establish the B.C. sheriff service as its own branch within the ministry. The court services branch and my team is doing work on that.

The next recommendation was to figure out expanded duties and authorities for deputy sheriffs, so they could have more things within the scope of their career and profession for growth, more opportunities for that. We are actively….

As I'm sure it may be interesting for the public to know, a sheriff's primary responsibilities are officers of the court. That's, of course, a very important role in our justice system. The conversations we have about expanded scope or duties are with the judiciary. We can talk through how that works and shows up, so we know that their primary role of officers of the court is protected. We're having those discussions right now.

The report says implement specific leadership and supervisory training program, which is underway right now to do that.

Another one was to work on better equipment and communication. We're working on it.

There were other ones that we have actioned, which is about asking for a public safety designation from the federal government. That would help them with their pensionable benefits.

We're going to renew that call for the newly appointed Finance Minister, who I'll be communicating with very quickly, about that advocacy. We've been pushing for them to make that change federally.

The Chair: Members, just a reminder to please have your electronic devices on silent.

Steve Kooner: What was the date of that report?

Hon. Niki Sharma: July 2023.

Steve Kooner: There are a few interesting points that were mentioned about that report. One had to do with, I think, a merit-based ranking system.

The police have different ranks within the police, such as….

[Interruption.]

In the police you see different ranks. You see the constable, sergeant, inspector. You just mentioned that in the retention report there's a call for having that in place. Why has the province not acted on that? It's been a couple of years now since the report was done. It seems like an element of titles. Why has it taken so long to have that?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The report didn't comment on recommendations to do with ranking, and the sheriffs already have a system of ranking. We can provide the list of that ranking if the member wants.

Steve Kooner: Maybe just as a brief summary, because I wasn't aware about the ranking system, in terms of what positions are available within the sheriffs.

[6:00 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: It goes sheriff, deputy sheriff, sergeant, staff sergeant, inspector, superintendent, deputy chief and chief.

There are also specialized sheriffs that might be like specialized training of sheriffs or PIO, which is a provincial intelligence officer. That is a sheriff that might do a risk assessment for an area to understand where sheriffs should be deployed.

The Chair: Members, we will take a short five-minute recess. Please return for 6:06. Thank you.

The committee recessed from 6:01 p.m. to 6:10 p.m.

[Jessie Sunner in the chair.]

The Chair: Good evening, Members. Calling the Committee of Supply, Section A, back to order.

We are considering the budget estimates of the Ministry of the Attorney General.

Steve Kooner: Before the break, the Attorney General provided us some information about a ranking system within the B.C. sheriffs. In regards to that, how long has that ranking system been there?

Hon. Niki Sharma: At least 20 years.

Steve Kooner: There was another response in relation to the report that was mentioned. What was discussed was, I believe, compensation in terms of keeping sheriffs at their current positions.

In regards to police and police trying to attract the sheriffs, my understanding is that the amount of compensation that is the difference between, say, entry-level constables and sheriffs is about $40,000. Am I accurate in that, or is it more or less than that number?

[6:15 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: Yes, there is a gap between sheriffs and police, and it just really depends on the police service in terms of what that gap is. The stat that I do have right now is that the lift that we had through the recruitment and retention incentive changed the gap between sheriffs and police from $38,000, and I think that's an average, to about $28,000 on average.

Steve Kooner: If certain sheriffs are being lured over to the policing side because the difference is $38,000, is the Attorney General's department going to be making up that difference? Is that one of the things that the Attorney General's department is going to do because one of the big reasons is financial in nature of people getting into another job?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Our analysis and concerted efforts related to sheriffs have been a really comprehensive analysis of why people come to the Sheriff Service and why they stay. There are many reasons for what the Sheriff Service offers for people that are different than the police, what the opportunities are in regions across the province related to that.

I think that it's important to say that salary is a component of that, and we heard that loud and clear in the core review we had, which is why we put in the recruitment and retention bonus, which helps that gap. We're at about a $28,000 gap now.

As members of the BCGEU, I know that there's bargaining happening right now. Some of that happens through those negotiations that happen at that table, but we understand that there's more work to do to make sure there's a continuing network of a comprehensive set of packages that keep people coming and then keep people staying.

I'll just note that since putting in the recruitment and retention bonus, and the analysis that went into that, the number of applicants that we received…. I think when I first started as AG, we had a training program and recruitment. For maybe 20-something positions, we only had very few applicants for those roles.

We were really trying to turn the dial as quickly as we could, because we know the court services and everything needs sheriffs. Now, when we have our applications for the training programs for the recruitment, we have up to 600 applicants, which I was really pleasantly surprised by.

It's showing that the things we're hitting in communities about recruitment are showing people are interested in joining the service. We can do about 36 with increased — around 33. Usually our courses are in the 20s. We were

able to drive up the number of people that go into training in response to the number of applications we had and that growing number.

Steve Kooner: Just a follow-up question to the difference of $38,000. What is the actual entry salary for these sheriffs?

[6:20 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: The starting, the step 1 for a sheriff is $69,760, and that doesn't include the recruitment and retention bonus that we added on top of that. So that's another $10,000 for that. It's paid out as $5,000 every six months. So that would be, essentially, close to $80,000.

Steve Kooner: With a salary like that, it'd be tough to afford a mortgage at this time with the affordability and all that, so I can see why financial concerns are on top of people's minds, to actually switch their career from sheriff to policing.

We were discussing the training earlier. I believe the training happens, for the municipal police forces and the sheriffs, at the same place, at the Justice Institute. Is there a difference in training? Say if a sheriff wanted to go and switch over to becoming a police constable, do they have to go and retrain, or does that training that they obtained count towards their policing training?

Hon. Niki Sharma: There's additional training both ways. So if…. And we've had this too, where a police comes to be a sheriff. There's specific training that's needed because it's a courtroom system. All the processes and things that you would need for security in a courtroom are different, and the procedures in it. Also the other way: when a sheriff goes to the police force, there would be additional training.

Steve Kooner: Would it be additional training, or would it be just you have to do the new training?

[6:25 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: I'm told that they have to do the police training, so it's not like they get any…. Just like any recruit to the police, they'll do the full training for police.

Steve Kooner: How much training do you have to do to become a sheriff versus how much training you have to do to become a police officer? What's the time frame?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I can tell you about sheriffs, clearly, because that's within our ministry. That's 14 weeks for training. Eleven of those weeks are at JIBC, and then three of those weeks are in the courthouse. They're still trainees. They're not sheriffs until the end of that three weeks. But it's actually at site.

I would refer the member to PSSG. I think those are better asked of that ministry, in terms of how long police go through training. My team here — it's not their expertise.

Steve Kooner: I appreciate the answer, and I understand. Yeah, policing may be best left for a different minister.

Going further on the sheriff side of things, the Attorney General mentioned earlier that since the end of calendar year 2024, there were approximately 59 sheriffs that had left. She also mentioned that as of January 2023, there was a report commissioned or rendered on retention of sheriffs.

[6:30 p.m.]

Then there were some items, and the Attorney General mentioned that the Attorney General's department has been really trying to implement the recommendations within that report for retention.

How effective has the Attorney General's department been to slow that pace of 59 sheriffs leaving within a calendar year?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Yes, my team has done an exceptional job, in a very short amount of time, to turn around sheriff numbers in this province. I'm actually not only impressed by the work but also really proud of the work that has happened over the last little while.

Our attrition rate has gone from 11.8 to decrease to around 10 percent, 9.7, from 2023 to 2024-25, with an acknowledgement that there's more work to do when it comes to retention. The fact that we went from 492 fully trained sheriffs to the 569 FTE sheriffs just shows the tremendous growth that the efforts have had to put more sheriffs in courtrooms. It's been pretty exceptional.

Steve Kooner: The difference here that we're hearing in terms of the attrition rates…. It was 11.8 percent, and now it is 9.7 percent. So there's a difference of approximately 2 percent. Then the numbers that we had was 58 sheriffs that were lost, and the total numbers were around 570. That was about 10 percent that were off.

Would that be like…? Instead of losing 58 now, we're only losing about 55. Would I be accurate in that math?

[6:35 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: The change…. It's not exactly calculated in the way that the member describes because it's a percentage based on a head count, and the head count has also grown over time. The head count would have been smaller at that 11 percent attrition rate. If we do the math, in and around '22-23, it was about 61. That, again, would have been a smaller number of total sheriffs, and we talked about those numbers before.

To give you an idea of how we're tracking this, in 2023, there were about 40 resignations of sheriffs, and

in 2024, there were 30. So we're seeing a decrease in the resignations.

Steve Kooner: What would be the full complement? What's the goal here? We're at 569 right now. Where are we headed?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The very exciting news is that after all this hard work, we think we're about 20 away from full complement. I will go through the recruits that will come up soon.

So 24 recruits joined the staff complement on March 7, 2025, and a class of 33 recruits is expected to graduate in June 2025. A class of 36 recruits will start in July 2025, and a class of 24 recruits will start in November 2025. The expedited training and the increase of applicants means that we're very close to full complement.

Steve Kooner: In the year 2024, how many courtrooms have had to be closed due to the shortage of sheriffs?

[6:40 p.m.]

[George Anderson in the chair.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: In terms of closures in 2024, we had 194 that were due to sheriff shortage. And right year to date we're tracking at about 56. Every month they're declining because of the number of sheriffs that are hitting the courtrooms, and we expect those other recruits to hit soon. We went over the timeline. Over this year, we expect to see that number decline every time we have another team of recruits hitting the courts.

Steve Kooner: In the event that the police or local police forces get more aggressive….

Interjections.

The Chair: Members, estimates are occurring right now, and the member for Richmond-Queensborough is trying to ask his questions with respect to the estimates of the Attorney General.

Continue. Thank you.

Steve Kooner: Thank you, Chair.

We've heard from the Attorney General that some local police departments have been really aggressive, to the point that the police are approaching new recruits at the time that these new sheriff recruits are coming out of training.

That leads me to the next question. If the police want to fill in certain positions, if they get more aggressive in terms of, say, offering more financial benefit packages and that kind of stuff, would that affect the attrition rates actually starting to increase again?

Hon. Niki Sharma: It might, but that's speculative because….

I want to just focus, again, on the team effort of all the things that we need to do to retain sheriffs. And that's part of the work that we talked about earlier, about responding to that report. What we're seeing is such a dramatic increase in the number of applicants. That shows to us that how we're positioning the roles of sheriff, how we're communicating it to the public, how we increased the recruitment and retention, increased the wages that they might get — that that's hitting a mark, and we just need to continue to do that. We're always going to have to aggressively respond to the marketplace.

Steve Kooner: We've seen that there has been an increase in applicants. I believe the numbers that were used were 600 applicants at one point, and the low point may have been 60. In regards to getting more applicants…. Were the standards lowered, requirements lowered, in order to get more applicants?

[6:45 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: Nothing was done to change the standard that the trainees are expected to meet to become sheriffs. But some really, really very skilled efforts were put in place to recruit. That included a marketing strategy. That marketing strategy also targeted different regions and different areas to recruit.

There's a dedicated recruitment office, and there's a team that's operating that. There are new and more accessible fitness tests that are put in place. There was a removal of financial barriers to achieve low-cost, low-travel application process, because we were seeing, from some parts of the province, the fact that they would have to travel for training was a barrier — so just really understanding what was stopping people from doing it.

We created a pooled competition model to fill sergeant and staff sergeant positions and went from a provincial recruit hiring model to a regional one, so really getting into the regions of the province to get people interested in becoming a sheriff.

Steve Kooner: Some stats were given earlier in regards to 2024 and 2025. Courtroom closures in 2024 were 194 due to the sheriff shortage, and in 2025, we had 56. In regards to the 2024 numbers, 194 courtrooms closed, how many trials were delayed as a result of that happening, and how many…? I guess that's first thing. How many trials were delayed?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Just for clarity in the question: how many trials were delayed as a result of the courtroom closures?

Steve Kooner: Correct.

Hon. Niki Sharma: There are about 30,000 courtroom days per year in the province and 194 where courtrooms were closed. There were closures because of shortages. I just want to acknowledge that those were disruptive, and they were something that we all focus our energy to prevent — to go down to zero — because of sheriff shortages. We've talked about some of the efforts there.

Every time it happened, there was a triage system that was in place, working with the teams in different aspects of the court to make sure that the impact was minimized. For example, if something was closed, you could merge those matters into another courtroom so that they continued. Just to note that as matters go forward, about 5 percent of them are trials. So those would be like multiple days or would take up a lot of courtroom resources. Likely, out of those 194 with that ratio of 5 percent, there are matters that….

[6:50 p.m.]

Although it's unacceptable that it's based on a sheriff shortage, I would openly say that. They would be able to use triage to use other courtrooms or make sure that other matters continue. We don't have a stat that says how many delays resulted out of a courtroom closure but just an assurance that the team that was in place to work with judiciary, to work with the onsite team and the court services branch…. It was to triage everything to make sure that the impacts were minimal.

Steve Kooner: How many stays of proceedings happened pursuant to Jordan due to delay from courtroom closures as a result of sheriff shortage?

Hon. Niki Sharma: That's zero related to sheriff shortages.

Steve Kooner: At this point, I want to move on to…. Same line of questioning, but now on to court services and clerical staff. The next question is: how many staff positions do we have within court services clerical staff? What's the number?

Hon. Niki Sharma: There are 871 FTEs that are under court administration.

Steve Kooner: There are 871 currently. What should the staff number be to have a full complement?

[6:55 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: In terms of the number, we have 871 FTEs that are budgeted for, and those are all filled positions currently.

Steve Kooner: All right. A few more questions in regards to Crown counsel.

In this day and age, we're seeing a lot more data used, such as…. We have body cameras. We're hearing a lot about policing using body cameras in grocery stores, in different venues, during regular patrols. All that produces extra data. So all of that has to be reviewed.

Then we're seeing complicated cases. There is more surveillance. All that takes time. There's going to have to be some sort of Crown counsel to review all that stuff. And if you need Crown to review that, well, that's going to take away from their duties currently.

So if there is currently a 100 percent complement of 576 Crown counsel right now, with this extra onus of having to deal with the new evidence involving data, body cameras, other data…. Files are larger; we're talking about terabytes now. We're at 576. How many more Crown do we need to kind of fill in the void to deal with that?

Hon. Niki Sharma: That's a really good question because I think it appreciates all that downward impact of the fact that we'll have body-worn cameras and all that evidence. It is something that the B.C. prosecution service is currently assessing as an impact about what that might look like in terms of time.

But there are some interesting things to think about how this this plays out. One is technology fixes on that. How you understand what you do with that large amount of data and the technology that could come to help you intervene on that is one. So it's not necessarily an FTE response.

[7:00 p.m.]

Another one is forming agreements with the police — when stuff is going through disclosure or whatever, what the amount is that you need and what is being screened out before it comes. I think the member said Crown counsel. It may not be Crown that's required for that. You could think of other roles within the prosecution service that might take on the job of assisting with the volume of evidence that are not directly Crown counsel.

Steve Kooner: But wouldn't Crown have to review all the evidence, all the relevant evidence, that could involve the case?

Hon. Niki Sharma: It's correct that Crown has the ultimate responsibility, but I think the idea is to be assisted by paralegals or other roles to make sure that that can be done in the most efficient way.

Steve Kooner: Just to clarify, right now it's not known if more Crown need to be hired to deal with more data, but more Crown could be needed to deal with that, and the Attorney General's department is still reviewing what needs to be done.

Hon. Niki Sharma: Yes, that's correct.

Steve Kooner: We've heard a little bit about the ReVOII program, repeat violent offending intervention initiative. That has a certain number of Crown assigned to it. My understanding was that when it was brought in, there was a time period that was on that program. There was funding in place, and the funding was for approximately two years, I believe.

That contingent funding should be running out, maybe, next spring. Is that the case? Is that running off of a different, temporary budget versus what we have right now, the budget that we're dealing with right now?

[7:05 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: Budget 2025 provides $67 million over three years to support ongoing and new initiatives — this is for community safety — including ReVOII. So ReVOII is fully funded for three years. The program has shown a lot of success in results. The team that does the work has been talking about a lot of positive stories about how it has shown up, so this is a government initiative that we plan on supporting.

Steve Kooner: In regards to the ReVOII program and the length, three years was mentioned. What date does it end at?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Every year the budget is over a three-year period. This is normal budgeting that we would say over…. What we're debating right now, the budget before us, is $67 million for community safety initiatives, including ReVOII, over a three-year period. That's the scope of all budgets.

Steve Kooner: Can the Attorney General confirm that the ReVOII program is a permanent program?

Hon. Niki Sharma: For our government, it is a permanent program. I can't speak for governments in the future, but it's a very important part of our public safety response.

Steve Kooner: How many Crown prosecutors are involved in the ReVOII program?

Hon. Niki Sharma: That's 20 Crown and 20 support staff.

Steve Kooner: Is 20 a full complement?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Yes.

Steve Kooner: All right.

Moving along a little bit further, when you're dealing with the court process, there's a varied degree of sanctions that offenders can receive. One of the issues that we're seeing in the community is drug-related — committing offences while under the influence of substances.

So in regards to that, what incremental dollars are in this particular budget that bolster court ordered treatment, monitoring and enforcement for drug-addicted violent offenders?

Hon. Niki Sharma: It wouldn't be in this budget. You would have to ask the Minister of Health or the Solicitor General about those budget items.

Steve Kooner: We were talking about terabytes of data. In 2024, how many files did the Attorney General's department come across in terms of the prosecution service that were at least over five terabytes?

[7:10 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: The prosecution service doesn't track that data.

Steve Kooner: Another question in that line of questioning but not specific to that point that could not be answered…. From our research, digital evidence volume has exploded like 400 percent in like five years. How much of the capital vote is earmarked for a digital evidence and disclosure management system?

Hon. Niki Sharma: DEMS has been a really important project — that's our short-form for it over here — for court modernization. Over 2018 to 2026, $8.858 million has been spent on that. On November 15, 2023, a capital funding uplift of $1.6 million was put in place to develop the integration between the prosecution service and the police systems.

Steve Kooner: We've heard a lot about numbers and what this budget has earmarked for staffing of the court sheriffs and prosecutors. Did the Attorney General formally request a budget uplift for public safety staffing in the 2025 Treasury Board cycle?

[7:15 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: The budget includes, in 2025, $325 million in new funding over three years, and that provides a whole bunch of programs that are multiple-ministry-related that provide for improvements in safety and repeat violent offenders and reduction of street-level encampments. So there's a comprehensive amount in our budget that's there to address various things.

Steve Kooner: I just want to confirm. There was a formal request for uplifting the budget for staffing, correct?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The member is asking questions that are confidential based on cabinet processes.

Steve Kooner: In another line of questioning, looking at the justice system in terms of urban and rural, the violent crime severity in northern and Interior communities now exceeds the provincial average. What resources, human or financial, are moving outside the Lower Mainland to ensure equitable prosecution and court security?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Both for sheriffs and for Crown counsel, there are many ways that we ensure that there is a full complement across this province. More recently in the sheriff recruitment program, the team did an excellent job of recruiting directly in northern regions where there were shortages. I was able to attend that sheriff graduating ceremony and see and speak to a number of sheriffs that were going to be stationed up north in various regions. So that's one way of doing it.

Crown counsel also targets to make sure that there are enough FTEs for them to fill every region. One way they do that is to introduce flexibility in working hours or other ways to keep people retained in various regions across the province. Then the backup system that's in place for Crown and sheriffs is that if there are shortages, we have a team that could be deployed. So you can deploy sheriffs from other regions to fill gaps, and the same could be true for Crown counsel.

