

No. 66B



N° 66B

ISSN 1180-2987

**Legislative Assembly
of Ontario**

Third Session, 37th Parliament

**Assemblée législative
de l'Ontario**

Troisième session, 37^e législature

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

Tuesday 3 December 2002

Mardi 3 décembre 2002

Speaker
Honourable Gary Carr

Président
L'honorable Gary Carr

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Tuesday 3 December 2002

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Mardi 3 décembre 2002

The House met at 1845.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR EXPENSES ACT
(CABINET MINISTERS AND
OPPOSITION LEADERS), 2002

LOI DE 2002 SUR L'OBLIGATION
DE RENDRE COMPTE DES DÉPENSES
(MINISTRES ET CHEFS D'UN PARTI
DE L'OPPOSITION)

Mr Wilson, on behalf of Mr Tsubouchi, moved second reading of the following bill:

Bill 216, An Act respecting access to information, the review of expenses and the accountability of Cabinet ministers, Opposition leaders and certain other persons / Projet de loi 216, Loi concernant l'accès à l'information ainsi que l'examen des dépenses et l'obligation de rendre compte des ministres, des chefs d'un parti de l'opposition et de certaines autres personnes.

Mrs Julia Munro (York North): On a point of order, Mr Speaker: I seek unanimous consent that we go in rotation this evening.

Interjections.

Mrs Munro: Twenty minutes each.

The Acting Speaker (Mr Michael A. Brown): How be you read it again, so I know what you're—

Mrs Munro: Give me one second.

The Acting Speaker: The minister has the floor, and I would presume the minister would start to make his speech.

Hon Jim Wilson (Minister of Northern Development and Mines) On a point of order, Mr Speaker: I think we've agreed to split the time, 20 minutes each, stand down the leads, and it will count as one sessional day. I am asking for unanimous consent.

The Acting Speaker: The minister has asked to stand down the leads, 20 minutes per party in rotation, and this will be one sessional day. And no other business is called. Agreed? Agreed.

Debate.

Mrs Munro: It is my pleasure to begin the debate today on Bill 216, the Accountability for Expenses Act (Cabinet Ministers and Opposition Leaders), 2002. This is just the latest plank in the government's platform of important accountability measures to bring greater open-

ness and transparency to the way in which MPPs and their staff spend taxpayers' dollars. Since 1995, the Public Sector Salary Disclosure Act, the Balanced Budget Act, and the Taxpayer Protection Act have all given the taxpayers of Ontario greater legislative protection over the taxpayer dollars government spends. It gives greater assurance to the people that their government will not return to the tax-and-spend days of Liberal and NDP governments and that their interests are protected.

This bill is only the latest addition to this impressive track record. For decades governments of all stripes in this House have operated under different sets of rules which were hidden from public view, too open to interpretation and inconsistently applied. Acting in good faith, ministers, parliamentary assistants and their respective staffs have claimed expenses which in turn have been called into question by their critics. Whether they were claims from dinners, trips or hosting delegations, all parties at some point have been on the receiving end of this criticism.

1850

Now is the time to take action to end the uncertainty and speculation, and to give taxpayers real assurance that the people who spend their hard-earned money are truly accountable for it and have clear, consistent rules by which they must abide.

That's why this past June, Premier Ernie Eves asked the Chair of the Management Board of Cabinet to review these rules and bring forward a proposal about how to improve the system and ensure it is open, accountable and fair. This bill is the result of that review and encompasses the need for a clear set of rules backed by an independent third party who has the power not only to advise, but to impose remedial action if necessary. If carried by this Legislature, this bill would be the first in Canada to bring legislative oversight to the way in which members of Parliament handle their expenses. Giving the Integrity Commissioner the power to establish rules, regularly review them and table an annual report would give unprecedented transparency and accountability to the entire process. By giving this role to an independent third party, the bill would provide much-needed impartiality to this process to ensure it is fair and reasonable.

