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Alberta Liberals cry foul as Tories stop debate

Government tries to speed private health-care bill

JILL MAHONEY in Edmonton
HEATHER SCOFFIELD in Ottawa
The Globe and Mail

Opposition parties are accusing the Alberta government of heavy-handedness after it used a little-known legislative tool to speed up second reading of its controversial private health care bill.

A government MLA introduced a motion late Monday evening to limit debate on the bill. The move was expected to allow it to pass second reading last night.

The measure prevented opposition members from introducing amendments during this part of the process, although the bill can be altered once it reaches committee stage.

While the government's motion is not equivalent to closure, which limits debate after third reading, both opposition parties slammed the measure as a desperate attempt to choke debate.

"To stifle these voices is an affront to the people of this province and an act of cowardice," Liberal Leader Nancy MacBeth said during Question Period.

Premier Ralph Klein was unruffled and mocked the opposition for having only seven members present in the legislature Monday evening when the Liberals tried to filibuster the bill by referring it to a standing policy committee — an attempt that led to the government motion.

Bill 11 would see public money used to pay private, for-profit clin-

ics to perform a range of procedures requiring overnight stays that are now performed only in hospitals. The government says the plan will shorten waiting lists, but critics say it violates the spirit of the Canada Health Act and could see physicians pressuring patients to purchase upgraded services not covered by the public system.

After second reading, the bill goes to committee of the whole, where it will be dissected by all MLAs and amendments can be introduced. The government has said it intends to amend the bill to strengthen prohibitions on queue-jumping and conflict-of-interest guidelines.

Meanwhile, a prominent Canadian international trade lawyer said the legal opinion that the Alberta government relied on to prove that its health-care legislation won't trigger retaliation under North American Free-Trade Agreement is seriously flawed.

"We have no choice but to conclude that many of its key legal conclusions are misleading," said Barry Appleton, who represents most of the U.S. corporations that are trying to sue Ottawa under NAFTA.

"If we were advising the government of Alberta, we would urge them to seriously reconsider the NAFTA implications of their proposed policy."

Mr. Appleton is to release his own legal opinion today on behalf of the Canadian Health Coalition, which opposes Bill 11.