Steve Kooner: I came across some information. I think it was a courthouse in the Interior, maybe Vernon or something like that. And there was some concern that there weren't enough Crown. My understanding now from what information the Attorney General has provided: there are 576 Crown counsel in this province, and that's a full complement. So any sort of shortage issues have now been dealt with, correct?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Needs are always evolving and changing in different regions across the province. The important thing is that the prosecution service is always there to adjust if needs change, particularly in different regions of the province.

I've been to Vernon and I've spoken with some of the Crown and some of the members of the courthouse in that area. Their needs are changing, so we're in constant communication with the prosecution service that assesses the needs in each region.

Steve Kooner: Based upon the recent needs that were discussed with some Crown counsel, as the Attorney General mentioned, was there a concern that there are 576 Crown, but they may not be enough to address the caseload?

[7:20 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: Again, there's a constant evaluation of the needs. You always have to. The prosecution service team always assesses what needs change based on different staffing needs of the particular area or the way cases change in that area.

Steve Kooner: We've heard about the ReVOII program and Crown counsel, how they're involved with that program. I've also heard some success stories as a result of it and how that program is going, but are there any measurables, any data that actually shows that this is how it is, actually, in fact working? Is there data?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The ReVOII program, since its operation, has done many things that have been really important to the system and really important to outcomes. I'll just start by saying Solicitor General and PSSG are leading a more comprehensive evaluation of the program. But what we have are preliminary results of the way it's been showing up.

The first thing to note is that there are about 413 participants as of May 1, 2025. We have to remember that this is the population in B.C. that the system would determine, through how they see them show up, as the most violent or repeat offenders that are in need of this. What happens is the probation officer, the Crown counsel and the police can target themselves toward these individuals.

That targeting of resources towards them has a range of outcomes. And some of them are life-changing to the individual. You've probably heard of the incidence where an individual that was responsible for 1,000 police calls, after the ReVOII program, was reduced to none. Individuals that were in need of steady medication were put on medication.

[7:25 p.m.]

We're starting to really understand, through this tracking, who this population is and what their needs specifically are. We have a lot of data on that that helps us and that team figure out the direct response that's needed, whether it's housing or increased action towards detention.

Some of the results are showing that with ReVOII clients, there's been a 27 percent increase in returns to custody. These are the challenges of getting people in custody when they're breaching certain provisions and a 78 percent increase in breach reports. So since they're highly monitored — this population of people that are on this ReVOII program — if there are any reports of any breaches of any court-ordered conditions, the system is able to act very quickly for these individuals.

So on all accounts so far, the program is very effective for this population.

Steve Kooner: I thank the Attorney General for that response there in terms of 413 participants as of May 25.

I just have follow-up questions in regards to a particular datum. After a full year of this ReVOII program being

implemented, how many clients were denied bail because of the enhanced Crown package?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The B.C. prosecution service is working…. It was interesting when we went to the FPT federally and sat down with all of our counterparts to advocate for bail reform. What we noticed was a common problem is data and how the system records data about things like bail and detention and all those things. And there was a need federally for all of us to get better at figuring out what that data is and how we understand it in the system.

Since then, in the province, the B.C. prosecution service has been doing that. They've been figuring out a better way to track the type of data that the member is asking for. There is a computer system that's been, I think, put in place since January that helps to get some kind of consistency on the type of data. They're waiting for more months of results before it becomes even significant with that. So stay tuned for that part.

What I can say about the ReVOII program, what we've seen so far, is that the Crown counsel that are before the court on a bail hearing have better information and better evidence about that individual. It's ultimately up to the judge to decide on bail, but the Crown counsel and all members of the system report way better functioning when it comes to being before the court and the information they can put before the court in the decision that's being made.

Steve Kooner: In regards to the way better functioning, is there a percentage that the Crown has gotten better at keeping these violent offenders detained?

Hon. Niki Sharma: As mentioned previously, I talked about the B.C. prosecution's effort on data. We expect that there would be something that they would be ready to report out in the future.

[7:30 p.m.]

Steve Kooner: All right, so that's in regards to bail. But what about in regards to how many clients have breached release conditions? After this ReVOII program came into force, how many clients have still breached release conditions?

Hon. Niki Sharma: That data would be better asked under PSSG, which would have more of that direct information on that side of it.

Steve Kooner: Also to add to the last question, since the ReVOII program came into place, how many clients have committed a new violent offence?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The B.C. prosecution service and our side of ReVOII wouldn't have the full picture to answer that question, so I would just say to the member that the best ministry to ask that question to is the Solicitor General.

Steve Kooner: In regards to bail reform, we saw that the federal Bill C-48 tightened bail for repeat violent offenders. How many additional Crown counsel full-time-equivalents and court sittings will actually be triggered by this coming into force? Do we need more Crown, or are we at full complement?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Actually, the exact opposite. The changes of the reverse onus provision mean that it reduces the legal burden on the Crown in terms of whether or not that person should be released.

Steve Kooner: Back to the sheriffs. We talked about how many sheriffs we have, but we did not talk about overtime. How many of these sheriffs are actually doing overtime right now?

Hon. Niki Sharma: In the fiscal year '24-25, there were about 46.28 FTE equivalents for overtime.

Steve Kooner: Can the Attorney General shed more light on that? What does that mean, 46.28? Is that hours? What does that mean?

[7:35 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: This is between the'24-25 year, and we already talked, I think, quite a bit about the triage policy and the efforts to minimize the impacts of sheriff shortage on the system. At that time, what that means is that we used sheriffs on overtime to keep things going and help with those shortages. We expect this number to be much better now that we're almost at full complement.

Steve Kooner: What was the number back in '23-24?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The year before was 35.

Steve Kooner: Earlier we were speaking about financial compensation and many other items that were based in the retention report that was released back in January of 2023, I believe. In regards to retention of sheriffs…. And now we've heard there's been some overtime as well. We've also heard that in addition to financial compensation, there are other things you can do for sheriffs to actually be able to retain them.

How many peer-support counsellors and critical incident debrief sessions were provided last year to give more support services to sheriffs?

Hon. Niki Sharma: The ministry doesn't track the

number or the usage of the supports that are available to sheriffs because of confidentiality reasons, but they are available. There's a critical incident stress management team that operates on an on-call basis to anybody who needs it, and of course anything that's used there is confidential, and there are sheriffs that provide peer-to-peer supports through that. To the whole ministry and, I think, the public service, there are also mental health supports that are available, and they're also confidential, if anybody wants to access them.

[7:40 p.m.]

Steve Kooner: We've heard about vacancies and filling vacancies. We've heard about overtime hours and how that is all tracked. We've heard about past courtroom closures. Would the Attorney General be willing to commit to publishing quarterly dashboards on vacancies, overtime hours and courtroom closures so the public can judge the progress of the administration of justice in this province?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Like anything in the court system, we have to be very, very careful of what's public. For security reasons, tracking of sheriffs and tracking of that is, potentially, a security issue. We have many ways that we show publicly our investments — and one of those is this estimates where you're asking me questions about how we're doing — that help to not only maintain the confidence that the justice system needs but provide a level of transparency.

Steve Kooner: Earlier we were speaking about shortage of sheriffs. We talked about courtroom closures. When there was a shortage of sheriffs and those positions needed to be filled up, did additional security measures come in place that were temporary in nature, such as getting security or getting police involved to help with the justice system here?

Hon. Niki Sharma: We never used police or any kind of private security for that.

Steve Kooner: I understand there was a radio upgrade within the courts, with the sheriffs. With that same money that was provided for that upgrade, how many additional sheriffs could have been hired — with that same capital investment?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I want to remind the member that when we did that review of what the sheriffs were asking us to do to improve their retention, one of them was equipment, and radio was one of them. It's a safety thing, and it's a security thing, so it was part of our response to sheriffs.

I'm not sure of the angle of the question that's being asked about trading safety for sheriffs in the way that the member is asking, but I'll just leave it at that.

Steve Kooner: We spoke about Jordan stays earlier, stay proceedings. We were talking about data as well. We talked a little bit about how complicated some cases have gotten with the data. There are some major cases and stuff like that as well. Out of the pending mega-files, how many of those are within six months of the Jordan ceiling?

[7:45 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: Although it would be really hard to use a classification that the member noted as mega-trials and how close they are to Jordan stays, because it's just not a statistic or viewpoint that the prosecution service uses, I will say that they track very closely all of their files.

With respect to Jordan stays, we're one of the lowest in the country. There's lots to be proud of with our prosecution service. One is too many for sure, but in 2023-24, there were 14 Jordan delays out of 41,000 cases. That's comparable, if you think, to Quebec who had 88 judicial stays in 2024. In Ontario, 124 charges were stayed and 177 in 2023; the previous set was 2022. Our team does as much as they can to make sure that the Jordan stays are minimized in the province.

Steve Kooner: Was that 14 stays per year in 2023 and 2024, or is that a total for both years?

Hon. Niki Sharma: That's the fiscal year '23-24.

Steve Kooner: If it was 14 stays in 2023-2024 fiscal year, what were they in the previous fiscal year?

Hon. Niki Sharma: They're such small numbers that it can jump around quite a bit, because the numbers are so low.

[7:50 p.m.]

In 2019-20, it was eight. These are fiscal years. In '20-21, it was eight; in '21-22, it was six; in '22-23, it was four; and then as I said, in '23-24, it was 14.

Steve Kooner: What was the problem that caused these stays to happen? I guess we can just speak about the '23-24 year.

Hon. Niki Sharma: It's not an easy question to answer, because each case in the number that fall to a Jordan stay is so specific for the reason that it happened. Every time that happens, we all learn from that to figure out how to prevent that from happening again.

Just to show you how that learning really has been showing improvements in our numbers, I can go back to 2012. In 2012, the total was 68. That is in the calendar year,

not the fiscal year, so it's a bit different than the number that I quoted.

Then there's a tracking every year of that, including up to the years that I talked about previously. But it started, kind of, around 2019, where we got to 12 in a calendar year, 11, ten, eight, 19, 14, six. The numbers have been consistently trending down.

Steve Kooner: Back to the data question. How many dedicated digital forensic analysts does the B.C. prosecution service currently employ?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I'm told that there are about three or four people in the prosecution service with that ability.

Steve Kooner: What financial resources are currently attached to those four?

Hon. Niki Sharma: It would be those individual salaries.

Steve Kooner: Are there any key performance indicators that the public can rely on to see how our justice system is working? There are a lot of concerns over violent repeat offenders being in the system over and over again.

[7:55 p.m.]

The question is some key performance indicators that the public can actually see, and they can judge that there have been some improvements. We've talked about some data, but in addition to that data issue we talked about, some KPIs.

Hon. Niki Sharma: There are two ways that this stuff is very public, along with other ones that we report at the ministry. Maybe the most relevant is the B.C. prosecution service annual report that sets out how they're tracking their status of various things — it's a very detailed report, which has measurements throughout it — and the court services dashboard, which is publicly available, that tracks things like time to disposition for matters and things like that, for the public to understand how our system is doing.

Steve Kooner: Now I would like to speak about failure to appear for appearances. People sometimes get promises to appear in court, and sometimes the accused are out on conditions that they have to attend their trial and that. How many trials were adjourned in 2024 because the accused failed to appear at the trial?

Hon. Niki Sharma: We don't have that data.

Steve Kooner: All right. In terms of failure to appear, what we see…. There are people that are hitting the court system first time, second time, third time, but a lot of times there is that first, initial contact. There may be a notice to show up, and then, as a result of not showing up the first time, that would be a failure to appear.

Is the Attorney General's department going to instruct Crown counsel or send a directive to maybe the Assistant Deputy Attorney General to take more action on charging or putting a high focus or public interest on charging people that fail to attend their appearances?

[8:00 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: The B.C. prosecution service has a really strong bail policy related to how they assess this, and it's called BAI 1.

The government issued directives to ask the B.C. prosecution service to strengthen their bail policies, and they did that in BAI 1. There's a whole section in that that talks about breaches, like failure to appear, and how they assess that process. So I just refer the member to that.

Steve Kooner: My colleague from Kamloops Centre has one question to ask that's relevant to the estimates, so I'd just like to pass the floor to him if possible.

Peter Milobar: Yeah, just one, maybe two real quick ones. It's in relation to bail and the provisions.

My understanding is that a lot of times, to make bail, defendants don't necessarily have the financial means to make it, so they sign an undertaking of a promise to pay. Yet when a breach happens, the Crown is not actually insisting on that promise to pay to be acted upon.

What is the outstanding balance, or how does the ministry actually account for that? Is it a bad debt? Is it just totally ignored, and why? Why even bother with going through the motions of asking for a promise to pay if, essentially, Crown prosecutors are being encouraged to not seek the revoking of the bail provisions with the breach, based on the fact that they are not able to then actually pay?

[8:05 p.m.]

Hon. Niki Sharma: This is an interesting part of our justice system. We are very unlike the States when it comes to bail. There's not a cash bail system directly where you can pay a certain amount to be released. There is a principled equity reason why we don't do that. And that's because that would favour somebody's ability to pay. So if you're rich and can pay, you can not spend your time in jail. And if you're poor and you can't, then you're going to be stuck there.

Although on the books, there's a cash bail policy here, there are two ways that would show up. One is with cash bail, which rarely occurs here. The other one is with a surety or guarantee. That would be where somebody is giving a guarantee for that individual saying: "I promise to pay this amount if my relative doesn't show up and in accordance with the conditions that were set out." In those

circumstances, it's also very rare that's even used in our system.

Because of the rarity of this, there's not a line item of debt owed to the Crown, or it's not something that even shows up as something that would be in any balance sheet or books. But in the instance that the Crown would somehow go after an assurance or guarantee, there is a policy on when and how they would do that, that's under the bail estreatments. I guess it's a 1.1. Their policy sets out in the event that they would go after somebody.

Peter Milobar: I won't belabour the point, but I think the Attorney General might want to look into it. My understanding is the promise to pay is used a lot more frequently than that answer would indicate, in fact, that triggering the surety does not happen, which totally defeats the purpose — was the premise of the question.

I get the fairness piece of it, to make sure people get released on bail. The point being the province goes to great lengths to point to various other bail provisions that are a federal government issue, yet on something like this, which would only be triggered if somebody breaches their conditions, that promise to pay would have to get actioned on. The Crown is actually instructing prosecutors not to seek that remedy and, in fact, essentially dissolve that outstanding area and just move on to the next bail hearing with the same person who has previously breached.

That's the background that I asked that in. I won't take any more of my colleague's time. I do thank him for doing that, but I would be interested in a follow-up answer from the Attorney General with more detail on this, in terms of better data around it. The answer the Attorney gave is certainly not the impression that I've been given on what is happening in real time out within the Crown prosecution service.

Teresa Wat: The multiculturalism and anti-racism branch budget has seen a modest cut. To the Attorney General: can you explain if this affects the implementation of the Anti-Racism Act and Anti-Racism Data Act?

[The bells were rung.]

The Chair: A division has been called in the main chamber, and this committee shall recess.

The committee recessed from 8:10 p.m. to 8:28 p.m.

[George Anderson in the chair.]

The Chair: I call Committee of Supply, Section A, back to order.

Hon. Niki Sharma: In answer to the question before, I just to want to be clear that the Anti-Racism Data Act is actually held under Citizens' Services, so the implementation and that piece of it would show up on that budget. The reason for the change with MARB is that the resources that went into drafting the Anti-Racism Act were…. Obviously, the act is now in force in the province, so those resources are no longer needed.

Steve Kooner: I'd just like to change the line of questioning. This goes to data again. Actually, it goes to the public having more open access to the court system.

[8:30 p.m.]

We have the digital audio recording system, which is called DARS within courts. Right now there are certain limits in terms of how you can get access to this audio.

Will the Attorney General be directing court services to post DARS audio online within 48 hours for all criminal proceedings? Right now it's actually limited. There are requests that have to be made for it, and I believe there's some money that has to be paid for it. It would really open up the process if there was some open access.

Hon. Niki Sharma: With respect to the data referred to and collected, that's the purview of the judiciary, so it's theirs to decide when and how to release.

Steve Kooner: Is the Attorney General's department able to do anything in terms of legislative amendments to provincial legislation to actually regulate these recordings?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I think we're stepping a little bit out of the scope of estimates and what's in the budget. But obviously, the judiciary operating independently is a very important, constitutionally-protected system within our democracy.

Steve Kooner: The reason that I'm asking these questions in regards to the estimate debates…. We're talking about budget. We're talking about court services. We're talking about the public having access to certain court services. All this requires money. Right now getting transcripts is pretty expensive. That's why I framed that question and addressed the question to the Attorney General.

Right now there are fee mechanisms that…. If somebody wants a transcript, it's a — what do they call it — fee for service, if somebody wants to hear a hearing. Is my understanding all correct that that comes under the realm of the judiciary, that has nothing to do with the Attorney General's department?

Hon. Niki Sharma: Again, the access to court transcripts is the purview of the court system and not the Attorney General.

Steve Kooner: In regards to the line of questioning for more open access and transparency to how our court sys-

tem works and what sorts of decisions are rendered but moving away from the data aspect….

[8:35 p.m.]

Is the Attorney General's office willing to publish quarterly data showing detention versus release rates by judge and courthouse so taxpayers can see their administration of justice at work?

Hon. Niki Sharma: There would be quite a few issues in doing what the member asks. One is the independence of the judiciary, which is a pillar of our democracy, related to that. There would also be, probably, many examples about how publishing that type of data would put the administration of justice in the province at risk — and also, possibly, the constitution.

I would just say that the judges have requirements, and there are appeal procedures in terms of the decisions that are published, the appeal procedures that are available to the public and how those are already publicly provided. That's the accountability and public transparency measure that's in place in the system as it is right now.

Steve Kooner: What percentage of provincial court oral decisions were…? Well, I guess the Attorney General's perspective is that it's in the judiciary purview. So I'll change my line of questioning here.

In regard to staffing, we've asked many questions in relation to the Crown, the court staff and sheriffs. I haven't asked questions about judges yet. How many judges would we need to make sure that all courtrooms and B.C. are fully staffed?

Hon. Niki Sharma: I'm very proud of this, actually: the work that we've done with our judiciary, in cooperation with the federal government. For the first time in a very, very long time — we're trying to figure out if it was decades, or less than that — the Supreme Court of British Columbia is at full complement.

[8:40 p.m.]

That hasn't happened in a very long time. That means that trials can happen without delay for lack of a judge and that we can move forward. It's the same with the Court of Appeal. I'm really grateful for all the actors that worked in the system to make that happen. It is quite a remarkable thing.

The next thing is that the agreed-upon number for the provincial court judges in our province — that's something discussed between the chiefs — is 140, and I'm told we're at 142.

Steve Kooner: All right. So switching the line of questioning a little bit more, talking about…. There was a decriminalization of possession of controlled substances up to about 2.5 grams. That policy was reversed, I believe, last year, in terms of carving out an exception to that policy that there would be no more open public drug use that would be sanctioned.

My question in regards to that, in terms of the partial removal of the initial decriminalization policy…. We often hear about supportive housing and how there's drug use. That carve-out for that exception to take away any sort of open drug use — does that apply to supportive housing units as well?

The Chair: Member, I would just ask how that question is relevant to the estimates that we're discussing right now. Please take me on a journey so I can understand. Thank you.

Steve Kooner: Okay. We're looking at enforcement, and we're looking at administration of justice, and we're looking at making sure that we are addressing all the public safety concerns with the budget at hand. There was a policy shift, and we've talked about bail and all that kind of stuff.

Now, in the Attorney General's department, that shift happened as a result of advocating. So, obviously, if there's more enforcement, not enough enforcement, it will have a toll on our administration of justice system here, and it will require resources as well.