This works on a number of levels. By referring this to an independent third party, it removes the partisan and adversarial nature of interpreting this issue in the Legislature. By doing so, it would help focus its energy on the real policy issues of the day that the people of Ontario sent us here to resolve. Health care, education and the

environment are all more important to taxpayers than how ministers, parliamentary assistants and opposition leaders spend their money on dinner. We owe it to them to come to a real resolution on this matter so that the House can focus its energy on these substantive issues and move forward.

This bill would help to do that by preventing endless partisan accusations, by providing for a mechanism to resolve disputes that might arise, and for the first time, by giving the people of Ontario a glimpse at how the leaders of the opposition spend the taxpayer dollars for which they are responsible. Requiring all ministers, parliamentary assistants, leaders of the opposition parties and their respective staffs to submit their expenses to the Integrity Commissioner will in itself provide a greater level of accountability.

As a person who enjoys the unqualified confidence of this House, the Integrity Commissioner is in an excellent position to judge with impartiality whether or not an expense was reimbursed according to the rules, rules which he is now in the process of developing. Similar to the way in which the Provincial Auditor encourages the responsible use of public funds, this reporting system would add a level of scrutiny never before seen in Ontario and not seen anywhere else in Canada. The commissioner would, on a proactive level, be able to provide advice to a person who seeks it, giving all persons under this bill the advantage of non-partisan advice before incurring an expense. This advice would be the same for all parties, whether Progressive Conservative, Liberal or New Democratic. It would apply equally to all those included under the bill and would provide much-needed consistency that is lacking under the current system.

I think it's really important to highlight this particular aspect of the bill with regard to the opportunity for this non-partisan advice. I know that many members take advantage of the ability to inquire currently under the Integrity Commissioner's responsibility with regard to areas that they face, questions on which they wish to have a decision made. It is this kind of non-partisan advice that would be available to all members in this particular piece of legislation.

I know that when you look at the Integrity Commissioner's report today, as it stands, and in his current function, there are often many examples in his report of the kinds of situations that he has been asked to give advice on. I know that many members find this opportunity to be very, very valuable. Obviously, having that non-partisan advice in this new context will, again, provide the members with the security that they have his advice and his position, his interpretation, and therefore are able to move forward in the same way they are able to seek that advice under the legislation we currently have.

Of course, we all know that no matter what the system, situations will arise that were never contemplated, the grey area that requires the use of judgment. Should a person exercise judgment that the commissioner

feels was inappropriate, he would then be able to direct a person to repay the reimbursement and to do so within a set period of time. I think this simply underlines the point I made previously with regard to the current legislation with the Integrity Commissioner, that obviously seeking the advice ahead of time is an absolutely foolproof way of ensuring that you are in fact not stepping into that grey area. This is, I think, a very, very important protection for all members who need to have that kind of impartial judgment.

While I anticipate that the vast majority of people would defer to the commissioner's decision, there is always the possibility that a person could choose not to do so. In that case, the commissioner would then be able to name the person in the annual report. As all members of this House know, this may well be the most damaging of punishments: public humiliation.

Again, following the same kind of pattern that currently exists with the Members' Integrity Act, the Integrity Commissioner has that ultimate tool available to him in naming a member. I know that all of us in this House are very conscious of the need to ensure that we follow within those guidelines currently set up in the Members' Integrity Act, and this simply runs in a parallel way for the members of cabinet, parliamentary assistants and the leaders of the opposition. Should there be a situation where that is not sufficient, the commissioner would also be able to recommend to the Legislature any other remedial action that he or she sees fit. Again, this is consistent with the commissioner's power under the Members' Integrity Act, and fits the government's commitment to accountability and openness.

One of the most important features of this new regime would be the evenness and consistency that would exist between offices. The same rules would apply to me as a parliamentary assistant, cabinet ministers past and present, the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of the third party and all our respective staff. We would all be held to the same standard and, more importantly, the public would be able to hold us to the same standard because this bill would require the government to post the rules on its Web site and to make them available upon request. Again, this level of openness is unprecedented.