The Chair: Your comments earlier didn't highlight any of that, so that's part of the reason of asking how your comments were relevant to the budget estimates.

Steve Kooner: Okay. So taking that into consideration, apply that preamble that I just said, and apply it to that question I asked earlier.

Hon. Niki Sharma: These questions would be better asked to PSSG and Ministry of Housing than our team.

With that, I move that the committee rise, report resolution and completion of the estimates of the Ministry of Children and Family Development and report progress on the Ministry of Attorney General and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The Chair: This committee stands adjourned.

The committee rose at 8:44 p.m.

Proceedings in the Birch Room

The House in Committee, Section C.

The committee met at 2:20 p.m.

[George Anderson in the chair.]

Committee of the Whole

BILL 13 — MISCELLANEOUS STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2025
(continued)

The Chair: Good afternoon, Members.

I call Committee of the Whole on Bill 13, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2025. We are on clause 12.

On clause 12 *(continued)*.

Tony Luck: Yes, we're still on clause 12. We've got just a couple more quick questions on that one. Like I said, this is more just making sure that we're open and honest and see what's happening here with these bills and making sure we've got some transparency, which is really good.

Further to clause 12, are there any additional procedural steps required for acting trustees compared to elected ones?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It's the same.

Tony Luck: Is there any specific duration for which an acting local trustee can serve before a by-election is mandated?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The team informed me that it's when a by-election is practical. Usually, it's three to four months for that to happen.

Tony Luck: What limitations, if any, are placed on the authority of acting trustees compared to an elected counterpart?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Similar to my previous answer, it's the same abilities.

Clause 12 approved.

On clause 13.

Tony Luck: Now we're onto clause 13, so just a few questions on that as well.

What instigated or inspired these changes for this particular clause? Was there some consultation that drove this?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I'll just read the working group into the record again, just so that members are aware.

[2:25 p.m.]

The ministry staff consulted with the technical advisory committee group, which is staff from UBCM, Local Government Management Association, B.C. School Trustees and Ministries of Education and Agriculture. We've got a pretty good technical group that looks at these. The recommendation came from there.

In particular, local election officials indicated they were working within the constraints of the size of the ballot. Vancouver, in particular, noted that they have to work with the EOs to shorten the name on the ballot so that the font size is still legible and not too small so people can't read it. Those are the reasons why some communities just have a lot of names on the ballots.

Tony Luck: Yeah, I think we saw that in the last federal election where it was a rather long ballot, so I sympathize with the group trying to find ways of limiting the size of those ballots, because they can get rather onerous for the voters as well as the candidates or anything like that. So any way we can do that. We may bring an amendment forward later that may help solve some of that issue, but we'll talk to that.

Basically, I think for all these amendments here, then, there was this technical group that was put together that pulled all these together moving forward on all these. I'll try to avoid those questions moving forward. Every clause, I don't want to ask the same question, I think. Is that fair to say? And if we can do that, I think that may work out well. I'll have to be cognizant of that.

The third question for clause 13 here. Under what circumstances specifically would Elections B.C. opt to suspend an electoral organization's registration for failure to file a timely notice under subsection (1.1), and is suspension the appropriate initial enforcement step, or where else were severe penalties considered?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: To the member's question, the power already exists. This is a technical change to ensure that Elections B.C. is notified within 60 days so that the abbreviations that are with the local government align with what Elections B.C. has.

Tony Luck: What measures have been taken to anticipate or mitigate any confusion among voters resulting from changes to the electoral organization's names on the ballots, of course, particularly if changes occur close to election periods and that, or is there a new procedure in place?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: There's a lot of information shared. There's a guidance document that's shared. And Elections B.C. will do some work to ensure that the names are aligned with what they have so that there's not a misuse of that process.

Clause 13 approved.

On clause 14.

Tony Luck: We'll move on to clause 14 now and a couple of questions around that piece there.

What deadlines will apply for an electoral organization

that wishes to align its registration name with the shorter form chosen by a chief election officer? Will Elections B.C. impose a cut-off date before nomination date to prevent a last-minute confusion for the voters and for the group?

[2:30 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Everything has to be finalized before the ballots are issued. Once the ballots are issued, obviously, it becomes more challenging to make these changes. That's usually the cut-off point.

Tony Luck: Does the ministry foresee any risks that electoral organizations could exploit this exemption to rebrand during a campaign, perhaps adopting a more appealing acronym under the guise of conforming to the ballot? What safeguards or guidelines will Elections B.C. issue to prevent such abuse?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: An example would be, say, someone was running as B.C. Liberals, and then they decide that the Conservative name is better. That's kidding. I tease. I tease.

I think it's a good question from the member, and it's incumbent on the Chief Electoral Officer to be able to make sure they control it from the local government and the municipality.

Tony Luck: Good answer. Thank you.

Clause 13 allows Elections B.C. to suspend an organization that fails to file notice of a shortened ballot name within 60 days. How will that suspension power interact with the new flexibility in clause 14? For example, if an organization files the change late but before general voting day, could it still be suspended? Timeline stuff.

[2:35 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It's better. It's about shortening, so that it can be more efficient with time. And that's what we're trying to get at here.

The scenario that the member has raised is probably not realistic with this, given that ballots need to be printed approximately 45 days before the election. Then you've got 15 days, because it's 60 days. That would take it to after the election, so it wouldn't be…. That scenario wouldn't play out.

Clause 14 approved.

On clause 15.

Tony Luck: Clause 15. This one is in regards to amendment duty that the B.C. Chief Electoral Officer make documents publicly available. Obviously, we've got some concern around that in some respects.

How did the ministry weigh privacy concerns against the public's right to scrutinize campaign finances?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This section is really about protecting people's privacy. Many of my colleagues have shared stories with me, in particular women who run, and the level of toxicity that they have to deal with when they run and their concerns about their address being publicized, their home phone number being publicized. This is more of a safety measure so we can continue to have people run.

I can share with the member, just for the record, that this amendment will improve candidate privacy by requiring that the candidate's personal information, such as residential address of the candidate, be redacted when certain election documents are published online, in the case of disclosure statements, also when they're available for public inspection. The amendments limit the disclosure of candidate personal information but do not impose any additional disclosure requirements on candidates.

Information around the jurisdiction that the candidate lives in will still be publicly available. Essentially, the community will know if the person lives in the riding or not, just not what their house address is and what their phone number is, because we're trying to make sure there are some protections in place for people. That's what this section is about.

Tony Luck: Can the Attorney General or the minister compare these new redacted rules with the disclosure standards used in federal elections and B.C. provincial elections? Are we now more restricted, and if so, why?

[2:40 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The team is going to look up the provincial — I hope the member is okay with our not having information about the federal process; it's outside of our jurisdiction — but the team will just find that. I do recall, from our election just recently, that there was a box that you can click to say, "I want my personal address private," etc. I believe that already exists for us. The team will just get that information for you.

Again, this has been a call from many people who've put their name forward and who see the environment is not necessarily as safe, in particular for women. This request has come from local governments, saying: "Please make this change, so that our electoral process will be more inclusive and create more space for women, in particular, to run, but a safe place for everybody to put their name forward."

If the member wants to continue, I can just get that information for the member at a later point.

Tony Luck: Yeah, that'd be fine. I would just see if there's an alignment there, or if we've gone too tight, maybe, or even not tight enough, to see how they compare there. It's nice to stay in alignment with that level of government.

The amendment retains a minimum five-year public access window. Was any analysis done to determine whether five years remains appropriate, or whether it should be longer or shorter or anything like that? It seems fairly standard.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It wasn't really in the scope of the work, because the five years always existed in there. It was just more of the privacy piece that was brought to us by our partners and not: "Should we extend it beyond that?"

I can't comment on one or another, just to say that it has existed there for a long time.

Tony Luck: Journalists and academics often rely on address fields to confirm contributor identity and detect straw donor schemes. How will Elections B.C. facilitate legitimate research requests when addresses are no longer published?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I should just be clear. Elections B.C. will still have access to the information. It just won't be displayed publicly for the general public. But for the process of what Elections B.C. has to do, they still get access to this information.

Tony Luck: If we happen to have a request from a journalist or some group out there that would like to analyze some of the donors and that, would they have access to that information, then? That's kind of what this previous question was asking. I think they've done tests in the past.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Our good friends in the media would, of course, be able to go to Elections B.C. to get information, but I'm informed also that journalists would be able to access it from the electoral office with a disclaimer that they wouldn't make their information public.

Tony Luck: So there might be an NDA or something they would have to sign to be able to do that process. Perfect. That would be really good, because we do need to maintain it, yet we have to have some accountability in there as well. Thank you.

Could the ministry commit to reviewing the impact of these redactions after the 2026 general election, to assess whether transparency has been materially reduced, or whether future privacy safeguards are required?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Just to confirm to the member, in every electoral cycle, the technical advisory committee looks at what happened and where the challenges were, and recommendations come. This set of recommendations is from the last electoral cycle. It's part of the ongoing work that the committee does.

Clauses 15 and 16 approved.

On clause 17.

[2:45 p.m.]

Tony Luck: Clause 17 expands the authority of a minister to make orders the minister considers necessary to achieve the purposes of the act.

Minister, how does the bill define or limit the phrase "special circumstances," respecting an election or assent voting? Can you provide concrete examples of situations that would or would not justify ministerial intervention under the new section 99?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This is just a technical change. The special-circumstances ability was there, but we were advised that we had to make it specifically clear. An example would be that in the Fraser Valley regional district there were special circumstances, due to flooding and infrastructure damage, and there was a need for an assent vote postponement. That's one example.

Again, this is a technical change, just to make sure it is clear that this power exists, because we were advised that it would be important to clearly specify that.

Tony Luck: What threshold of evidence or documentation will the ministry require before determining an irregularity or procedural error exists under 99(1)(b)? Will Elections B.C. be the sole source of this information, or can complaints from candidates or third-party sponsors trigger an order?

[2:50 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This measure would be started by a chief election officer. It wouldn't be the minister deciding that there was an irregularity. It would be a chief election officer raising that concern, and it would go to staff. Staff would confer with the chief election officer to confirm that there is, in fact, an issue, and then it would come forward.

I will read this into the record. There are limitations and protections against ministerial overreach under the order-making authority. An order is not automatic. It is at the minister's discretion to make an order if the minister considers that the special circumstances or a procedural error or an irregularity exists in the administration of an election or assent vote and an order is necessary.

Tony Luck: I think that clarifies it a little bit, but let me just ask this question. It might just clarify a little bit more than that.

Given the broad phrase, "any order the minister considers appropriate," what internal or external oversight mechanisms will prevent the misuse or perceived politicalization of this power? Is there a requirement to consult the Chief Electoral Officer before issuing that order?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I'll start by saying that this power already exists. This is not a new power we're creating, just to be clear. What we were asked to do was just to clearly put in the term "special circumstances," which I gave you an example of, which was flooding, etc.

This is not something that I'm creating because I want to take over elections. I have no interest in that. It's something that already exists, but we just want to be clear on that information. Perhaps if the member…. Maybe the member might want to ask the question again, and then I'll try to give an answer, maybe a specific case.

But I did already read into the record that the Chief Electoral Officer starts the process and says: "We believe there's an issue." They confer with government staff, with people I work with in the ministry. They validate whether that's an issue. Then this allows us the ability to take appropriate steps if needed.

Tony Luck: I think I've kind of got this. It looks like the B.C. electoral officer is the one that would initiate most of these complaints. The minister would then be brought in. Should it confuse the B.C. election — and I use that word loosely, of course — there's a question of where it needs to go from there.

So mostly it's in the hands of the Chief Electoral Officer. That's what I'm understanding. Is that correct?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Yes, the member is correct. Before making a regulation under this authority, a proportionality and necessity test must be met. This means the minister must be satisfied that the effect of enacting this order is reasonably equivalent to the effect of the modified provision and that the order is necessary to prevent, respond to or alleviate the effects of a special circumstance.

Tony Luck: Will every order made under section 99 be published in full and without delay? If so, where and how will voters, candidates and sponsors be notified, particularly when the order is issued close to voting day?

[2:55 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The member is correct. All ministerial orders are made public, so this would be similar to that.

Tony Luck: Some of these questions are kind of tedious, but we're just confirming with the public and ourselves to make sure that we've got the right clauses in place and the changes that are made are not making huge adjustments or anything, as we go along, to the voting process for the voters out there. So bear with us as we go through this process, of course.

Clause 17 permits retroactive orders back to the first day of the election period or 80 days before general voting day as an assent vote. Why were these specific limits chosen? How does the ministry assess the legal risk of overturning actions that were lawful when originally taken?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It's a two-part question. The 80 days is already in the bill, so it's aligned with what's already defined in the bill.

This makes it explicit that when an administrative error has occurred, the minister has the powers to make an order during the period of time which the election is underway and where the error occurred and if the time for the administrative task to be completed has passed. So that's the answer to the second part.

Tony Luck: We'll have one more question on this section here.

How will the ministry ensure that retroactive orders do not unfairly penalize candidates, electoral organizations or third-party sponsors who have relied in good faith on the rules as they existed at the time? Will there be a compensation or remediation mechanism for them?

[3:00 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: These are not major. I think maybe there's a misunderstanding of the scale of this piece. It's minor. It's administrative.

It's hard for us to consider what would be administrative yet would have a major impact on an election. I shared the example of flooding, of a special circumstance in 2014 to extend the period to receive nomination documents during the local elections due to an RCMP lockdown at the village of Slocan. Those are the types of examples that we're looking at here. It's very administrative. It's not major changes to an election.

Tony Luck: I'm offering you up something. We're done for 17 through 21 if you'd like to….

Clauses 17 to 21 inclusive approved.

On clause 22.

Tony Luck: Clause 22 that we're into here removes the requirement to deliver originals to the nomination documents and a number of things like that, just some clean-up stuff as well.

Minister, with nomination packs now accepted by fax or email, what verification protocols will Elections B.C. and local chief election officers use to confirm the authenticity of signatures and statutory declarations that formerly had to be delivered in hard copy and by hand normally?

The Chair: Recognizing the Minister of Housing and Municipal Affairs.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Thank you so much, Chair. We're getting better and better at this. I like it.

The Chair: You're intimidating.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Oh, that's the first time I've ever heard this from this member, from the Chair. I appreciate that.

I'll just say to my friend across the way: it's a two-part…. Now, quite frankly, with technology, once you scan a document and you email it, it's essentially the same thing as a document, but there's still a requirement to sign a declaration, similar to if you were providing a mail-in package.

This is a request that's come, in fact, more from rural communities. It's more about managing the administrative load just to make the process more efficient. That's essentially the reason for the change. From the working group, they said this would be an element that they would support.

[3:05 p.m.]

The team also shares with me that many legal documents are now accepted electronically under the Electronic Transactions Act, which provides an electronic signature, has the same legal effect as a wet signature, and the local chief election officers have shared that the requirement for original copies is redundant and administratively burdensome to track.

Tony Luck: Having been a realtor, I totally understand the system of electronic signatures and everything, but we're talking about elections here. What's gone on in the recent history here of elections and that…. People get a little bit more upset about signatures on documents, especially when it comes to voting irregularities and things like that, other than signing your will or your house documents online. They don't seem to worry about that.

But I appreciate your answer, and I think that's where we're moving to more and more as it is. I appreciate, also, the fact that in rural…. I was in rural, in Merritt. There is a challenge up there getting in before doors close and lock and all those kinds of things. So I appreciate that.

Clause 22 also now allows council to give the public access to all or part of the nomination documents. What guidance will the ministry issue to ensure minimum provincewide transparency so that core information, endorsement statements, financial agent details, etc., are not withheld by local bylaw?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I just wanted to share an example with the member around the mail-in documents and when it was a challenge. The district of Port Hardy, the village of Zeballos and the Central Coast regional district experienced challenges receiving original nomination documents on time due to a postal service delay during the 2022 local election.

[3:10 p.m.]

Despite having electronic copies of nomination documents — all reasonable efforts were made by the nominees — the legislation provides that those persons would have their nominations withdrawn because those documents never arrived. That's what we're trying to address here.

I can share with the member that in this section, this actually enhances transparency. The information is still available on site for the public to see, so that doesn't change. The information is available online still, but the ability to black out people's personal information online is what's included here. That's essentially its privacy protection piece that the member was asking about.

Tony Luck: I recognize that. I think that's a really good piece because of some of the issues you've talked about before with women running and certain individuals running and that kind of thing. Especially in rural ridings, we get a lot of that kind of thing happening.

But the question was more specific. How do we prevent local bylaws from changing that legislation if they decide they want to do something different? That happened a couple of times.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: They can't. These are the rules. They can't change that.

Tony Luck: We asked this question a little bit before, maybe just a different little slant. Reporters and academics often need full nomination files for accountability work. Will certified media or bona fide researchers be able to view unredacted addresses on site, subject to control conditions, or is the information entirely off-limits?

I think you may have answered a nuance of that in the past.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: In person, it's still going to be available.

Tony Luck: The next question I had was more around the misuse of the nomination data as well. What legal consequences, civil or criminal, are attached to a breach of that declaration, and who investigates those alleged abuses?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It is an offence. I was chuckling with the team that I'm going to have to get my lawyer, the AG, over here to tell me if it's criminal or civil. I don't want to weigh whether it's criminal or…. I suspect it's criminal, but I can't say 100 percent.

It is an offence, as the member just phrased it.

Tony Luck: I won't hold you to that right now. If it's

criminal or civil, that's fine, as long as it's an offence and will be taken care of. Absolutely. Thank you.

Just a little bit around…. There are a lot of changes and things happening in this legislation, especially around the voting procedures and things like that. Of course, it always comes down to: are the staff going to be trained? Do we have enough information and stuff in place to be able to take care of all that?

Has the ministry estimated the additional IT security and training costs for smaller municipalities that must now manage email submissions, redaction tools and electronic public access portals? If so, will provincial grants be available if they can't afford it?

[3:15 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The changes here are all minor. They're not major changes, so it doesn't require a massive retraining of people. Most of them are administrative changes that have been requested by local governments. In fact, they may even save money for the folks operating. I certainly hope so.

When they say removing administrative barriers, I assume that's red tape, inefficiency. Again, this gives the ability of local governments to do this if they have those pieces in place. Many local governments are accepting legal documents online right now. This just gives those local governments the ability to continue to do that work. It's enabling. It's not forcing them to do so.

Tony Luck: I agree with you. I think this is good. I think a lot of these things are a good thing to have, that municipalities take hold of and grasp, and hopefully we can see some savings across the board on some of this.

Now, one of the things we do…. I could have put this question to just about any of these clauses, of course. It's one of the things we wanted to do, but we hear it all the time. In an election, I call up city hall and I try to get an answer, and I call them back, or somebody else, and get different answers.

What, if any, education did the Elections B.C. staff have to provide correct information during the writ procedure, especially with these small but a lot of changes coming in?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: If these amendments are passed, we will go through correspondence and guidance material to local governments as a follow-up.

Clause 22 approved.

On clause 23.

Tony Luck: This is amendments for the criteria for what is required for an electoral organization to endorse a candidate. This gets a little bit more into the meat of the actual nomination of candidates and working with the candidates and everything, so this is an important piece.

Minister, could you outline why the government chose to replace the stand-alone endorsement document with two brief statements inserted in the nomination package? What administrative or legal problems with the previous system is this clause meant to solve?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Again, this was a recommendation from the advisory group. It's about creating efficiencies. Essentially, it creates an efficiency because there are less forms to track, and all of it can be consolidated to one form as opposed to having multiple documents.

Tony Luck: Yes, and I agree. Anything to reduce and simplify, right? That should be a mantra in all our speeches these days when it comes to official documents, especially with rural communities that are always struggling with having the time and resources to be able to manage a lot of this stuff.

What procedures will chief electoral officers follow to verify that the authorized principal official who signs the endorsement statement is in fact duly authorized by the electoral organization governing the documents?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: We're not making any changes to that. Elections B.C. would still have to go, and they'd still have to confirm like they normally do. We're not changing their powers to be able to do that.

[3:20 p.m.]

Tony Luck: Must the endorsement and consent statement be filed at the same time as the nomination papers, or can they be added later with the nomination period? How will late or incomplete filings be handled?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: We're not changing any of that, so it's not reflected in the item that we brought. Maybe I'll just say, generally, that people can change their documents. There are processes in place, but we're not changing that in any way with what we're proposing here.

Tony Luck: This goes back to, again…. How will local election officials ensure that the ballot endorsement name matches the name, abbreviation or acronym recorded in Election B.C.'s electoral organization register, particularly in light of the short-form provisions amended elsewhere in Bill 13?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Same way as before. Information is shared.

Tony Luck: What penalties or remedies exist if a person files a forged endorsement statement or a candidate's consent later shown to have been falsified? Does the minister foresee a need for additional offensive provisions in that?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: There are no changes to that. It would be just the normal process that local governments take if someone were to do that.

Tony Luck: Yeah, a lot of these seem mundane, but we just want to make sure and confirm and get it on record that these are changing or not changing or how they would affect….

If an elector organization or candidate later wishes to withdraw the endorsement after the close of nomination, does clause 23 provide a mechanism for doing so, and will the ballot be reprinted and amended in such cases?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: We're not making any changes to that.

These questions are straying a lot away from the actual amendment changes, administrative changes. I'm happy to have latitude because I know this is a cordial conversation, but we're just moving far away from it.

Clauses 23 to 25 inclusive approved.

On clause 26.

Tony Luck: Clause 26. We're dealing with amendments to authority to appoint a person to fill a vacant office by conferring the authority only on councils.

Minister, why was immediately adjacent chosen as the residential boundary for appointed councillors? How will Chief Election Officers interpret adjacency when municipal electoral areas and treaty land boundaries do not perfectly align on the ground?

[3:25 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This was requested by local governments. Again, these are requests that come, a lot, from smaller communities and rural communities. Local governments have requested that to ensure we include neighbouring jurisdictions to increase the chances of them being able to find someone in their community that doesn't live within the municipal boundaries.

I've got an example. During the 2022 general election, the village of Valemount experienced an insufficient number of candidates, despite extending the nomination period and concerted efforts to recruit potential candidates. As a result, the village of Valemount had two vacancies on council and undertook an appointment process to fill those vacancies, as required under section 100 of the Local Government Act.

During that process, it was made clear that the people were located just outside the municipal boundaries, with close ties to the community and its services. They were interested in participating in the appointment process, but because they were just outside, they were not able to.

These are requests…. There are other examples like this. This was allowing the ability for it to be just expanded to neighbouring communities when these kinds of more extreme situations arise.

Tony Luck: That's an interesting explanation, because during the election process and nomination process before the election…. I can run in Prince George if I want. A lot of the public does not understand that. There might be a public education piece here that's missing, in letting people know that.

For a council, they say: "Yeah, okay. We're allowed now to go outside the boundaries of the municipality." Well, you can do that anyway without…. It just seems a little bit redundant. That's all I'm saying. It just seems kind of strange. I'm not criticizing or anything, but it's just interesting.

Does clause 26 require council to seek any form of public notice or input before they appoint unelected members? If not, has the ministry considered a short, optional consultation period to bolster democratic legitimacy on that piece?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Yeah, the member is correct. It's one of those weird rules. I recall a local government election — maybe it was two elections ago or three elections ago — where a gentleman ran in pretty much every riding in the Fraser Valley. I think he was in real estate, so he thought: "This is a good way to put my signs up." He was running in Whistler. He was running in Surrey.

[3:30 p.m.]

I understand there was somebody in the CRD here, as well, that ran in all the communities to raise their profile, I guess, which is interesting.

But to the member's main point in his question, which was: what is the guidance that is issued to local governments? The guidance we issue to them is to post notice; give a two-week application period; have a discussion with applicants by council, if successful; and close vote by council for an applicant and an appointment by council. Those are the guidance processes that we put in place.

Tony Luck: It seems a little strange on some of that stuff, but maybe that's for the next amendments we can look at and for change somewhere down the road.

What guidance will the ministry issue to ensure that the criteria and deliberations for appointing councillors are publicly documented so that the community can understand why particular individuals were chosen?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The local government is required to put out a pretty transparent process that they've got for their public. We do work with them through different associations, etc., when those circumstances arise. It's not something that happens everywhere. It is very localized in some communities, and often, it's very public. People read

about it in the paper, that nobody ran and why there isn't anybody running.

It is on the local government to have a transparent process that the public's aware of, of how to deal with the situation, if it were to arise.

Tony Luck: That's very true. It seems that we ask these questions here in the committee and everything, but the public's pretty aware, and they're pretty on top of some of this stuff. But we just want to make sure that we're tight on our stuff.

Will appointed councillors be required to complete the same financial disclosures and conflict-of-interest training as elected members prior to taking office? How will compliance be monitored? I'm pretty sure I know the answer to that, but we'll get it on record.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The member will know it's the same process. They go through the same orientation. They have to follow the same rules.

Tony Luck: Clause 26(4) grants appointed councillors the same rights, duties and powers as elected ones. Did the ministry consider any limitations, such as restricting them from voting on tax rate bylaws or land use decisions, given they lack a direct electoral mandate?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: We haven't changed any of those rules. Everything stays the same. The only thing this piece changes is the geography, to be able to expand. Everything else is still the same.

Tony Luck: You can understand where that question came from. Once you start appointing people, then there looks like there's a chance for bias and preferential treatment and those kinds of things, even though, hey, you didn't step up to get elected, but now you're going to complain about the bias aspect of this. We always want to be careful on those kinds of things, especially when it comes to democracy, and make sure everything is open and transparent and everything.

Can the minister provide examples from other Canadian jurisdictions where councils may fill vacant seats by appointment rather than by election and outline a couple of safeguards they may have found in other jurisdictions? Are we a lone wolf on this?

[3:35 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: First, I should start by saying that this is rare. I shared with the member that the village of Valemount last electoral cycle was an example. Part of what we do is we learn from the electoral cycle where there are examples, and we try to create efficiencies and flexibilities within the process.

That's what we've done here. This was, again, recommended by the advisory committee that we have. It was seen as a tool, in particular for rural communities, to be able to fill vacancies with people who still have a connection to the community.

I don't have, at this point, a jurisdictional scan of what there may be in other jurisdictions. I know that the authority already existed in the legislation prior to any changes we're making. The team informs me that in Alberta, the minister has broad authority to determine what next step will be needed.

The Chair: Minister, I may need to remind you that looking at electronic devices is not permitted in the chamber.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I will look at my friend across the way if that helps you.

In Alberta, the minister has some broad authorities to be able to do that. And again, this was a response to what our advisory groups have suggested.

Clause 26 approved.

On clause 27.

Tony Luck: A lot of tedious stuff here, but this goes to voting integrity, of course, and the way that we…. Even with the little tweaks and everything, there will be somebody that picks up on some of this stuff, so we just want to make sure we've got our i's dotted and our t's crossed, of course. Some of these questions may sound a little redundant, but as I mentioned, I think this goes to voting integrity amongst the public, because there has been a lot of concern around that lately.

Minister, for clause 27, what criteria or written guidance will the ministry issue to help chief election officers determine what constitutes appropriate public notice of mail-in ballots? How will consistency be monitored across 188 local governments?

[3:40 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I hope the member is okay with me just going broader here, because I know there are a lot of conspiracies out in the public around mail-in ballots. And did people lose the election federally because of mail-in ballots? I think it's important for us to spend some time in this section just to be clear of what the changes are.

The three changes that we're allowing in this section are to allow local election officers to be able to specify locations where mail-in ballots can be dropped off if an elector chooses to vote by mail. So you can actually have…. They can define the location as opposed to having to go in the mail.

It's a minor housekeeping amendment to remove outdated language around entitled to vote by mail. It's a minor change. Third, it permits the use of secrecy sleeves

and other types of enclosures to protect the secrecy of the mail-in ballot votes. That's what this section does. It does those three things.

I can share with the member that during the 2022 local election, the ministry heard from a number of local governments that expressed concerns over the challenges of ensuring mail-in ballots were received by the CEOs on time, especially when the distances between polling stations were very large.

In response to the comments from local government, ministry staff facilitated a working group consisting of chief electoral officers, administrative staff and the mail ballot voting working group. It was aimed to explore ways to improve the mail ballot process for electorals, local government staff, and informed by recent elections, local elections and by-elections.

I can share with the member, on the question of what guidance, for each general local election, guidance materials are prepared by the province to the Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Child Care, as well as members of the technical advisory committee.

The technical advisory committee, of course, I shared with the member, has got representation of the Union of B.C. Municipalities, UBCM; the Local Government Management Association; Elections B.C.; and the B.C. School Trustees Association, as well as, I believe, representatives of Attorney General. I don't see that here.

Hopefully, that answers all the questions the member had there.

Tony Luck: I wasn't alluding to conspiracy theories or anything like that. I happened to be involved in an election in 2022 where staff in that particular municipality decided to do things their way. It became a fiasco where we even did an affidavit before the courts to look at some of the issues that had happened with ballots, ballot boxes and all those kinds of things. It's not that I want to talk about conspiracy theories here, but these are legitimate concerns that happen in municipalities.

I thank you for your clarification on that, and I appreciate that. It's really, really important to make sure we get this right moving forward here — that we have consistency across the province, that everybody uses the same binder and that everything's done in the proper manner. I appreciate the answers that you've given us here, Minister.

How will the minister ensure that rural and remote voters who may live far from the municipal office have reasonable approximate drop-off options and that site hours do not disadvantage voters who work standard hours. As I say, some like to be rogue cities.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Again, I started my comments by saying I'm not referring to the member or anybody in this room. Well, not all the members in this room.

Oh, I just tease. I tease.

That being said, I will say to the member that the question around rural communities, in particular, is actually the core point of why this change is made. When you have larger communities now, the ability for a chief electoral officer to specifically name a location in the diversity of some large communities is the exact reason why this change was recommended by that committee.

It can be a challenge in larger communities. And having the ability for the chief electoral officer to say that this is a defined location that's in reasonable geographic distance for people to travel, I think, will help strengthen our democracy.

[3:45 p.m.]

Tony Luck: Thanks, Minister. I think we're on the same wavelength on that. It's about ensuring proper democracy and voting procedures for everybody in the province.

It doesn't matter if I live in Vancouver or in Pouce Coupe or wherever, the process and procedures are followed the same by everybody, so I think that's an important piece. I do appreciate a lot of these amendments that are coming forward. But as I say, we just want to make sure that we're all on the same page on that. So that's great.

I think this is a question that is in almost every clause. Has the ministry estimated the additional staffing, training and IT costs for municipal implementation of multiple drop-off sites and electronic notice systems? Will provincial funding or templates be provided for those municipalities?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This is about efficiency, so I'll create another efficiency just by saying that the changes in the sections around the elections, none of them are about adding costs. Everything is about actually reducing paperwork, reducing administrative burden and helping streamline processes that chief electoral officers have raised with us.

Clause 27 approved.

On clause 28.

Tony Luck: Minister, what problems has the ministry, or this tech group here, observed with variant or informal electoral organization names on ballots that made it necessary to require an exact match with the Elections B.C. register under the new section 115(1)(d)?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This is the mirror of clause 13, where we made changes in one act for the language to be aligned. This changes it in the other act to make sure the two speak to each other.

Tony Luck: What deadlines will be set to ensure that consultation with the B.C. CEO is completed early enough

to avoid delaying ballot production, in particular in jurisdictions with large candidate fields and large geographical areas?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The answer is the same as it was in clause 13, which is that the CEO will engage with everyone and do the appropriate consultation.

Clauses 28 and 29 approved.

On clause 30.

Tony Luck: This is always an interesting one here, talking about a clause about accepting marks on ballots. We'll have a few questions on that, and then we'll try to get through this one as quickly as we can.

Minister, what evidence, such as recount data or court rulings, drove the decision to adopt an open-ended voter intent standard and to delete rejection grounds (4)(d)?

[3:50 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This is a cleanup, essentially a cleanup. Now with this change, it aligns with our elections, and it goes on voter intention as opposed to just having to be an X.

If somebody, for example, colours in the box…. When I was younger, all my tests used to be: "You colour in the box, and it goes in." A lot of people do that. It just makes sure that that is allowed, as long as the intention….

To your previous question, I think the member had asked me: "How does it align with our elections?" This now aligns it. Again, it's a minor change.

Tony Luck: Yeah, I agree. Sometimes you wonder why it takes so long to make these alignments. It's good to see a lot of these things falling into place and everything getting aligned. It makes it simple. From one election to the next, everybody knows the standard. It's great. I like it.

Will Elections B.C. publish illustrative examples, such as ticks, circles or initials, to help both voters and officials understand what "clearly indicate" means in practice?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The local CEOs do that. They provide people with information about it: "Here's your ballot. Here's how you can mark it, etc." So everyone will have the same information now.

Tony Luck: There's always a learning curve. Does the Attorney General or the ministry anticipate a higher incidence of judicial recounts or court petitions challenging officials' interpretations of ambiguous marks under the new standard? What safeguards are in place to ensure consistency?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I would say that this would probably create less. Our hope is that the rules become more clear, and then we'll have less of those fractious types of situations.

Clause 30 approved.

On clause 31.

Tony Luck: I appreciate the last answer to the question I had there on clause 30.

On clause 31, we're going to be looking at persons affected by court appeals, applications, injunctions and that.

What policy consideration led the ministry to stipulate that an appeal to the Court of Appeal does not stay a Supreme Court declaration of disqualification or invalid elections? How does this compare with stay-of-proceedings rules in other B.C. statutes?

[3:55 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Again, this is a minor change. This is a cleanup, a legal cleanup. Currently the status of an elected candidate only refers to the court declaring the candidate is disqualified and the office vacant.

The courts also have the option to declare the election invalid and the office vacant. Changing the language to capture a court declaration of invalid election captures all the scenarios in which an office may become vacant through court declarations under section 155 of the LGA and clarify the status of the relevant individuals, and it mirrors the clause previously to it. It's just creating more clarity.

Tony Luck: When a member is removed pending appeal, what mechanisms ensure constituents continue to receive representation? Did the ministry weigh the options of allowing the disqualified member to sit without voting rights during the appeal?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: That was out of the scope. We have made no changes to that.

Tony Luck: Parallel amendments are proposed for the Vancouver Charter, clause 58, and potentially other statutes. Can the minister confirm that the operative language is identical across all acts and explain any deviations?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It's the same policy intent for both.

Tony Luck: I like the confirmation, so that's good.

What guidelines will the ministry provide to local governments on notifying the public when a councillor is removed, reinstated or replaced due to court decisions, to maintain transparency and reduce mistrust in the electoral process?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This is something the local government is responsible for and that they do. It becomes pretty

apparent in communities when something like that happens, but it is something that the local governments have to put out.

Clauses 31 and 32 approved.

On clause 33.

Tony Luck: Clause 33 we're into here now. That expands the authority of the minister to make an order the minister considers appropriate to achieve the purpose of part 3.

Minister, what objective criteria will guide a finding that special circumstances exist under section 167(1)(a)? Could you table any internal policy or decision tree that will help ensure provincewide consistency?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This is again a situation where, in clause 18, we made the change, and now it's just mirroring it, so it's exactly the same.

The Chair: The committee shall now take a ten-minute recess. We shall return at 4:10 p.m.

The committee recessed from 4 p.m. to 4:12 p.m.

[Susie Chant in the chair.]

The Chair: I call Committee of the Whole on Bill 13, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2025.

Recognizing the member for Fraser-Nicola.

Tony Luck: Thank you, Madam Chair. Welcome to the seat. We'll hopefully have as much fun in this piece as we did in the last one, so thank you.

We got that first question answered there.

With this clause, what threshold of evidence, administrative audit, sworn affidavit or complaint volume will the ministry require before concluding that an irregularity or procedural area justifies an order under section 167(1)(b)?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This is similar to section 17, same process. Chief Electoral Officer raises concerns, reaches out to staff, and they confer. So same answer to 17.

Tony Luck: Will the minister be statutorily obliged to consult the Chief Electoral Officer before issuing an order, or if not, why was this safeguard omitted?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Yes. Again, as I said in section 17, the concern would come from them.

Tony Luck: Probably the same applies here, but I'll ask the question. Quick answer if that's appropriate. If a petition has already been filed under section 153, an application to court regarding validity of election, can the minister still issue an overlapping order under section 167, and how will conflicts be resolved?

[4:15 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I was enjoying the moment to see my friend getting a little bit more air from the fan.

No, the minister would not interfere in a court decision or a court order or during a court proceeding.

Tony Luck: Is there any statutory right for candidates, electoral organizations or voters to seek judicial review or internal reconsideration of a ministerial order issued under revised 167?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Again, I want to remind members that these are all administrative pieces, and usually the CEO is requesting remediation from us. It's coming from them to help address an administrative challenge. Anyways, I hope that answers the question.

Clause 33 approved.

On clause 34.

Tony Luck: Now, for some reason, all our questions for 34 to 39 got all bundled together. Is it all right if we do that as a single grouping, and then we can pass them as a single grouping, too, at that particular point?

The Chair: Minister, you're agreeable to that?

Yes, please. We can go ahead and do that.

Tony Luck: Thank you.

The first question here is: what practical problems or past litigation informed the decision to let election-related regulations be made retroactive to the first day of the election period or 90 days before assent vote date?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This authority supports ministerial regulation to vary or display provisions related to timelines of part 3 or part 4 where those timelines have already expired. Issues sometimes arise due to human error or in special circumstances — floods, wildfire.

I can share with the member that in 2021 two local governments had state of emergencies, and then during COVID there was a community that had a state of emergency, so those were the types of circumstances they were used in.

[4:20 p.m.]

Tony Luck: Floods and fires are getting blamed for everything these days, and then we'll throw in the pandemic as well, but that's okay.

What internal checks, legal review, cabinet guidelines and mandatory consultation with Elections B.C. will be in place before a retroactive regulation is deposited?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This is about local government elections administration, so local government CEOs, the CEOs at the local government level, but not Elections B.C.

Tony Luck: How will candidates, electoral organizations and third-party sponsors be notified that a rule affecting them has been backdated, particularly if the change alters spending or disclosure obligations already incurred?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: These are administrative changes. They're minor. In many cases, they would say minor technical changes. We just can't see how this would have a major impact for someone who had put their name forward.

Tony Luck: Subsection (5) now excludes seats vacated by section 155 court declaration from a resignation, death or disqualification language. Could this create a gap before a replacement is named, and how will boards ensure uninterrupted representation?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I think the member has moved on to 35 by agreement by both of us. This ensures that it's clear that an alternate director's term ends if the electoral area director that appointed them ceases to hold office because of a vacancy created by an application to court respecting the validity of the election, the alternate replaced or until the next general local election, whichever is earlier.

Tony Luck: Why did the ministry choose appointment by resolution rather than an automatic by-election for vacancies caused by court decisions or renunciations?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This one is the clause after that. A by-election would be triggered, but this just gives the ability to put someone interim until such time as the by-election has happened.

Tony Luck: Just clarity on that. What I'm hearing is that there will be a by-election triggered, but we'll put somebody in place just to hold the spot while waiting for the by-election. Is that correct?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Yes, the member is correct, and then we could put somebody in. Not necessarily saying we would, but you could in the time until the by-election is completed.