1900

I know there are a number of members across the way who are opposed to the legislation. I have heard them say that it leans on them a little too much and that it holds the opposition to a higher standard than the government. Nothing could be further from the truth. This bill would open to public scrutiny the expenses of the leaders of the opposition parties. It may be a shock for the opposition parties, whose expenses have never been the subject of public scrutiny; however, the goal of this bill is to be fair to all members and accountable to all taxpayers. On this side of the House, we don't mind the scrutiny. After all, governing brings with it the responsibility and obligation to be called to one's actions. We do that for an hour in this House each day. However, we also know that a taxpayer is a taxpayer and a tax dollar is a tax dollar, and

it is unfair to the people of this province not to be able to request or review the expenses of the Leader of the Opposition and his staff.

I know it is possible that the Liberals may claim that this bill would actually hold the former Premier, Bob Rae, and Lyn McLeod to a higher standard, but before I get to that, let me say that I never thought I would see Monte Kwinter, the Liberal member for York Centre, standing in front of a portrait of NDP Premier Bob Rae defending his legacy. I also wonder if the honourable member had forgotten about the \$300,000 trip to Italy that he took when he was part of the David Peterson government—

Mr Wayne Wettlaufer (Kitchener Centre): How much?

Mrs Munro: It was \$300,000—until Graham Richardson reminded him of it on last Friday's 6 o'clock Global news. I'm not sure about him, but I certainly would not have forgotten a \$1,000-a-night, four-star hotel. But I digress.

There is nothing in this bill that would hold the former leaders of the parties opposite to a higher standard than our former leader and Premier, and that's well understood. The Liberals know full well that Premier Harris's records have always been subject to freedom of information legislation. They seem to not have had a problem obtaining the records of other cabinet ministers, so I find it somewhat confusing why they think that the records of the prime minister of a government would not be subject to a freedom of information request. This has always been the case and there is nothing in the current legislation before the House that would change that.

Of the 56 government members, 49 of them can have their expenses examined under freedom of information legislation—under the current legislation, I should emphasize—because they are ministers or parliamentary assistants. Out of the 37 members of the opposition caucus, none of them can fall under the freedom of information requests, not one. The same is true for the caucus of the third party and their nine sitting members.

Under the proposed legislation, the numbers for the government side would not change. We would still be held to account, as we always have been. On the other hand, we would be taking the giant step, I might suggest, of increasing those covered under the opposition caucuses to one each. I recognize that to increase those covered under freedom of information legislation—I should say, to make them covered by it at all—is a giant step in accountability for the members opposite, but I hope they will agree that this is a reasonable step.

It is also important to remember that even when the leaders of the opposition parties are covered by the legislation, they would not be covered nearly to the same extent. These amendments would only allow a person to request or review the records dealing with expense claims. It would only extend the freedom of information legislation to deal with those dealing with travel, meals, accommodation and hospitality, and that's it. Caucus research offices would not be covered, and neither would

the expense records of the deputy leader of the opposition, nor would their education critic, health critic or any other member of their shadow cabinet.

The only new people covered by this legislation would be the leaders of the opposition and the staff. If that's not a level of scrutiny they can handle, they should come out and say it. They should vote against the bill, and then explain themselves to their constituents over the inter-session break.

These are important changes to the way in which ministers, parliamentary assistants, the leaders of the opposition parties and their respective staffs can claim business-related expenses. For far too long, the rules governing those expenses have been vague and inconsistently applied. I think it's extremely important to emphasize the fact that the rules have been there, they have been vague and they have been inconsistently applied. This is an opportunity we have taken to ensure that we do what is expected. The people of Ontario expect their elected officials to spend their tax dollars reasonably and responsibly. It is time to set in place a system that will provide for greater scrutiny and consistency.