Tony Luck: One of these timeline questions: why was 45 days chosen rather than aligning with the 50-day deadline in clause 36? Could mismatched timelines cause inadvertent disqualifications or confusion?

[4:25 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Sorry, Chair, for the delay on that one.

There's no connection between the two. Yeah, they're completely separate. That's why it took a couple of extra minutes for us to connect. One is in case we need to appoint an alternate, and of course, this other one is to take an oath of office, so they're actually two completely separate pieces.

Tony Luck: Well, if we're aligning things, it would be kind of nice 50-50 or whatever. But anyway, you can think about that and make an amendment.

Now we're into 38, 39 here with the fire safety piece.

Does the ministry anticipate regional districts hiring qualified fire inspectors and investigators, and has any provincial training or certification program been planned to support consistent standards across the districts?

Clauses 34 to 37 inclusive approved.

On clause 38.

[4:30 p.m.]

Tony Luck: What criteria will a board use to decide whether costs are shared among all electoral areas or only those that have benefit from the service? There'll be a shared responsibility and shared cost on those services.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The answer is actually that section 38 allows us the ability to do it. Section 39 actually lays out how the costs are done, but I'll take the question anyway.

Section 39 in this bill allows it to be distributed evenly amongst the regional districts but also gives them the ability to weight it. If they come together and decide that they want to do it by population or that they want to do it in a different formula, it gives them the ability to do so.

Tony Luck: Good. Thank you.

If electoral directors disagree on who benefits from the service, what dispute resolution mechanism is available before a board's cost-sharing resolution is challenged in court, or challenged at all?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: In the Local Government Act, there are already processes for when these disputes happen. This would be similar to that.

Tony Luck: Has the ministry modelled the expected tax impact on rural property owners for the new inspection and investigative services? Will there be any provincial grants to offset some of the start-up costs that might be incurred?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This is very minor, if there's anything at all. These changes to the Fire Safety Act were

made in 2024, and PSSG does lead many of the investigations already. So we don't foresee much cost associated with that. This is just to support PSSG's changes from 2024.

Clauses 38 and 39 approved.

On clause 40.

[4:35 p.m.]

Tony Luck: What evidence led the ministry to conclude that a two-year freeze on newly adopted or amended Metro Vancouver development cost charge and amenity cost charge bylaws was necessary to maintain cost certainty for projects already in the approval pipeline? Please table any economic impact analysis or stakeholder feedback that might underpin this decision.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Yeah, these would be better questions for Metro. They agreed to these terms with the federal government. This is just enabling that change to happen.

The numbers I can share with the member are the ones that I'm aware of. Metro believes that the cost for instream protection will be $220 million. The federal government agreed to give them $250 million.

Those analyses would all be done by Metro. We're responding to their request to enable the support from the federal government to flow.

Tony Luck: We know where Metro Vancouver is with the number of concerns that the public has. But has the minister's office assessed potential legal challenges from municipalities or community groups alleging that the two-year freeze undermines local infrastructure funding objectives or violates the Community Charter cost recovery principles, and if so, could that legal opinion, redacted as necessary, be shared with the committee?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This enables infrastructure. This enables more dollars to flow to Metro Vancouver. So this is, from Metro Van's perspective, a positive. They deliberated on this, and this change reflects their request.

Tony Luck: Section 511.1 protects subdivision applications, while section 568.1 and 570.911 protect building permit applications.

Could the minister explain the policy rationale for using different procedural milestones and whether there is any risk that a project could slip through the gaps if it required neither a subdivision nor a qualifying precursor application?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: We're just trying to get to the bottom of it. Can the member repeat the question so that we can better get a grasp of where he wants to go?

Tony Luck: Section 511.1 protects subdivision applications, while sections 568.1 and 570.911 protect building permit applications.

Could the minister explain the policy rationale for using different procedural milestones and whether there is any risk that a project could slip through the gaps if it required neither a subdivision nor a qualified precursor application?

Did that make sense?

[4:40 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: We believe that it's covering all the spaces where it could be at. That's why we made the change. If we didn't believe that, we wouldn't be making this change.

I will say, as we continue to deliberate, that the member should be on his best behaviour, because I know his partner is watching. I thought I saw his wife walk by outside. Maybe she's wandering the halls just listening to see if he's doing a good job.

Yeah, we do believe that it has captured all of that, Member.

Tony Luck: Well, that's why I have all of you here to make sure I'm on my best behaviour.

Please correct me. I'm always learning, so you can always correct me.

Interjection.

Tony Luck: That's awesome.

Why are these grandfathering provisions limited to Metro Vancouver and the greater Vancouver water district? Have any other rapidly growing regional districts, such as Fraser Valley or the capital district, requested similar cost-charge exemptions, and would government consider extending them to all regional districts?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It's in response to an agreement that Metro had with the federal government. If the federal government were to provide appropriate dollars to other partners, and that was part of the agreement, we certainly would consider that.

Clause 40 approved.

On clause 41.

Tony Luck: This is some interesting information, language here and updates. The Community Charter already specifies delinquency periods prior to tax sale. How was the new 30-day notice period chosen, and did the ministry analyze whether it dovetails with or extends existing notice timelines under municipal bylaws?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The general change was recom-

mended by the Ombudsperson in 2021. The 30 days was chosen after consulting local governments and consulting tax experts on the appropriate time for either someone to pay or people to be notified.

Tony Luck: Yeah, this is an important piece, one of the clauses that is really important because we've had some bad situations out there with some homeowners lately. It just hasn't seemed fair, so I appreciate some of the changes that are coming down the pipe on this one as well.

Has the ministry estimated the incremental costs — legal, courier, clerical — of preparing and tracking registered mail or courier notices, and will there be provincial support for smaller municipalities that conduct only occasional tax sales?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Again, these changes around this are to make it less onerous. In fact, it's to ensure that local governments have multiple ways, ways that they think are the most efficient way for them to proceed.

The member may have seen my comments when I spoke to this, but there was a high-profile case in Penticton, in particular. We made a lot of changes, but we're refining that to make sure that it's an effective process for local governments, and this was a key part that was recommended to us.

[4:45 p.m.]

Tony Luck: If a collector fails to comply with any element of section 647.1, and the property is sold, what remedies will be available to the former owner? Could noncompliance invalidate the sale, and has the ministry evaluated potential liability exposure for the municipalities on any such sales?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Yes. There are remedies. Council can take some steps to address the challenge, and also you can go through the Supreme Court. So there are two avenues.

Tony Luck: While owners receive formal notice, tenants and unregistered occupants may still be surprised by a tax sale. Did the ministry weigh extending notice to occupants of record or at least requiring on-site posting to protect vulnerable tenants?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This process can take three to four years. It's not like a one-month or two-month notice. It's a very lengthy process and, certainly, there are obligations of the property owner to notify a tenant in the case that this type of issue arises.

Clauses 41 to 44 inclusive approved.

On clause 45.

Tony Luck: This particular clause here, Minister. What problem is clause 45 trying to solve? Were there specific projects or local governments that reported difficulty amending site-specific density bonus zoning bylaws once the new provincial framework was announced on April 25 of 2024?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: On clause 45, the intent of this amendment is that any site-specific zoning bylaws adopted before April 25, 2024, do not need to be amended to be consistent with the new density benefit rules.

[4:50 p.m.]

The intent of this amendment is also to provide that the site-specific zoning bylaws that received first reading by April 25, 2024, or that received first reading at any other time before the prescribed date, do not need to be amended to be consistent with the new density benefit rules.

In order for these exemptions to apply, the site-specific density benefit zoning bylaw must be consistent with any applicable density benefit zoning bylaw that applies to the broader area where the site is located.

Now, the member has asked why these legislative amendments are being proposed. I can share with the member that April 2024, density benefit legislation included transitional provisions to protect in-stream development projects under existing general density benefit zoning bylaws until a date set by regulation. However, the legislation did not specify or specifically mention site-specific density benefits zoning bylaws, which are typically used to implement individual housing projects through rezoning.

The proposed amendments clarify that the site-specific density benefits zoning bylaws do not need to be amended to comply with the new legislation if the bylaw existed prior to April 25, 2024, or receive first reading between April 25, '24, and the prescribed date.

These amendments ensure consistency in the application of transitional provisions and provide stable, predictable process that allows development to proceed uninterrupted while local governments update their general density benefit zoning bylaws.

Tony Luck: To kind of encapsulate, a bit of a grandfathering, I guess, is what happened there. Is that kind of how I'm reading that, there? Anything before that, if they met, were close to the criteria. Is that what we are seeing?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Yes, I think the member is correct. Several local governments had asked us to allow this provision, so that's where we are making changes.

Tony Luck: The amendment introduces a site-specific density benefits zoning bylaw. Could you explain, with examples, how staff will distinguish a truly site-specific

bylaw, one or more parcels from an area-wide density bonus bylaw that nonetheless named certain parcels in the schedule? Does that make sense?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: What we are trying to do is align both the site-specific and then the general piece at the same time. And this is how local governments operate, so this won't be a surprise to them or a change for them.

Tony Luck: If a site-specific bylaw is later challenged in court for failing the consistency test, could the entire density benefits package, including negotiated amenities or housing contributions, be struck down? Has the ministry issued guidance to mitigate that risk?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It's hypothetical, so it's hard for me to provide a specific answer. We have issued guidance to local governments to help guide them on how they move forward on this work, but it's hard to know what lawsuits would come in the future, and we'll respond if we need to.

[4:55 p.m.]

Tony Luck: I can understand that, because this is all so new to municipalities that they're dealing with, and we probably haven't had a situation like that yet. We're just trying to anticipate some of the issues, and are you ready for that kind of thing. I appreciate the answer.

Some municipalities rely on density bonus zoning to fund parks and child care. Has the ministry modelled whether exempting bylaws from the new procedural steps until the prescribed dates will affect amenity contributions or municipality balance sheets?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The whole point of this is to allow them to continue to operate, to mitigate any complications while they develop their new changes.

Tony Luck: How will grandfathered site-specific bylaws coexist with the provincewide upzoning under Bill 44? Could there be scenarios where the underlying density baselines change, altering the negotiated value of the bonus density?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: We are starting to skate into relitigating the legislation from previous, because that's not part of these changes at all. So, you know, respectfully, perhaps we can just go back to the bill at hand as opposed to the other pieces.

Tony Luck: Fair enough.

Clauses 45 and 46 approved.

On clause 47.

Tony Luck: Got a few questions around that one. Then I'm going to give you a real treat coming up.

What recent conflicts or court decisions persuaded the ministry that Vancouver's charter required a stand-alone statement of provincial supremacy rather than relying on the common law doctrine of paramountcy that already applies to all municipalities.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Vancouver believed that they have the same powers as Local Government Act that all their local governments have. There was a court decision, the Pender Lodge decision, in B.C. Supreme Court in 2022. So these changes reflect us ensuring that Vancouver has the same powers as the communities do under Local Government Act.

Tony Luck: If a Vancouver bylaw is alleged to be inconsistent, what is the minister's preferred enforcement path: informal dialogue, ministerial order, court application under the Judicial Review Procedure Act, or some combination of all?

[5:00 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The shortest answer of the day: none of the above.

Tony Luck: I'm assuming there is no answer. Yeah, okay.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Well, if it were found to be inconsistent, the courts could strike it down.

Tony Luck: Why was the Vancouver subdivision control override left intact, under 2.3(3)? Were specific development permit or land title concerns raised that justified shielding that power from provincial paramountcy?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Section 292 of the Vancouver Charter outlines Vancouver's bylaw-making ability in relation to regulating the subdivision of land.

In section 292(4), it states that if any provision or bylaw under this section is inconsistent with the provision or made under the Land Title Act or any other act with respect to the subdivision or the resubdivision of property, the provision of the bylaw shall prevail.

Section 292(4) is the only existing rule in the Vancouver Charter that does not align with the proposed express default conflicts rules. Its inclusion in section 2.3 is intended to recognize and maintain this exception.

Clauses 47 to 57 inclusive approved.

On clause 58.

Tony Luck: We're getting around to voting again. We'll talk about a few things there, for vote integrity.

Why does the new section permit a declared winner to take the oath, vote and exercise full powers, even when a petition under section 115 has already been filed? Did the ministry considered delaying the swearing in until the first court appearance to reduce the risk of multiple turnovers?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It's innocent until proven guilty; otherwise, you may see cases where people just continuously take people to court so that they can't swear an oath.

[5:05 p.m.]

Of course, it's important for courts, when they are doing their process, for that to happen before process is taken, but we don't want to presume people are in the wrong or guilty until the courts have made such a judgment.

Tony Luck: That makes sense.

When a councillor or mayor is removed, pending appeal, how will the city ensure continuity of representation? Did the ministry contemplate allowing the disqualified person to sit without voting rights or to serve only under the appeal, as decided?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It's a similar answer to what we did…. It mirrors…. There would be…. It would trigger a by-election, and the process would happen that way.

Clauses 58 and 59 approved.

On clause 60.

Tony Luck: Under clause 60 here, we are looking at expanded authority of the minister to make an order the minister considers appropriate to achieve the purposes of the sections there.

What objective criteria will guide the minister's conclusion that special circumstances may exist under section 127(1)(a)? Could the minister table any internal policy or checklist that will be used to ensure consistent application of this discretionary power?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This is exactly mirroring clauses 17 and 33 and now in this legislation, so it's the exact same language, same mirrored change.

Tony Luck: I'm just trying to make sure that we don't get the same answer for the other clauses we've had here.

Does the charter provide any mechanism for candidates, electoral organizations or voters to seek judicial review of a ministerial court order under section 127? If no explicit route exists, what is the government's position on the standard of review that would apply?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Again, it's the same answer as section 17, which is that any order would be open for judicial review.

Clauses 60 to 64 inclusive approved.

On clause 65.

Tony Luck: Could the minister clarify, with examples, how staff will distinguish a true site-specific density benefit zoning bylaw of one or more parcels from a neighbourhood-wide bonus density schedule that nonetheless lists individual legal descriptions?

[5:10 p.m.]

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It's the same as clause 45, except that in the Vancouver Charter, the language is different. But this is mirroring the same change in the Vancouver Charter.

Tony Luck: That's good. Some of these are probably going to be answered pretty similarly, but we're just making sure we got that cross-referenced, so I really appreciate the minister's patience with us on this.

Subclause (7)(b) requires that site-specific bylaws be consistent with the density rules in any broader density benefits bylaw. What objective, criteria or checklist will the ministry issue to help council applicants and the courts determine consistency and avoid future legal ambiguities?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: It's up to the local government. We're not over their shoulder monitoring this, and we've issued them guidance on how they should proceed so that it's consistent.

Tony Luck: Because grandfathered bylaws may proceed without procedural steps in 634(2)(a) to (e), what avenues will residents and neighbourhood groups have to comment on negotiated amenities, cash-in-lieu contributions or CAC formulas embedded in those bylaws?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The member's question actually goes to something that we had a good discussion about during estimates, which is that this allows things to continue until such time as they've made those changes.

This is why the changes we made in the legislation, in the previous government, were so important, because too often, there was frustration from the public about what charges were charged for developments behind closed doors. It made it a real challenge for the public, leading to mistrust. It made it hard for local government officials, because they were, perhaps, negotiating in good faith, trying to get the best deal they could, but people didn't believe that the same deal was made for everybody.

Actually, the question leads to why the changes are so important when they come into place, because the community will have a chance to agree on what amenities they want. They'll be put into bylaws. A clear cost structure will

be put in place so that everyone understands what the cost structure is — at the front of the door, before they walk in, as opposed to something that they're halfway through the project and then they're having to try to figure out.

It will lead to that transparency and that certainty for the public, as well as for the local government and for the development community, because it will be net new. It won't be charging on charges that don't actually contribute something new.

This piece allows them to continue until such time as those changes are made.

[5:15 p.m.]

Tony Luck: How will grandfathered, site-specific bylaws interact with Bill 44's small-scale multi-unit zoning and the Housing Supply Act targets? Could a pre-existing density bonus agreement unintentionally constrain the high provincial baseline density now permitted?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: This was the same question that was asked previously when I suggested that, perhaps, we were going too far outside the scope of the legislation and going to relitigate the original legislation. Hopefully, the member's okay with me saying the same answer as I did previously.

Tony Luck: I am absolutely okay with that. Some of these questions.… Because the type of legislation that we're bringing forward here is an omnibus bill, there are going to be crossovers and interlaps and things like that. I'm okay with that.

Will the ministry require Vancouver to publish a public list of all site-specific density benefits bylaws claiming the exemptions, including the parcels affected, bonus floor area ratios and the negotiated amenity values? Would they be able to do that?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: All bylaws should be posted already.

Clauses 65 and 66 approved.

On clause 67.

Tony Luck: Just a few questions around 67 here.

How will election administrators handle situations where the nomination period for the by-election starts under the former act, but voting day occurs after 2026 when the new provisions are enforced? Which rule set applies to campaign finance disclosures that straddle the transition dates?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: All the changes that we are contemplating with this will come into effect in the 2026 local election. Anything that happens between now and then would be under the previous rules.

Tony Luck: How will election administrators handle situations where the nomination period for a by-election starts under the former act but voting day occurs after 2020? Did I ask you that question? Sorry, I already asked that question.

Minister, clause 67 grandfathers former provisions for any election or assent-voting event held before the 2026 local election. Does that window include all intervening by-elections, school trustee by-elections and referenda that might occur as late as summer of 2026, or is the cut-off intended to be a statutory general voting day in October 2026?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: The answer is yes. It would include everything up to the 2026 general election.

Clauses 67 to 71 inclusive approved.

On clause 72.

The Chair: Recognizing the member for West Vancouver–Capilano.

[5:20 p.m.]

Lynne Block: Thank you, Chair. I'm delighted to be here today. I'd like to just give a quick preamble to clause 72, with your permission.

It specifically amends section 45 of the School Act. This amendment introduces a new subsection, (2.1). This new subsection mandates that a board conducting a trustee election must identify places for the public notice requirements of section 50 of the Local Government Act. This provision is intended to prove transparency around school trustee elections. It ensures that the public is clearly informed about where to find official notices regarding these crucial local democratic processes. Knowing where to find official information about who is running, important dates and polling locations is fundamental for informed voter participation.

This specific amendment in Section 45(2.1) of the School Act, scheduled to come into force on January 1, 2026, explicitly applies to "A board conducting a trustee election for a school district other than School District No. 39 (Vancouver)." This exemption undermines transparency, creates a bit of inequity and weakens democratic process.

My first question, please: what is the specific reason that school district 39, one of the largest and most complex school districts in B.C., is being singled out and exempted from a basic transparency requirement being imposed on all other school districts?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Thank you to the member for the question.

My critic has left, but he and I had a good discussion

about the Vancouver Charter versus the Local Government Act, etc.

This is a Vancouver Charter–related issue. Elections for SD 39 are run in accordance with part 1 of the Vancouver Charter. The Vancouver Charter does not have a requirement for the city to specify a public-notice posting place or to post a notice at the public-notice posting place as part of its requirement for public notice in section 3.

Instead, the legislation explicitly states when a notice must be available for public inspection at city hall, in addition to meeting the public-notice requirement in section 3, the requirements for SD 39 will be the same as for the city.

Lynne Block: So it's just a different set of rules. Basically, the requirement for consistency and clarity is embedded in their particular governance. Is that correct?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: That's correct. It's embedded into the Vancouver Charter.

Lynne Block: Just a question. How long has that been a part of the separation?

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I look to the team, and my team is way too young to know.

The team says the Vancouver Charter was created around 1953, so it would be around then.