This bill has been carefully crafted to make leaders of the opposition parties accountable for the taxpayer dollars with which they are entrusted. At the same time, it does not provide for any additional disclosure of any member's constituency work, which would still be overseen by the Board of Internal Economy. This is a fair process that recognizes the important leadership roles of the opposition party leaders as distinct from the rest of their caucus. It would provide a more equitable standard of openness, which is sorely lacking under the current system. By having the Integrity Commissioner report annually, it provides for an ongoing system of fairness and accountability.

This is important legislation that is needed to ensure the accountability that the people of Ontario expect from us. I look forward to the continued debate on this bill and encourage the House to give it speedy passage.

Mr John Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands): I'm very pleased to join this debate this evening and to tell you that one of the things I've been interested in over the last seven years is the whole question of accountability. I certainly will be supporting this bill and I know our caucus will be supporting this bill.

I don't like the way the member for York North, for whom I have a high regard—she was a very prominent member of the public accounts committee for many years and made very valid contributions. But she kept talking about the opposition leaders as if this bill dealt only with the opposition leaders. Let's clarify it for the people of Ontario. This bill deals not only with the two opposition leaders we have here, the opposition and the third party, but it also deals with the 25 or so cabinet ministers we have. That's where the main focus surely should be, if for nothing else than in pure numbers. There are 25 over there and two here.

I don't think the public should somehow be left with the impression that the individual members shouldn't be

held accountable. I think we should be held accountable for every tax dollar that's spent, whether it comes out of our individual global budgets or whether it comes out of cabinet ministers' budgets or leaders of the opposition's budgets, whether it's spent in any government department.

1910

It's kind of ironic that we should be talking about this bill this evening. That's really what the Provincial Auditor's report annually is about. It's all about accountability. It's all about making sure the taxpayers' dollars, which are the dollars that you and I and the people of Ontario put into the system, are properly spent. Whether we're talking about spending it in programs for health care, education, the environment or anything else, or whether we're talking about spending it through our own individual global budgets or through ministerial budgets or the leaders of the opposition's budgets, it should all be accountable. No money should be wasted at all, because a dollar wasted is a dollar out of your pocket and my pocket. I think the people of Ontario deserve better than that.

But let's have some honesty to the system. The reason this bill is here is because of a number of unfortunate situations that happened in this House. I happen to believe that all the members here are honourable members; there's no question about it. But there were a couple of things that happened here. I'm not going to go into detail as to which cabinet minister spent more money or who spent less or what have you, but we all know why this bill is here: because of certain embarrassments that happened on the government side which caused one minister to fall and high expenses of other people—

Interjections.

Mr Gerretsen: You can see all my expenses. I've got absolutely nothing to hide. But what this gentleman doesn't understand is that we're already accountable. Our global budgets are accountable. On June 30, or sometime near the end of June, we get a report as to how all our global money—all our money for accommodation, all our expense money and travel money—is being expended. There should be full accountability for that, absolutely no question about it. But to somehow make it sound as if the members' budgets aren't accountable is, I think, doing all of us a disservice, because that's not the case. If somebody is spending money in an outlandish fashion and not having the due diligence that you would in spending your own money, then that is wrong, absolutely, and this bill is here because the government was embarrassed, which caused one minister to resign and a couple of other parliamentary assistants apparently to come up with tremendously high individual travel bills or what have you. That's what this is all about.

I see another very prominent former member of the public accounts committee here, the member for Niagara Falls. I can't for the life of me understand why you would include the current opposition leaders—you take the opposition leaders right back to June 1995, and you do the same thing with your own cabinet ministers—but

anybody who has left this place or was the leader of government is somehow exempted. Why isn't Mr Harris part of this? I realize full well—

Interjections.

Mr Gerretsen: Well, include him in the legislation, then.

Mr Wettlaufer: You could have FOIed him.