Lynne Block: I'm just curious. Obviously, it has been around for a long time. It obviously works and there are no issues, I believe, with transparency, clarity or organization. Has there been any talk of including it with everybody else, so that there would be consistency and clarity? Just a question.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: Vancouver runs the election, and school boards tag along.

I can share with the member that we have not had any feedback around that change from the B.C. School Trustees Association. We engaged with them on this.

[5:25 p.m.]

Lynne Block: To the minister: thank you for your answers. I do appreciate that. It was just a curious little note, and I didn't know why it wasn't for the whole of B.C.

Clauses 72 and 73 approved.

Interjection.

The Chair: So clause 72 has passed.

Wait, please.

Interjection.

The Chair: Is there agreement to come back to 73?

Interjection.

The Chair: You're okay with 73 passing.

What I want to do is keep the minister here for anything else that….

Interjection.

The Chair: So 86?

If there is agreement in the committee….

Interjection.

The Chair: I would just like to clarify with the committee in the room that clause 73 has passed.

Donegal Wilson: I just want to take this opportunity to thank the minister and his staff. It was very good engagement.

My colleague the member for Fraser-Nicola had to leave, but he definitely appreciated your time and all your staffs' expertise today. Thank you.

Hon. Ravi Kahlon: I appreciate the member thanking my team. I want to thank my team as well. I also want to thank my critic for a really thoughtful and respectful exchange.

Again, I just want to emphasize what I made in my first comment, and it wasn't directed to my colleague across the way at all. But there were a lot of speeches in second reading around our housing section, and I hope folks understand that these were mostly administrative changes. There wasn't any major overreach from government, and I'm glad I was able to answer all those questions.

Thank you to the member, and we'll just move out and let the next team come in.

The Chair: At this time, we'll take a brief recess, five minutes.

I've had a request for a ten-minute break, if everybody could be back at 5:37. Thank you.

The committee recessed from 5:28 p.m. to 5:41 p.m.

[Susie Chant in the chair.]

The Chair: I call Committee of the Whole on Bill 13, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendments Act, 2025, back to order.

Clause 74 approved.

On clause 75.

Larry Neufeld: I think most of my caucus and perhaps most others may have glossed over what it actually does say in clause 75. With perhaps a bit of latitude, it's going

to be important for me to illustrate the importance of this clause by giving a bit of background and a bit of history as to why this is important.

I've been a professional engineer for probably longer than I should admit, but I will admit to 30 years. The importance of this clause to me is that…. Again, I think a little bit of background here is probably important.

The iron ring that I wear is nothing flashy. It's nothing blingy. It's not meant to be a piece of jewelry. It's meant to remind us that if we make errors, people will suffer or even perish.

The history behind the ring, if I may, is one of…. I enjoy telling it, but it's actually the unfortunate result of engineering mistakes that have resulted in death. It's worn on the small finger of your dominant hand. I'm right-handed; if I were left, it would be on here. The rationale behind the ring is that it is to touch every plan, every drawing, your keyboard, whatever it is that you're working on to remind you to be diligent and that if you're not diligent, you can cause harm to the public.

Incidentally, the other really interesting part of it is that these rings originally were made from the steel of a bridge that fell and killed a fair number of workers, from the simple fact that there was an engineering mistake completed on that bridge during construction.

There was a very poignant story told during members' statements. Honestly, I can't remember the member's riding, so I won't try to describe it. She did talk about the Ironworkers Memorial Bridge, or the Second Narrows Bridge, that collapsed in 1958. If I recall, there was something on the order of 18 workers that were killed during that collapse — an incredibly tragic event.

Again, the ring is a reminder. It cost me $5 when I was awarded it. It did take an awful lot of work to get it, but it's there as a reminder.

The other one from my own riding that I think is incredibly important to highlight is the Taylor Bridge. It has also fallen down once in the past. I'm not saying that was due to engineering issues, although…. Well, I will say that. The footing squashed out, and the bridge fell down. It could have killed people.

Why I appreciate the latitude to give this preamble is that it is incredibly important to me that we maintain the ability to oversee and to control the profession of engineering. By controlling those standards, we protect lives.

[5:45 p.m.]

What concerns me in this section is reducing oversight on that one particular clause or that one particular aspect of software engineering. It's concerning to me. It's deeply concerning.

If you look at the MAX 8 disaster that we all will remember, that was software engineering. That was software that killed those people. If we look at the future of artificial intelligence, we look at the future of self-driving vehicles…. Self-driving vehicles will be programmed by software engineers.

If we don't make sure that they are operating to the very highest level of safety and protecting public safety, I have grave, grave concerns about that. I truly do. That bothers me. In fact, when this clause was first brought up, I heard one of my colleagues speak to it in support, and I jumped up pretty quick. This is a very strong thing for me personally.

I've also been in contact with the Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia executive, and they have expressed extreme concern, equal to my own, with respect to this clause. I really don't think that we appreciate that we're putting public safety and, ultimately, lives at risk by passing this clause.

One of the things that I was provided with from Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C. was that one of the major concerns is clarity and public trust. Again, if we start using that title yet it's not regulated….

I know that the government has illustrated that Alberta went down that path. I'm a registered member in Alberta as well, and I'm also aware that Alberta is struggling right now on how to continue regulating all engineers because of the information that's carried out in this clause.

If memory serves me correctly, I want to say…. I don't know if memory does serve me correctly. I'm certain it's over 60,000 registered members for Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C. I should have looked that up before I said that. I want to say something like 67,000 or 69,000, but please don't hold me to that.

Again, it's incredibly critical to public safety that we protect that title for the simple fact that when a person uses that title, they have been rigorously vetted through an education process, an ongoing training process and an ongoing regulatory process whereby they're held to account by people in their own field.

For instance, I'm of a civil background. If I make an error, I'm going to be judged by civil engineers. They are going to know exactly what I did wrong, they're going to know if I was negligent, and they're going to punish me appropriately.

Removing that oversight, I think…. Again, giving the example of the MAX 8 and giving the example of the self-driving vehicles that are around the corner, I'm concerned. I want to express my deepest concern.

That's the amendment that I will be putting forward.

But to go a little bit further…. I do really want to get this on the record, because I think this is something that…. If and when this does end up before a justice, it's important from their perspective, perhaps, to understand what the thought process was behind the implementation or the proposal of this clause.

The code of ethics that I follow as an engineer contributes to clarity and public trust. Again, that's very, very important. With the stamp that I put on a document, I'm

taking responsibility for that document. That goes for any work — I own an engineering company as well — that any of my staff…. I have to stamp their work. I take my responsibility very, very seriously. Again, that goes back to my significant concern with this clause: it's that is going to be removed.

We've already talked about the risks to public safety and oversight. I've been an incredibly proud engineer for 30 years, and I'm very concerned at what the public perception of engineering will be if this clause does pass.

Real-world precedents — I've already talked about that. We did have an unfortunate…. Well, I already spoke of it, so I'll just leave it with that.

[5:50 p.m.]

Judicial consistency is another one that should be discussed. Most provinces and international regulators continue to protect engineering titles. Across Canada…. I was registered originally in Saskatchewan, then Alberta and now British Columbia. Those are all three different colleges. They're all three different organizations. If I were to work in Nova Scotia, I would have to be registered there as well.

If we removed that requirement in British Columbia, how does that transfer to other jurisdictions? That would be another concern that I would have as well.

Policy framework integrity through the Professional Governance Act is meant to be consistent and apply accountable standards across all professions. If we remove that requirement for a very select number of folks within our profession, again, where's the consistency? How do we properly allow the regulating body to do their job? That is incredibly important. It's to protect public safety. How do we allow the regulator to do their job accurately and effectively when we remove their ability to do so? As legislators, I find that to be a pretty grave responsibility.

The other one that I did want to highlight is the impact on B.C.'s education system. We currently have two educational institutions in this province that do offer an accredited software engineering program. If we were to remove this requirement and allow others to come in from other jurisdictions, what does that say to the folks that spent four, five hard years obtaining that degree?

I would further add that there is an opportunity right now within the existing framework where software engineers coming from other jurisdictions can be registered here. Just again, they would be regulated under the auspices of the existing regulatory body. It's been in place since 1928, I want to say. Excuse me if I got that date wrong, but I do believe that was 1928. Oh, excuse me, 1920. For the record, 1920.

Those would be my major concerns. My question would be: will the minister remove clause 75 from this bill?

[5:55 p.m.]

Hon. Anne Kang: Before I give my answer to the member in opposition, I would like to start by introducing the staff that I have with me today. I have Tony Loughran, assistant deputy minister, as well as Alayna van Leeuwen, who is a director of legislation, with me from the ministry.

These amendments work to clarify regulation-making powers in the Professional Governance Act respecting professional titles. I take to heart the passion that the member has. I have a lot of respect for the work that engineers do, making sure that our built environment is safe, absolutely.

However, the act specifies that the Lieutenant Governor in Council can make regulations related to what job titles are reserved for certain professionals, and these amendments will provide the clear ability for government to determine what titles are not reserved for.

They are still required to have practice rights, required to be registered. Still have the power to enforce authority. All of that will be maintained. These regulation-making authorities are important for government to respond to concerns around industry standard job titles that overlap or conflict with reserve titles under the PGA.

The member did talk about if these amendments will diminish the value of professional credentials, especially in terms of engineers. The answer is no. It will not diminish the value of professional credentials. Nothing is changing for professionals under the PGA, who have worked hard to earn the credentials through many years of education and training, and that entitles them to register with their regulatory body and to use the relevant reserved titles under the regulations. I just wanted to make that clear.

In examples that I have discussed in the House during second reading, it is important that our government supports B.C. employers, businesses and workers. The amendments clarify government's ability to respond to the concerns raised by the technology sector while maintaining the value of professional engineers in B.C.

The member also did raise the question if these amendments will impact or diminish professional standards, and that was the main concern. The answer is no as well. It will not diminish or impact professional standards.

Regulatory bodies will retain their existing authority to investigate potential of practice infringement. If a regulation is made to allow people to use the title "software engineer," for example, that does not give them the authority to practise engineering without a licence. If someone calls themselves a "software engineer," EGBC would still be able to examine the work performed by the person and determine whether they are practising the reserve practice of engineering and take enforcement action against them.

Just a very brief example. If an engineering company that was building a bridge were to be hiring someone who may have the title "engineer," through the interview process, they would have determined if they're qualified or

not and would be hiring the right person with a qualification. If the person said, "I'm a software engineer, and I have been programming for specific data programs," the employer would realize that this person is not the engineer that they were hiring. Under these circumstances, it will not diminish the value of professional credentials, nor would it impact or diminish professional standards.

[6:00 p.m.]

I will not be accepting any recommendations to clause 75.

Larry Neufeld: Thank you, Minister, for that answer. I am a little confused, though. Are we saying, then, that anyone using the title "software engineer" will be forced to register with Engineers and Geosciences B.C.?

Hon. Anne Kang: No.

Larry Neufeld: Again, with respect, I would…. With respect — I do respect you — I would reject your previous statements. I strongly believe that this will not only diminish the profession, but it will put public safety at risk by not regulating folks that are using the term "engineer." I truly do. With respect. I'm not trying to be challenging.

To follow up with my statement, one of the things I would like to talk about is that the Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C. have opened…. Sorry, I'm going to make sure I get this correct here. The number of enforcement files that have been opened has been staggering. Again, my concern here is….

With respect, if we think about the MAX 8 disaster, it was software engineering that caused that. The families suffered because of the lack of oversight of individuals that were performing that work for a very, very large company…. I can't imagine how I would stand here and look at anyone in the face if it was one of my family members.

I would also want to believe in my heart that had that person or those individuals that were responsible for it, for that horrific lack of ability to keep humans alive…. If they had had the proper amount of oversight, I really wonder if we wouldn't be telling this horrific story right now.

I'll get to my question here in a moment.

One of the things that I did want to talk about is…. I did speak with the very kind folks at Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C., again, to get on the record that in one fiscal year, they opened 400 enforcement files. They resolved approximately 250 of those files.

Again, back to the situation that we were just talking about. If the government is going to allow software engineering to proceed in this province without the oversight of the professional governance body, what protections will be put in place to ensure public safety?

[6:05 p.m.]

Hon. Anne Kang: I understand the member's concern on the health and safety of using this title. Our government stands behind the safety-critical software, which is a standard that EGBC has developed. It takes to heart the issues of practising engineers, and it does make a critical distinction between health and safety and what would not be under the protected title of a practising engineer.

If we take, for example, those who are hired by Electronic Arts, who are, by their employment letter, hired as a software engineer, but they're not able to be called a software engineer, this is where we are trying to provide this opportunity for a new industry which is using a new industry title.

However, we do take in mind that safety-critical software is the safety regulation that we are standing behind. There will be…. If the question is how the public will know the difference between a software engineer and an engineer that does not practise engineering, the regulation will allow the use of "software engineer" with engineering activities that pose risks to public health and safety, or the engineer will continue to be within the EGBC's authority to regulate.

Larry Neufeld: My next question would be: will this government allow software engineers to program self-driving cars to be driven on the roads of British Columbia?

Hon. Anne Kang: I'm not the subject expert on this. It would be…. EGBC would have the jurisdiction over this. It seems to me that to be programming a self-driving car is of critical safety, and those who are practising engineers would be best fit. But I will leave this to EGBC to decide. It seems to me it's pretty critical that we have practising engineers programming self-driving cars.

[6:10 p.m.]

Larry Neufeld: I couldn't agree more. Again, that's why I will be proposing this amendment.

Speaking with, and I don't want to put words in folks' mouths…. Well, perhaps I'll ask this question. What, if any, consultation was there with EGBC on this clause, and what was their response?

Hon. Anne Kang: My ministry has had several conversations with EGBC but no formal consultation in terms of the legislation that is before us. However, if we were to be putting a regulation into effect, we would be consulting with EGBC and making sure that we get things right.

I would also like to point out that the general public does not hire professional engineers. It is the professional industry that hires professional engineers, and they would be able to differentiate between a software engineer, like someone who works at Electronic Arts, versus someone who is required to build a bridge or a program for a self-driving EV car.

Larry Neufeld: Again, with all due respect, I've been a professional engineer for 30 years. I own an engineering company, and I disagree very adamantly with what you just said.

The entire purpose behind a professional governance body, as I stated previously, is to protect human life. I took an oath; my colleague just reminded me of it. When I was awarded my professional engineering status, I took an oath, and my oath was to put human safety first and foremost.

I am exceedingly concerned about this clause. My question to the minister would be…. Well, first and foremost, I will state that I've had a number of conversations — I believe I already have stated that — with the regulator.

[6:15 p.m.]

Certainly, I'm hearing something different from the regulator than what I just heard from the minister, with respect to conversations with them and with respect to any type of support, whether…. In fact, perhaps I could ask for a recess. I need to have permission to table a letter that has been provided to me that would suggest that the statement I just made is accurate.

The Chair: Who are you seeking permission from, please?

Larry Neufeld: The author of the letter.

Interjection.

Larry Neufeld: Yes.

The Chair: Is the author readily accessed?

Larry Neufeld: Madam Chair, they are not on the precinct, but they are available via telephone or other means.

The Chair: Minister, what do you say?

Hon. Anne Kang: I don't think we need to table the quotes. I don't disagree with the member across the way that protecting the engineering title is important, protecting the practice is important. I don't disagree with you.

The amendments that we are trying to do, as I have said, will not diminish the value of professional credentials, and it will not impact or diminish professional standards. I just want the member to be aware that the changes we are making will just provide more opportunities for our businesses here, and those who are software engineers, who are working, say, at places like Electronic Arts, to be able to practise here without being penalized because they're using the title software engineer.

The Chair: Just an advisement to the member. Remember that if you do table an amendment, there will be a recess at that time.

Larry Neufeld: Okay. My question is…. Without tabling said documents, my understanding was that this letter that was sent to me had been circulated to other MLAs as well. Has the minister received or read a letter from the regulator dated May 9, 2025, that would disagree with her previous statement?

Hon. Anne Kang: The member does not need to table the document. I have it in front of me.

Larry Neufeld: Again, I'm not trying to be confrontational here. I do respect you, so please don't take this in any way personal.

Given her previous statement, would the minister please identify anything in that letter that would support her previous statement?

Hon. Anne Kang: My ministry has had several conversations with EGBC. We will be consulting with them when we get into the regulations to make sure that we get things right.

[6:20 p.m.]

Larry Neufeld: May I ask the timeline and the veracity of these conversations with EGBC? When did they begin? How many were there? When did they end?

Hon. Anne Kang: The superintendent of professional governance has been meeting with EGBC quite regularly, and the topic of professional governance and the software engineer topic have come up quite a bit. As well, I myself met with EGBC last month.

Larry Neufeld: With respect, Minister, that didn't answer my question. My question was: specific to clause 75, how many times has the ministry met with EGBC, and when did those meetings occur?

Hon. Anne Kang: The ministry did not consult with them in terms of the legislation, but we will be consulting with them during regulation.

Larry Neufeld: Given the gravity of what I hope I've done a reasonable job of explaining what this clause 75 could mean to public safety, would the government, would the minister accept, at minimum, to table this clause until such consultations have been had with the professional governance body who is responsible for protecting the lives and safety of the citizens of British Columbia?

Hon. Anne Kang: I just want to be clear that this particular legislation does not impact public health and

safety. It does not change the professional credentials of engineers. It does not diminish the value of professional credentials.

[6:25 p.m.]

I think, perhaps, the member opposite is getting ahead of himself. The purpose of this section is to add a narrow regulation-making authority for the LGIC to prescribe narrow exceptions to the prohibition against the use of certain names or titles by non-registrants. But there is no change to professional engineering or the health and safety of what the member across is referring to.

[Nina Krieger in the chair.]

Larry Neufeld: Thank you to the minister. Again, with respect, I could not disagree more. I truly could not disagree more.

I would ask the minister again to refer to the letter that she has in front of her. And perhaps after she has referred to that letter, would she prefer to answer that question a second time, please.

Hon. Anne Kang: Asked and answered.

Larry Neufeld: At this point, I would like to submit an amendment to the bill. That amendment would be to remove clause 75. The protection of public safety is paramount. I can't vote for this. I would like to submit an amendment, please.

[**SECTION 75,** ***by adding the underlined text as shown:***

(vii) any regulation made under sections 118(2)(i)(i), 118(2)(i)(ii), 118(2)(i)(iii), 118(2)(i)(iv), 118(2)(i)(v), 118(2)(i)(vi) is required to have a 30 day public consultation period on the proposed regulation prior to its implementation.]

The Chair: We will take a brief recess while we review the amendment for admissibility and make copies for everybody, so we'll convene shortly. Please don't go too far.

The committee recessed from 6:27 p.m. to 6:44 p.m.

[Nina Krieger in the chair.]

The Chair: Good evening, Members. I call Committee on the Whole for Bill 13, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, back to order.

We are currently on clause 75. An amendment has been proposed by the member for Peace River South. I'd like to invite the member to speak to the proposed amendment.

Larry Neufeld: I do want to correct the record. Prior to the break, I had indicated that I was going to be submitting an amendment to remove clause 75. I did make a different decision, and as we'll all see and have all read, this is actually an amendment to add a 30-day public consultation period to any proposed regulation. Why don't I just go on to my statement?

[6:45 p.m.]

Hopefully, I have done a reasonable job of illustrating how incredibly important the protection of public safety is and how incredibly important it is to protect the title of "engineer" in that respect.

Having said that, I will get to the amendment. This amendment proposes to require public consultation should the Lieutenant Governor in Council wish to consider regulations regarding reserved titles and reserved practice, exclusivity of reserved titles and right of practice of reserved practice, prohibition and limitation, use of reserved titles, prohibitions regarding reserved practice.