Mr Gerretsen: Of course I can FOI it. I can FOI it right now, and the cabinet ministers too. But the whole idea of having a piece of legislation is to make sure it's easier for the general public to do it. It's not what you and I can do by way of freedom of information; it's how does the general public get to know this? All I can tell you—

Mr Wettlaufer: Give us your leader's expenses.

The Acting Speaker: I've brought the member for Kitchener Centre to order a number of times, and if he wishes to continue, he won't be here.

Mr Gerretsen: My leader's expenses you should know about, and we should know about your leader's expenses too.

If there's one bit that I didn't agree with from the member for York North, it's that somehow she talked about something that a minister was involved in during the Peterson years and how much money he spent. I can assure you in that particular case that he probably took a trade mission somewhere, so that the money that was spent included an awful lot of money probably for salaries for civil servants and whatever else goes along with that. Let's be honest about it: that's what happened.

I, by the way, don't have a particular problem with, for example, people who may want to do business in Canada, from which we can all benefit in Ontario, being wined and dined to a certain reasonable extent so that we can get their business here. I've got no problem with that at all, because I know that sometimes you have to spend a dollar in order to make \$10 and in order to make our economy grow. So I've got absolutely no problem with it at all. But what I would like to know is, why have you somehow exempted Mr Harris and Bob Rae—and I'd forgotten that Bob Rae was actually here—

The Acting Speaker: Point of order, the member for Kitchener Centre.

Mr Wettlaufer: Mr Speaker, under the point that the member opposite is raising, he is wondering why, under the point of order—no, no.

The Acting Speaker: No, what's the point of order?

Mr Wettlaufer: I'm trying to get to that. Mr Harris's expenses have been FOIed 12 times—

The Acting Speaker: That's not a point of order. Sit down. The member for Kingston and the Islands.

Mr Gerretsen: They may have been FOIed a hundred times. That still doesn't make it any easier for the general public to—

Mr Wettlaufer: They're there for you.

The Acting Speaker: I name the member for Kitchener Centre, Mr Wettlaufer.

Mr Wettlaufer was escorted from the chamber.

The Acting Speaker: The member for Kingston and the Islands.

Mr Gerretsen: Well, I must admit that I'm a little surprised. Here I got up and I agreed with everything that's in this bill, I think there should be something more in the bill, and I get heckled by the government members.

Interjection.

Mr Gerretsen: Thank you very much, the member from Scarborough Centre. Another wonderful individual on the public accounts committee that really contributes a lot.

So I guess what I'm saying is that if we're going to have this kind of a bill, and I think we should, let's include everybody. If you want to go back to 1885 or 1995, I don't care. If somebody has been taking money out of our pockets for improper purposes, they should darned well be—I was almost going to say that word—accountable for it.

If you want true accountability, I was going to suggest tonight, why don't you just pass my audit amendment act? Mr Maves had a similar bill like this about five years ago. This bill has been given second reading, which basically will give the auditor full auditing powers to follow the money to the grant recipients, to the hospitals, to the universities, to the colleges, to the municipalities etc. It's been given unanimous approval on second reading in this House, it's gone to committee unanimously, it was given clause-by-clause. It's sitting there waiting to be called, and I would just ask you to call it.

As a matter of fact, even the auditor today, in his statement—and I was very pleased he did this, by the way, and it came as a bit of a surprise to me—endorsed my bill and he said, and I will quote from his speech today, if you will permit me:

“Finally, on a further positive note, last Thursday the standing committee on public accounts unanimously approved Bill 5, as amended by the committee in its clause-by-clause review. Bill 5 is an act to amend the Audit Act to permit my office to carry out full-scope value-for-money audits of hospitals, universities, colleges, municipalities, school boards and other organizations that receive transfer payments. Since the government has the majority on the public accounts committee, I urge the government to give an early and successful third reading of Bill 5. Bill 5 was introduced by Mr John Gerretsen, the Chair of the committee, some time ago. Passing this bill would fulfill the commitment to amend the Audit Act made by the government in the speech from the throne in April 2001.”

So I would ask the government leader to call this bill some time between now and a week from Thursday. Let's pass it. Let there be true accountability. And I know the hospitals won't like it, the universities won't like it. I've heard from them already. I've heard from them locally in my community as well. Quite frankly, I don't care. I think if we're giving millions and millions of dollars to hospitals, universities and colleges, then we, through the auditor's office, should have the right to make sure that money gets expended on the programs for

which it was intended. Now, does that mean that he's going to go into every hospital, university and college overnight and do an audit? Of course not. He doesn't have the human resource power to do that. But on the other hand, if there are concerns, he has the ability to do that and he should be able to do that.

By the way, this is something that Mr Maves called for, this is something that the Premier called for when he was Minister of Finance back in 1996, it is something that was sort of included in the Public Sector Accountability Act in a different sort of way, which I think was included in the speech from the throne, in the last one in 2001. It's all here. It's all here in this Audit Act amendment act. Let's pass it and let's get on with it. That, to my way of thinking, is true accountability. Because we need that in the system. We need to make sure that when people pay their money to government, it's being expended properly.

1920

We have seen all sorts of examples where that's not the case. When you look at the Provincial Auditor's report this year and you see how money has been wasted in consulting services—just think about it. There have been some ministries where basically, in order to meet the human resource guidelines as far as the number of people who could be employed in a certain ministry, certain people have, in effect, been let go or have been retired or whatever, and they came back the following day and were hired as consultants. That's included in this year's report. That is just atrocious, absolutely atrocious.

Let me just give you an example of that. They came back at a much higher salary—if I can find the page here, and I'm looking very quickly to see if I can find it. Some of these people were making, let's say, \$200 to \$300 per day as employees and they came back in basically the same capacity the next day and were making three times as much. Here it is. This was for the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care on page 182 of the Provincial Auditor's report. In other words, it isn't my propaganda. It's in the report from the Provincial Auditor who, again, doesn't work for the opposition. He doesn't work for the government. He works for all of us. He's an officer of the Legislative Assembly. He's totally independent, although at times, particularly when he comes out with bad news for the government, I know a lot of government members think that he somehow works for the opposition, but he doesn't. He doesn't. He works for all of us here because all of us, surely, want to make sure that our taxpayer dollars are being spent properly and correctly. Because if it is spent properly and correctly, there is more money available for education, there is more money available for health care, there is more money available to look after the environment properly etc.

Let me give you an example. There's a chart on page 182 of this year's report which shows that in the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, for the employees that were let go, the average overall per diem rate for staff was \$273 per day. When those people came back the following day as consultants, do you know what their

average per diem was? It was \$847. It's unbelievable. There are all sorts of ranges in there, but to me it's almost incomprehensible as to how that can happen. This is kind of interesting. When the auditor was asked by the media about this, as to how this could possibly happen, what was his response? That a business case had not been made on a value-for-money basis and that consultants shouldn't be hired on that basis. He found that there was money being wasted.

There are so many other areas, and I'm sure that over the next little while we will have an opportunity, over the next 10 days, to ask questions about some of these issues.

For example, on the corporation tax situation—this is another one that absolutely baffles me—did you realize that we have 763,000 corporations in Ontario? That's a lot of companies and a lot of them are probably very small. But did you realize that 355,000 companies last year didn't even file an income tax return? They didn't file a return.

Now, in the olden days what would have happened was that a letter would have gone out from the Ministry of Finance saying, "You haven't filed. You need to file." As a result, in 1995 only one in five companies had not filed. Of course, some of these companies may not be operating. I'll admit, some of them may be very small. There may not be any reportable taxable income for that given year. I'll grant them that much. That may happen, but in those days, back in 1995, only one in five corporations didn't file a tax return. You know what it was this time around? More like one in two; 355,000 corporations didn't file an income tax return. My golly, if we did that on an individual basis, the revenues in the province would probably drop by \$10 billion to \$15 billion and it would be totally untenable.