I would go on to further state that on this side of the House, we believe there is a reason these titles are currently reserved titles. Again, hopefully I have done a reasonable job of explaining that.

This amendment does not prevent the government from choosing to make regulations. However, it does mandate that they are required to consult before these changes are made. It is our belief that if the government wishes to make changes to the title around engineer, then they should be consulting with other engineers.

The Chair: Thank you, Member, for your proposal.

After reviewing the amendment in consultation with the Clerk's office, I've determined that it is out of order as it is illogical with the legislation as drafted.

Amendment ruled out of order.

Larry Neufeld: I don't want to belabour it too long, but I do have one final question with respect to clause 75.

Is there any intention to add or eliminate any further protected titles or protected professions?

Hon. Anne Kang: This legislation gives LGIC the power for regulations for protected titles but not for reserved practice, so that question would be a bit more premature than it is. But I have committed to consulting with relevant parties when we propose regulations.

[6:50 p.m.]

Larry Neufeld: I appreciate the minister's answer.

I would like to ask one final time why the ministry did not consult with the engineering regulator on something of this level of importance prior to including it in a legislative bill.

Hon. Anne Kang: This legislation is enabling legislation, and we will be consulting with relevant parties during regulation.

Larry Neufeld: What mechanism would we be able to

expect to ensure that the voices and the grave concerns that are in the letter in front of you are, in fact, taken into account when the ministry consults with the professional practice regulator?

Hon. Anne Kang: The usual process that we would take is to be showing the relevant parties a consultation draft under an NDA.

Larry Neufeld: Is that process available to members of this House in writing?

Hon. Anne Kang: I have answered the question into the record that relevant parties will be consulted during regulation to the bill. The process is set up by cab ops, so I don't have anything that is written in front of me.

Larry Neufeld: May we have a list of relevant parties, please?

[6:55 p.m.]

Hon. Anne Kang: That has not been determined yet, but we will definitely include the six regulators under the Professional Governance Act.

[7:00 p.m. - 7:05 p.m.]

The Chair: Before putting the question, I remind all members that only members of Section C or their duly appointed substitutes are authorized to vote.

The question is shall clause 75 pass.

Clause 75 approved on the following division:

YEAS — 6		
Kang	Choi	Rotchford
Routledge	Popham	Arora
NAYS — 5		
L. Neufeld	Paton	Maahs
Wilson		McCall

On clause 76.

Larry Neufeld: A couple of questions on this one.

Why does the cabinet need to establish new classes, and what does this mean, specifically in terms of decisions or activities?

Hon. Anne Kang: Thank you to the member opposite for that question. The purpose of this section is just to move the regulation-making authority of subsection 119(c) into the new subsection 119(d), replacing the content of 119(c) with a new subsection that allows the LGIC to "establish classes of persons, entities, regulatory bodies, places, things, decisions, transactions or activities."

This section also adds to the existing list of categories in subsection 119(d), formerly 119(c), to align with the new list of categories in the new section 119(c). It's important, for the overall operation of a legislative scheme such as this one, to be able to regulate classes of persons, regulatory bodies, places, etc. This amendment makes that power explicit. This power is very routinely included in modern statutes.

Larry Neufeld: Thank you for that answer, Minister.

Does this legislation require consultation prior to cabinet establishing different regulation for different classes and individuals, and if not, why?

[7:10 p.m.]

Hon. Anne Kang: This amendment here is simply housekeeping. It's quite routine. These authorities are very commonly included in modern statutes.

Larry Neufeld: Thank you for that answer.

What I would ask is: why does it allow for cabinet to make this decision without legislative oversight?

Hon. Anne Kang: This amendment makes changes to the act. It does not provide cabinet with regulation-making power.

Larry Neufeld: I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the minister and, in particular, staff. I know I'm passionate about engineering. I'm not going to apologize for my passion, but if it did come across a little more assertive than I intended, then I do apologize for that.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you to your staff. That's the end of my questions.

Clauses 76 and 77 approved.

The Chair: Before we move on to part 4, the Water, Land and Resource Stewardship amendments, let's take the briefest of recess to ensure the minister and her team can get seated.

The committee recessed from 7:13 p.m. to 7:16 p.m.

[Nina Krieger in the chair.]

The Chair: Good evening. I call Committee of the Whole on Bill 13, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, back to order.

On clause 78.

Donegal Wilson: I'm excited that we are turning attention to Water, Land and Resource Stewardship amendments. I know we've both been waiting for this since yesterday.

I want to appreciate that the staff have waited around

for most of the day, and I really do appreciate that, as the other members worked through their sections.

Requesting a little latitude from the minister, I have some questions overall that I think will help us get through the clauses faster, if the minister is willing to entertain that.

Can you identify why you felt the need to add measures for aquatic invasive species to the Wildlife Act rather than leaving it in regulation where it lives today?

Hon. Randene Neill: Thanks for the question.

I just want to introduce my team really quickly, because as you said, Member, it's wonderful that they've been around here for the last two days.

James Mack, ADM for water, fisheries and coast division for WLRS; Martina Beck, invasive fauna unit head, water, fisheries and coast division, WLRS; Pam Doerksen, director of strategic initiatives, resource stewardship division, WLRS; and Sonja Sun, legal counsel, Ministry of the Attorney General.

Thank you so much.

This is a really proactive move, because of the threat and, particularly, the threat of invasive mussels coming into Idaho recently.

[7:20 p.m.]

We wanted to be incredibly proactive and provide clear authority and have the mandate to be able to get people to stop. This gives us the authority to follow through when they stop or if they don't stop. I think I'll leave it there.

Donegal Wilson: I want to be clear that I am in support of these amendments. You have a letter in your office from me requesting this. My questions today are purely around whether this is the best way to achieve the goals, and it should not be perceived in any way as not being in support of what we're trying to achieve today.

What I heard, I think, is that you cannot achieve what you're trying to do with regulation only. Is that true; it has to be in the Wildlife Act? It can't be achieved through regulation?

Hon. Randene Neill: Yes. My last answer was fuzzy. Thank you for asking again.

Basically, your question of if we could have done this under the current regulations…. We could have still done it but without the proper enforcement measures that we needed.

This bill is proposing amendments to the Wildlife Act to establish legislative authority alongside the enhanced enforcement measures to proactively prevent the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species in B.C. We're creating the authorities to allow the regulation to be made, in this instance.

These amendments will also allow the province to define and designate aquatic invasive species. They'll also establish legislative authorities to enforce the "pull the plug" that requires all boats and water equipment travelling in B.C. to have the drain plugs be pulled before moving over land from one body of water to another — also, amendments to establish legislative authorities to require any watercraft being transported in B.C. to stop at any open watercraft inspection station.

It clarifies authorities needed for officers to enforce the existing invasive mussel defence program as well, undertaken in partnership with WLRS and the Ministry of Environment. It also includes the relevant offences for noncompliance to the proposed authorities.

Donegal Wilson: Thank you for that answer. I definitely understand the goals that we're trying to achieve.

Are you concerned that the amendments that you have proposed may be too prescriptive? The fact that they live in the act and not in regulation means you need to bring that back to the Legislature to make changes, even to a word or punctuation. Is what you've put in here too prescriptive to allow you to pivot to what's needed to be done?

[7:25 p.m.]

Hon. Randene Neill: Thank you for the question.

I think the short answer to your question — is it too prescriptive? — is no. The only kind of prescriptive one is the legislation to stop and inspect.

We think this legislation is basically where it needs to be. Where we think we do need flexibility and discretion, we can do that through regulation.

Donegal Wilson: I personally think it's pretty prescriptive and that you're going to find that we will be back here. I look forward to the discussion.

Can you provide a list of organizations that were consulted or helped assist with the drafting of this legislation? I imagine they were probably under NDA, but if you can provide that list, it would be good.

[7:30 p.m.]

Hon. Randene Neill: In terms of the actual drafting of the legislation, the government did that, but we have been running this program for the last ten years, so we have had a lot of feedback and a lot of consultation.

I do have a list of probably 50 organizations that we spoke to, which I can read out to put in the record or we can share with you afterwards.

Donegal Wilson: In the interest of everyone's time, we can maybe just have that afterwards. I believe you, Minister.

Were there any changes made to these amendments based on what the minister heard from those conversations? I heard that it was probably drafted based on those consultations and going forward, but I'm just wondering if

there were any specific changes that were made based on what they heard from stakeholders.

Hon. Randene Neill: I think that we can safely say yes. All of the legislation that was made was based on feedback, was based on concerns that people had. It was based on the threat of these invasives coming closer to B.C. and our attempt to keep them out of this province.

You asked for specifics. For example, one was we specifically created the authority to enable mandatory inspections of watercraft from outside provincial jurisdictions. That was something we heard a lot, so that is something that we specifically crafted because of suggestions made to us.

Donegal Wilson: I appreciate the minister's allowance to kind of divert and do some all-encompassing questions. I think that will allow us to move a lot quicker, so I appreciate that.

Specifically on clause 78, can the ministry share why we're defining aquatic invasive species separately from controlled alien species?

[7:35 p.m.]

Hon. Randene Neill: The term "controlled alien species" is wide and broad, and the term "aquatic invasive species" is actually a subgroup of controlled alien species, which enables us to tailor and create specific legislation.

Donegal Wilson: Thank you, Minister, for that answer.

Were there any other definitions that the minister or ministry considered while drafting this legislation? As we go through it, there's a lot of repetition about boats and airplanes. It repeats through every clause. Was there some thought around how to use definitions to clean it up, so that it was cleaner legislation?

Hon. Randene Neill: Thank you for the question as well.

We can always be more efficient, but because this is a miscellaneous bill, and what this legislation is doing is urgent and targeted, we did want to be very specific to what we mean. There are lots of different types of watercraft; we wanted to avoid ambiguity.

Also, this legislation is specific for authorities as well, right? In case it's a floating dock, a kayak, a paddleboard or anything, listing that out again and again, repetition, helps create the certainty of what it is that we're talking about. That's why that was chosen.

Clause 78 approved.

On clause 79.

Donegal Wilson: Thank you for that.

I will just share that I did try to draft some definitions to try to clean it up, but we would have been here for the next week then, cleaning everything else up after it. So I did not introduce that.

Under clause 79, what is the process by which a species will be designated as aquatic invasive?

[7:40 p.m.]

Hon. Randene Neill: The species will be designated through a regulation change.

Donegal Wilson: This appears to be focused specifically towards invasive mussels. But the reality is we have whirling disease. We have milfoil and many other invasive aquatics.

Does this definition…? In the regulation, I think you said. Will we be able to redefine all those other aquatic invasives in there as well?

Hon. Randene Neill: The newly proposed section 6.4 allows the minister to make regulations that can designate a non-native animal or fish species as a controlled alien species or a controlled alien species that is an aquatic alien species.

WLRS specifically deals with aquatic invasives — with fauna, not flora like milfoil, as you suggested. As plants. Also, we can't specifically designate diseases, just species.

Clause 79 approved.

On clause 80.

Donegal Wilson: This is a pretty big clause, and it gets into some of that unwieldly that I was talking about, of repetition of what is a boat, trailer, fishing wharves, docks. It comes through several times in this section and further on. I will just put on the record that I think there was a cleaner way to do that.

Will these changes in clause 80 align us with our neighbouring jurisdictions, or will we be different?

Interjection.

Donegal Wilson: I just want to know if we're aligning with our neighbouring jurisdictions or being different or, should I say, leading.

[7:45 p.m.]

Hon. Randene Neill: I think the common consensus is that we are in step with all the other western provinces and states.

In fact, we all work really actively together to ensure that we stop and reduce the spread in the states and the provinces where it's already been detected, in terms of mussels, and in provinces in B.C. where it hasn't been detected to actually make sure that it doesn't take hold here.

Donegal Wilson: Part of this work, 6.5(2), is being repealed and replaced. I just want to read 6.5(2).

It says: "In making regulations under subsection (1), the minister may do one or more of the following: define classes of controlled alien species; make different regulations for different controlled alien species or classes of controlled alien species; delegate a matter to a person; or confer a discretion on a person."

We've changed that, and we've added two more sections. When I read 6.5(2), you've already defined the subclass of aquatic invasive. Wouldn't the existing act cover what we need to do without adding all of the sections thereafter?

[7:50 p.m.]

Hon. Randene Neill: I'll just read the first sentence, 6.5(2). It allows for the minister to regulate, prohibit and impose requirements for driving, operating, shipping or transporting motor or other vehicles and aircraft designed to land on water — for example, float planes or a boat.

In short answer to your question, we needed new authorities here. We simply didn't have the authorities to regulate without this new legislation.

Donegal Wilson: Thank you for that.

I respectfully think that the existing 6.5(2) could have been expanded. It gave you the powers to make regulation, to delegate a matter, to confer discretion. We could have added, maybe, a line in there around the authority to inspect. Regardless, can you define "thing" it refers to or "a thing referred to in this paragraph" that is in 2(b)(v)?

Hon. Randene Neill: The thing referred to in paragraphs (a) to (d) would be a boat trailer, any item used for fishing, a wharf or dock, any item used for water-based activities or any equipment associated with an aircraft designed to land on water, or a boat.

Donegal Wilson: Can you explain the difference between (2)(a) and (2)(b) to me? I'm not really understanding the difference. One's driving, operating; one's shipping or transporting. Typically, with a boat, when you're driving, you're also transporting. I'm a little confused. If we could have some clarification on the difference between (2)(a) and (2)(b).

Hon. Randene Neill: So (a) refers to vehicles or driving, and our team actually used the motion for a steering wheel for part (a). And for part (b), they're water-related equipment, typically non-motorized, like a boat trailer, an item used for fishing, a dock or different items used for water-based activities.

Donegal Wilson: On (3), do we currently have an inspection record that is given to people when they go through our stations?

[7:55 p.m.]

Hon. Randene Neill: How we relate to this is as risk management. Right now we don't currently have any — but, for example, if we do have a vehicle that has some suspicious-looking mussels on it and we decontaminate it, we will issue a certificate or a record of decontamination. We will keep a record of that, but that is as far as we go at this point.

Donegal Wilson: How long would that decontamination be considered good? If they were decontaminated in Golden and three days later are at Okanagan Lake, would they just be showing that and continuing on, or would they be reinspected?

Hon. Randene Neill: For example, if a boat is decontaminated and it hasn't left the province…. We don't have any invasive mussels right now in our province, so we don't require that boat to go through another decontamination. However, they are always required to stop, as part of this legislation. It's part of the mandatory legislation to stop at any inspection points. They're also required to clean, drain and dry their boat.

Above and beyond this legislation, this is part of our education campaign as well. We're just getting people to understand that the last thing we want is invasive species in this province.

We all have to do our best to keep them out.

Donegal Wilson: Do these amendments, then, support a case if a lake had become infected with invasive mussels? Would we be able to pivot and be able to decontaminate and do different measures, based on what we have here today?

[8:00 p.m.]

Hon. Randene Neill: This does actually allow us to pivot. Right now we're really focused on the borders and preventing invasives from coming into the province, but if it was detected in a lake, then we can pivot and set up a parameter or a containment around that lake. That is very consistent with other jurisdictions as well.

Donegal Wilson: I appreciate the answer and that we are able to be nimble if need be.

Looking at section (4)(c), can you provide an example of why we would exclude a person or item?

Hon. Randene Neill: Quite simply, this was put in for emergency measures — emergency services equipment, a water bomber in case of a wildfire. That's why this clause

would exclude a person, a vehicle, an aircraft, that sort of thing.

Donegal Wilson: Thank you. That makes sense.

Will the government provide any transition supports or guidance for the public about these amendments?

[8:05 p.m.]

Hon. Randene Neill: I think the simple answer is we are doing our best with communications and education around this. We've been doing, as we mentioned, the invasive mussel defence program for over a decade. Embedded in that are communication and education to update the public. That's part of the "Clean, drain, dry" as well.

We've got signs up on the highway and at inspection stations, at boat launches as well. Local governments, anglers, different angling organizations, outdoor rec groups and boating groups have been such great partners in letting people know and spreading the word as well. We've been working, as well, with other jurisdictions, western provinces and states, to have similar language and communication and education around this.

Donegal Wilson: Thank you for that, Minister.

Will these amendments have any adverse effects on industry? You had mentioned guided fishing, all of that. How are we managing the industry side of it?

Hon. Randene Neill: There is no cost to industry; in fact, industry just stands to benefit from this legislation. They know, all too well, the threat of invasives coming into B.C.

We've done studies on this, where there's up to $129 million a year in impact on our economy if invasive mussels come here. There is a severe economic impact to industry if invasives come here but none if we keep them out, with this legislation and with the public's help.

Donegal Wilson: Will the ministry be working with those industry partners to ensure that there are best practices put in place for how they are decontaminating fishing gear and things they're bringing into our water systems?

Hon. Randene Neill: Good question. I didn't know the answer to this.

Yes, absolutely, we're working with commercial fishermen and outfitters, etc., for decontamination protocols, which we've got on our website and we're sharing with all industry. By all accounts, they're eager to work through this to keep the invasives out of our waters.

Donegal Wilson: The last thing. I don't know whether it was just my printed copy, but (4)(c) appears to have an extra period right before "exclude." I don't know if that's just the online version or all versions.

Clauses 80 to 83 inclusive approved.

[The bells were rung.]

The Chair: Division has been called in the main chamber, so we will take a short recess and reconvene when that is complete.

The committee recessed from 8:10 p.m. to 8:29 p.m.

[Nina Krieger in the chair.]

The Chair: Good evening. I call Committee of the Whole on Bill 13, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2025, back to order.

On clause 84.

Donegal Wilson: One question I want to hit on is…. I know we're in a rush. What fail-safes have been put in place to ensure that the public is not unduly stopped with such broad language?

Interjection.

The Chair: Recognizing the member for Boundary-Similkameen to please repeat the question.

[8:30 p.m.]

Donegal Wilson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm just looking to know what fail-safes we've put into place to ensure that the public is not unduly stopped with such broad language as is in the act.

Hon. Randene Neill: The inspection authorities for officers are very, very specific to identifying and stopping the spread of invasives within B.C. through vectors of transportation. This is intended to limit the scope to operate within program parameters and set the guardrails.

Donegal Wilson: What steps have we put in place regarding coordinating with Border Services on our U.S. border, and then, as well, what we're doing along the Alberta border?

Hon. Randene Neill: We do work very closely with CBSA. We've been working closely with them ever since the invasive mussel defence program started about a decade ago. They will actually notify us in some cases when boats are coming across the border. They assist us in setting up inspection points — for example, at the Osoyoos border crossing.

Then we have what we call a perimeter defence approach with other provinces and western states, wherein if an invasive mussel is found in, say, Saskatchewan, they

will alert all the neighbouring provinces and areas so we're all on the same page and we're all working together.

Donegal Wilson: How will enforcement capacity be scaled to cover peak traffic periods?

[8:35 p.m.]

Hon. Randene Neill: In the summer months, starting May long weekend right until October, we are full-scale operations. We track what we need for full-scale operations with compliance. We track how many vehicles we stop each year. Then at the beginning of each year, we set off the program based on the data from last year to ensure that we have the people power that we need, and the dog power, to be able to sniff out invasives.

Donegal Wilson: Just leaning back into the work we did in estimates, making sure that the budget is also there to ensure that we have these boots on the ground…. In the Okanagan, when you see so many boats that could be lined up and creating traffic jams and things like that…. I think it's really important that we have the boots on the ground.

Can the minister assure us that we have the budget to implement what's in this act for this boating season?

Hon. Randene Neill: You're right. This is something that we did canvass at estimates. We do have the budget to run this program this year as well as support implementation of the legislation.

As we mentioned at estimates, this isn't just a provincial issue. It's a national issue. So we always encourage the federal government to take part in this program as well. Now that we have a new cabinet, that'll be one of our first calls — to see if we can get them to help us endorse a national program and kick in some funds to really fight the invasives in the country.

Clauses 84 to 86 inclusive approved.

Title approved.

Donegal Wilson: I just wanted to thank the minister and her staff for hanging out all day again. I really do appreciate it. The promptness of your answers to my questions was appreciated. Thank you.

Hon. Randene Neill: 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 8:39 p.m.

Appendix

Schedule 1

TITLE, GLOSSARY AND PREAMBLE

The Tla'amin Final Agreement is amended as follows:

1. *The title of the agreement is changed from* "Tla'amin Final Agreement" *to* "ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs."
2. *The title of the appendices is changed from* "Tla'amin Final Agreement Appendices" *to* "ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs Appendices."
3. *The following glossary is placed before the table of contents in ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs and before the table of contents in the ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs Appendices.*

GLOSSARY OF ʔayʔaǰuθəm WORDS

ORTHOGRAPHY	*MEANING*	*PRONUNCIATION*
ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs	a good relationship with someone *[note: used as the name of this Agreement]*	Ah-jin-hway-gus
ʔayʔaǰuθəm	Tla'amin language	ay-a-joo-thum
taʔow	teachings	ta-ow
payɛštot yiχmɛtšt kʷʊms taʔow	we take care of our teachings *[note: used as a heading in Chapter 14]*	payesht-oat yeeh-metsht kooms ta-ow
hega	and	hega
q̓ʷətəms t̓išosəm	Sliammon River	Kwuh-tums t-eh-shoh-sum
q̓ʷətəms q̓aq̓ɛyq̓ay	River at Grace Harbour	Kwuh-tums k-ahk-ehk-aye
ʔaʔgayqsən	Harwood Island	ah-gyk-sun
t̓aχəmay	Cedar	tah-huh-my

ORTHOGRAPHY	*MEANING*	*PRONUNCIATION*
ti:xʷay	Cypress (yellow cedar)	Teeh-why
θəqay	Sockeye salmon	thuk-aye
qʷətɛčɩn	Pink salmon	kwuh-teh-cheen
ƛoχʷay	Chum salmon	kloh-why
χɛyt̓θɛqʷ	Coho salmon	hai-theh-kwh
t̓θoχo	Lingcod	thoh-hoh
χɛχyɛq̓	Crab	heh-he-yek
kikɛʔəqəł	Prawn	ki-ki-uh-kulth
łagət	Herring	lha-gut
ʔaləs	Sea Cucumber	ah-luss
qɛʔɛč	Roosevelt elk	qeh-etch

4. *The term* "this Agreement" *in clauses G, H, I, K, N and O of the* ***Preamble*** *is replaced with* "ʔaʔǰɩnxʷegəs."
5. *Clauses L and M of the* ***Preamble*** *are deleted and replaced with the following:*

   L. Tla'amin people are Coast Salish people who speak ʔayʔaǰuθəm and whose taʔow, ceremonies, and oral histories are tied to the lands and waters surrounding the northern Salish Sea;

   M. It is an important objective of the Tla'amin Nation to preserve, protect and enhance ʔayʔaǰuθəm and its taʔow, ceremonies, and oral histories;

USE OF ʔayʔaǰuθəm IN ʔaʔǰɩnxʷegəs AND RELATED AMENDMENTS

6. *The definition of* "Agreement" *in the* ***Definitions Chapter*** *is amended by replacing it with the following:*

   "Agreement" means this agreement among the Tla'amin Nation, Canada and British Columbia and the Schedules and Appendices to this agreement, which is also referred to as:

   a. the Tla'amin Final Agreement in Federal Settlement Legislation, Provincial Settlement Legislation and other Federal or Provincial Laws;
   b. ʔaʔǰɩnxʷegəs; and
   c. the Tla'amin Treaty;

7. *The term* "Tla'amin Final Agreement" *in the definition of* "Atlas" *in the* ***Definitions Chapter*** *and in the Introduction of the ʔaʔǰɩnxʷegəs Appendices is replaced with* "ʔaʔǰɩnxʷegəs."
8. *The term* "Tla'amin language" *is replaced with* "ʔayʔaǰuθəm" *in subparagraph 75.a of the* ***Fisheries Chapter****, in subparagraph 38.a of the* ***Wildlife Chapter****, in subparagraph 33.a of the* ***Migratory Birds Chapter****, in subparagraph 32.a of the* ***Tla'amin Role Outside Tla'amin Lands Chapter****, in paragraph 1 and subparagraph 4.a of the* ***Culture and Heritage Chapter****, and in subparagraph 19.a and paragraphs 101, 106 and 137 of the* ***Governance Chapter****.*
9. *The term* "Tla'amin Culture and Language" *in the heading before paragraph 1 of the* ***Culture and Heritage Chapter*** *is replaced with* "payɛštot yiχmɛtšt kʷʊms taʔow hega ʔayʔaǰuθəm."
10. *The term* "Sliammon River" *is replaced with* "q̓ʷətəms t̓išosəm" *in subparagraphs 13.b and 13.c of Schedule 1 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter****.*
11. *The phrase* "Kwehtums Kahkeeky (creek that runs into Grace Harbour)" *is replaced with* "q̓ʷətəms q̓aq̓ɛyq̓ay" *in subparagraph 37.c of the* ***Lands Chapter*** *and the term* "Kwehtums Kahkeeky" *is replaced with* "q̓ʷətəms q̓aq̓ɛyq̓ay" *in Schedule 1 of the* ***Water Chapter****.*
12. *The term* "Ahgykson" *is replaced with* "ʔaʔgayqsən" *in the* ***Definitions Chapter****, paragraphs 44 and 45 of the* ***Lands Chapter****, paragraph 3 of the* ***Access Chapter****, paragraphs 49 and 64 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter****, and the heading before paragraph 15 and paragraphs 15 and 16 in the* ***Wildlife Chapter****.*
13. *The term* "Ahgykson (Harwood Island)" *is replaced with* "ʔaʔgayqsən" *in subparagraph 37.b of the* ***Lands Chapter****.*
14. *The phrase* "cedar and cypress" *is replaced with* "t̓aχəmay hega ti:xʷay" *in the definition of* "Cultural Purposes" *and* "Monumental Cedar and Cypress" *in the* ***Definitions Chapter****, and the heading before paragraph 31 and in paragraphs 31 to 33 of the* ***Culture and Heritage Chapter****.*
15. *The terms* "sockeye salmon" *and* "sockeye" *are replaced with* "θəqay" *in the headings before paragraphs 12 and 16 of Schedule 1 and in paragraphs 12, and 16 to 19 of Schedule 1 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter****.*
16. *The term* "pink salmon" *is replaced with* "qʷətɛčɩn" *in the heading before paragraph 20 of Schedule 1 and in paragraphs 2, 5 and 20 of Schedule 1 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter****.*

17. *The terms* "chum salmon" *and* "chum" *are replaced with* "ƛoχʷay" *in the headings before paragraphs 13 and 16 of Schedule 1 and in paragraphs 2, 5, 13, and 16 to 19 of Schedule 1 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter***.

18. *The terms* "coho salmon" *and* "coho" *are replaced with "χɛyiˈθɛqʷ" in the headings before paragraphs 15 and 16 of Schedule 1 and in paragraphs 15 to 19 of Schedule 1 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter***.

19. *The term* "lingcod" *is replaced with* "t̓θoχo" *in the heading before paragraph 11 and in paragraphs 1, 2, 4, 9, and 11 to 13 of Schedule 2 and in subparagraph 2.c of Schedule 3 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter***.

20. *The term* "crab" *is replaced with* "χɛχyɛq̓" *in the heading before paragraph 19 and in paragraphs 1, 2, 4, 9, 19 and 20 of Schedule 2 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter***.

21. *The term* "prawn" *is replaced with* "kikɛʔəqəɬ" *in the heading before paragraph 17 and in paragraphs 1, 2, 4, 9, 17 and 18 of Schedule 2 and paragraph 3 of Schedule 3 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter***.

22. *The term* "herring" *is replaced with* "ɬagət" *in the heading before paragraph 15 and in paragraphs 1, 2, 4, 9, 15 and 16 of Schedule 2 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter****, in the Table of Contents of the ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs Appendices and the titles of* ***Appendix N-2*** *and of Part 1 and Part 2 of* ***Appendix N-2****, the defined term* "Tla'amin Herring Fishing Area," *and the title and legend for the map in Part 2 of* ***Appendix N-2***.

23. *The term* "sea cucumber" *is replaced with* "ʔaləs" *in the heading before paragraph 23 and in paragraphs 1, 2, 4, 9, 23 and 24 of Schedule 2 of the* ***Fisheries Chapter***.

24. *The terms* "Roosevelt elk" *and* "elk" *are replaced with* "ɛʔɛč" *in the heading before paragraph 49, the title of Schedule 1 and in paragraph 49 of the body and paragraphs 1 and 2 of Schedule 1 of the* ***Wildlife Chapter****, and the Table of Contents of the ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs Appendices, and the title and legend of the map in* ***Appendix Q***.

25. *The term* "Powell River Regional District" *in subparagraph 51.c.i of the* ***Lands Chapter*** *and paragraph 16 of the* ***Local and Regional Government Relations Chapter*** *is replaced with* "qathet Regional District."

26. ***Appendix W*** *of the ʔaʔǰɪnxʷegəs Appendices is replaced with the following, acknowledging the geographic features named and renamed as of the Effective Date in accordance with paragraph 28 of the* ***Culture and Heritage Chapter****, and changes to geographic feature names made after the Effective Date in accordance with paragraphs 29 and 30 of the* ***Culture and Heritage Chapter***.

APPENDIX W

KEY GEOGRAPHIC FEATURES

Part 1 Geographic Features Named

Part 2 Geographic Features Renamed

Part 1: Geographic Features Named

Feature type	Place names as of Effective Date	Place names changed after the Effective Date	Location	BCGS[1] map
Creek	Kwehtums Kahkeeky	q̓ʷətəm q̓a q̓ɛy q̓ay	Creek on Indian Reserve No. 6 Kahkaykay	92K/007
Island	Tlukeht kwukthyehs	θoqʷɛt kʷukʷθays	Small island attached to *ʔaʔgayqsən* at low tide	92F/087

[1] British Columbia Geographic System.

Part 2: Geographic Features Renamed

Feature type	Place names as of Effective Date	Place names changed after the Effective Date	Location	BCGS[1] map
Community	Teeshohsum	t̓išosəm	Sliammon Indian Reserve 1	92F/097
River	Kwahtums Teeshohsum		Sliammon Creek	92F/087
Island	Ahgykson Island	ʔaʔgayqsən	Harwood Island Indian Reserve 2	92F/087
Former Tla'amin village site	Pahkeeahjim	p̓aq̓iʔaǰum	Paukeanum Indian Reserve 3	92K/006
Former Tla'amin village site	Tohkwonon	toqʷanan	Toquana Indian Reserve 4	92K/007

Feature type	Place names as of Effective Date	Place names changed after the Effective Date	Location	BCGS[1] map
Former Tla'amin village site	Tuxwnech	toχʷnač	Tokenatch Indian Reserve 5	92F/097
Former Tla'amin village site	Kahkeeky	q̓a q̓ɛy q̓ay	Kahkaykay Indian Reserve 6	92K/007
Bay	Shehtekwahn		Pocahontas Bay	92F/078

[1] British Columbia Geographic System.

LIVING AGREEMENT

27. The following paragraph is added immediately after paragraph 1 of the ***General Provisions Chapter****:*

LIVING AGREEMENT

1.1 The Parties recognize and acknowledge that this Agreement is a living agreement and provides a foundation for evolution and for an ongoing relationship amongst the Parties.

ADOPTION, GUARDIANSHIP AND CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

28. The following definition is inserted in the ***Definitions Chapter*** *immediately after the definition for* "Child"*:*

"Child and Family Service" means a service to support Children and families including prevention services, early intervention services and Child protection services;

29. The definitions of "Child in Care," "Child in Need of Protection" *and* "Child Protection Service" *in the* ***Definitions Chapter*** *are deleted.*

30. The following paragraphs are added to the ***General Provisions Chapter*** *immediately after paragraph 22:*

22.1 Paragraph 22 does not preclude Federal Law from providing for the application of Tla'amin Law to Canada or Provincial Law from providing for the application of Tla'amin Law to British Columbia.

22.2 Notwithstanding paragraph 22, Tla'amin Law applies to agents of Canada or British Columbia on Tla'amin Lands acting outside of the purposes for which they are agents for Canada or British Columbia, as applicable.

31. Paragraph 28 of the ***Governance Chapter*** *is amended by replacing* "Child Protection Services" *with* "Child and Family Services."

32. Paragraphs 30 and 31 of the ***Governance Chapter*** *are deleted and replaced with the following:*

30. At the written request of any Party made within three months of receiving notice under paragraph 28, the relevant Parties will discuss:
    a. options to address the interests of the Tla'amin Nation through methods other than the exercise of law-making authority;
    b. immunity of individuals providing services or exercising authority under Tla'amin Law;
    c. coordination between individuals providing services or exercising authority under Tla'amin Law and other service providers;
    d. any transfer of cases and related documentation from federal or provincial institutions to Tla'amin Institutions, including any confidentiality and privacy considerations;
    e. any transfer of assets from federal or provincial institutions to Tla'amin Institutions;
    f. any appropriate amendments to Federal Law or Provincial Law, including amendments to address duplicate licensing requirements;
    g. the relationship of Tla'amin Laws with other Indigenous law; and
    h. other matters agreed to by the relevant Parties.

31. The Parties may negotiate agreements regarding any of the matters set out in paragraph 30, but an agreement under this paragraph is not a condition precedent to the exercise of law-making authority by the Tla'amin Nation, and such authority may be exercised immediately following the six month notice period or the notice period agreed upon in accordance with paragraph 29.

33. The heading before paragraph 61 and paragraphs 61 to 81 of the **Governance Chapter** *are deleted and replaced with the following:*

Adoption

61. The Tla'amin Nation may make laws in relation to adoptions:
    a. of Tla'amin Children in British Columbia; and
    b. by Tla'amin Citizens of Children who reside on Tla'amin Lands.

62. Any Tla'amin Law made under paragraph 61 will:
    a. expressly provide that the best interests of the Child are the paramount consideration in determining whether an adoption will take place;
    b. provide for the consent of an individual whose consent to a Child's adoption is required under Provincial Law, subject to the power of the court to dispense with such consent;
    c. provide for the collection, use, disclosure and security of information; and
    d. not preclude an adoption under Provincial Law or limit the court's power to dispense with consent to an adoption under Provincial Law.
63. Where the Tla'amin Nation exercises law-making authority under paragraph 61, the Tla'amin Nation will provide Canada and British Columbia with a record of all adoptions occurring under Tla'amin Law.
64. The record of adoption under paragraph 63 will include the following information:
    a. if born in British Columbia, the birth registration number of the adopted Child;
    b. if not born in British Columbia, the original birth registration of the adopted Child;
    c. any name change as a result of the adoption;
    d. the names, dates of birth, places of birth and contact information for the adoptive parents; and
    e. the effective date of the adoption.
65. If a Director designated under the *Child, Family and Community Service Act* becomes the guardian of a Tla'amin Child, the Director will:
    a. give notice to the Tla'amin Nation that the Director is the guardian of the Tla'amin Child;
    b. give notice to the Tla'amin Nation when the Director applies for a continuing custody order;
    c. provide the Tla'amin Nation with a copy of the continuing custody order once the order is made and make reasonable efforts to involve the Tla'amin Nation in planning for the Tla'amin Child;
    d. if requested by the Tla'amin Nation, consent to the application of Tla'amin Law to the adoption of the Tla'amin Child, provided that it is in the best interests of the Tla'amin Child; and
    e. in determining the best interest of the Tla'amin Child under subparagraph d. the Director will consider the importance of preserving the Tla'amin Child's cultural identity.
66. A Tla'amin Law under paragraph 61 prevails to the extent of a Conflict with Federal Law or Provincial Law.
67. Before placing a Tla'amin Child for adoption, a Director or an adoption agency under the Adoption Act will:
    a. make reasonable efforts to obtain information about the Tla'amin Child's cultural identity and preserve information for the Tla'amin Child; and
    b. discuss and collaborate about the Tla'amin Child's placement with a designated representative of the Tla'amin Nation.
68. [Deleted]
69. [Deleted]
70. [Deleted]

Guardianship

71. The Tla'amin Nation has standing in any judicial proceedings in British Columbia in which guardianship of a Tla'amin Child is in dispute and the court will take judicial notice of Tla'amin Laws and consider any evidence and representations in relation to Tla'amin Laws and customs in addition to any other matters it is required by law to consider.
72. The participation of the Tla'amin Nation in proceedings referred to in paragraph 71 will be in accordance with the applicable rules of court and will not affect the court's ability to control its process.

Child and Family Services

73. The Tla'amin Nation may make laws in relation to Child and Family Services:
    a. for Tla'amin Children and other Children of Tla'amin Families; and
    b. if an agreement under subparagraph 80.b is reached and subject to that agreement, for Children who are not members of Tla'amin Families.
74. Any Tla'amin Law made under paragraph 73 will:
    a. expressly provide that those laws will be interpreted and administered such that the best interests of the Child is the paramount consideration;
    b. not preclude the reporting, under any applicable law, of a Child in need of protection; and
    c. provide for the collection, use, disclosure and security of Child and Family Services information.
75. Any Tla'amin Law under paragraph 73 must be consistent with any minimum standards set out in Federal Law that are applicable, on a national level, to the provision of Child and Family Services in relation to Indigenous Children.

76. If the Tla'amin Nation makes laws under paragraph 73, the Tla'amin Nation will establish and maintain a system for the management, storage and disposal of Child and Family Services records and the safeguarding of personal Child and Family Services information.
77. Notwithstanding any laws made under paragraph 73, if there is an emergency in which a Tla'amin Child is in need of protection, and the Tla'amin Nation has not responded or is unable to respond in a timely manner, British Columbia may act to protect the Tla'amin Child and, unless British Columbia and the Tla'amin Nation otherwise agree in writing, British Columbia will refer the matter to the Tla'amin Nation after the emergency.
78. If the Tla'amin Nation has made a law under paragraph 73 and there is an emergency in which the Child under British Columbia's authority is a Child in need of protection, the Tla'amin Nation may act to protect the Child and, unless British Columbia and the Tla'amin Nation otherwise agree in writing, the Tla'amin Nation will refer the matter to British Columbia after the emergency.
79. A Tla'amin Law under paragraph 73 prevails to the extent of a Conflict with Federal Law or Provincial Law.
80. At the request of the Tla'amin Nation or British Columbia, the Tla'amin Nation and British Columbia will negotiate and attempt to reach agreement in relation to Child and Family Services for:
    a. Children of Tla'amin Families who reside on or off Tla'amin Lands; or
    b. Children who are not members of Tla'amin Families and who reside on Tla'amin Lands.
81. Where the Director becomes the guardian of a Tla'amin Child, the Director will make reasonable efforts to include the Tla'amin Nation in planning for the Tla'amin Child, including adoption planning.

81.1 The Tla'amin Nation and the Minister or a Director designated under the *Child, Family and Community Services Act* may enter into an agreement, in accordance with Provincial Law, that has the effect of:
    a. imposing specific duties or restrictions on a Director; or
    b. requiring that specific services be provided or not provided by a Director.

Schedule 2

***L'Accord définitif des Tla'amins* est modifié comme il suit :**

[French version to be attached once it has been completed]

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