Why don't we do the same thing with respect to corporations? Why don't we send out letters to these corporations and say, "Hey, you haven't filed. Why don't you file?" It may very well be that in some cases they did pay their corporate taxes on a quarterly basis. I don't know that. He didn't know that either. The point is, they didn't file their returns. You can be assured that, if they didn't file their returns, in an awful lot of those cases there was money owing. I think he came up with a figure on that as well that I won't have an opportunity to go into in great detail.

I think one of the functions that we have as parliamentarians, whether it's in government, as a cabinet minister, as a parliamentary assistant or being a Chair of a committee, on a board or what have you, or whether it's in opposition, is to make sure that the people's tax money that's being collected—it's the people's money; it's not the government's money—is being spent in a prudent way, whether we're talking about the individual expenses that any of us have, which should include everybody, or whether it's in the larger programs that are out there.

As the member earlier said, health care and education are more important than to ask the kind of questions that were going on about a month or so ago when we asked about particular expenses that individuals had incurred

etc. She's right in that. We shouldn't have to talk about that. It's from that viewpoint that we think it's a good idea that the Integrity Commissioner is involved. That gentleman in that office is totally beyond reproach. I've got the highest regard for him and I'm sure he will do an excellent job for us—for the taxpayer, in effect. And we should be much more concerned about health care and education issues.

Of course the problem is, as I've been told many times, it's question period that takes place here; it's not necessarily answer period. Maybe the whole House would function an awful lot better if the government ministers were actually there to answer questions rather than to quite often come up with anything but an answer to a question that's being asked. That would help, I think, an awful lot. I think one of the reasons why this place gets so loud and boisterous at times is that the opposition members, and I would dare say even sometimes the government backbenchers, are so frustrated by the fact that they're not getting any answers to any of the questions that are being asked. That's one way in which this could be alleviated.

I see that I'm into my last half-minute here, and I'm sure some people will be happy that that's so. But let me just say once again, we support this bill, but include everybody. Do not let the former Premier off the hook. If you're going to take it back to June 26, 1995, take it back for everybody, whether they were in cabinet, whether they were in opposition and I would dare say whether they were even private members or individual backbenchers on the government side, or opposition members. Everybody should be accountable. That's what it's all about. That's what the taxpayers and the citizens of this province demand.

Mr Gilles Bisson (Timmins-James Bay): It is so good to be here amongst all my colleagues tonight debating this most important bill, the bill I want to call the tit-for-tat bill because, quite frankly, what this is all about is a government that is frustrated by some of the excesses of their own members and have decided to participate in a little bit of partisanship by way of legislation. I think it's quite interesting.

I want to say up front, our caucus will be supporting this bill. We see this, quite frankly, for what is probably not a bad thing as far as being able to make expenses accountable.

I just want people to know why we're here with this bill tonight. Let's review it. The Liberal opposition has raised a number of allegations toward certain cabinet ministers when it comes to excesses that they have with their expenses. We're not going to get into names, but we know a number of them have got caught with expenses that were a little bit beyond the pale. The public reacted badly. The government looked bad and probably took a couple of hits in the polls because they were seen as coming to Queen's Park as the accountable party, the party that was going to be different and frugal for the taxpayer. They were just going to watch out for the taxpayer. They were going to make sure that taxpayers

get everything they deserve when it comes to the frugality of the Conservative Party.

The opposition raised a number of instances where members in the cabinet unfortunately were not as frugal as their mantra set out to be. Therefore, the Tories feel kind of bad about that because they're supposed to be seen as the frugal government, the anti-government government, the government that came to Queen's Park to clean things up, the government that was going to be different, and the public figured out, when they got their chance to get their time at the trough, that they were pretty good themselves.

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Now you've got a government that says, "I'm mad at Dalton McGuinty. Oh that guy, he came in the House and he accused my ministers of doing all kinds of things." So the government drafts up a bill, and I want to call it the tit-for-tat bill because the government now says, "Let's stick it to Dalton." We know how this place really works. We know that leaders of the opposition, in the thought of the Tory caucus, are maybe not as frugal as they put it out to be when it comes to their expenses. This is an opportunity for the government to say, "Come on, Dalton. We're going to stick it back to you."

I don't know what we gain in doing these kinds of things because, quite frankly, I think we all look bad when we start doing this kind of stuff. At the end of the day, we're all honourable members, and I would hope, as honourable members, that we try to treat ourselves as well as the public with a little bit of respect.

So this government has come forward with this bill and they've said, "Now we're going to get an opportunity to make totally clear the expenses of the opposition leaders," and they're going to make totally clear that the public has the right to know how much Dalton McGuinty or Howard Hampton spends when it comes to them going out.

I want to put forward the expenses of my leader, Howard Hampton, because we know my leader is compulsive. My leader, I have to admit, at times has been seen walking into Mr Submarine and ordering a vegetarian sub, and I know my leader likes to drink black coffee and I've seen him walk into Tim Hortons time and time again as we went around on the tour with the hydro bus. I'll tell you, any time we stopped it wasn't at Hy's Steak House in downtown Toronto and it wasn't at Hy's Steak House in Ottawa or the London Café in Timmins. Howard, I've got to say, has got a thing for Tim Hortons and Howard has a pretty good thing for Mr Submarine.

I look forward to the day when the opposition leaders, the Liberal opposition or the government will be able to FOI my leader's expenses, because I'll tell you, it's going to be pretty hard to try to figure out exactly what Howard was trying to put in when they look through the coffee stains on those \$5 receipts that he has for those subs he gets from Mr Submarine.

I want to say, we're going to make sure that Howard, the next time he goes out to a Tim Hortons or a Mr Submarine to order those garden fresh salads and those

subs that have no meat on them, only vegetables—God, imagine that, somebody eating something without meat on it. For me, that would be almost sacrilegious, but that's another story.

I've got to say, we're going to be watching Howard. We've told our staff at Queen's Park, "It's important when you go out with Howard that you're the first to grab the bill and make sure he doesn't drop any of that sauce that you put on top of the salad"—what do they call that? Salad dressing. I don't eat a lot of salad, as you might have noticed, so I'm not too sure what that's called. But we've told Jeff Ferrier and Stephanie Levesque and others who travel with Howard, "Get that receipt right away." We've got to make sure Howard doesn't get his hand on it because we know once Howard gets it, he might drop a bit of coffee on it or a little bit of salad dressing. Or when he's eating those subs and he's got the receipt on his lap, what happens, you've got that miracle sauce they put on at Mr Submarine and sometimes that falls down on to the receipt. I know that the auditors or the Conflict of Interest Commissioner or the public, if they were to get hold of those receipts, might have a difficult time trying to read my leader's receipts because they're so outrageous: \$7 and \$10 and Mr Sub and Tim Hortons.

We will try to be straight as a caucus. We will do all that we can to make sure that Howard, when he gets those receipts, keeps them in good shape, that they're not too dirty, not too many coffee stains on them, and that they're organized in such a way that it's easy for people to read. So that's the first thing I want to say from our caucus.

The other thing I want to say is I find this debate and the idea of this legislation a little bit passing strange from another point of view, and that is that we've got the government saying, "We're going to look at the opposition leaders' expenses and we're going to be a little bit more clear when it comes to the expenses of cabinet ministers and the current Premier." I would just say bring it on. I don't think the Liberal opposition and I know we don't—we don't have anything to hide; we're pretty clear. We have a budget and we spend that budget according to the rules. I don't know of any instances where people have done things that they shouldn't have done, but maybe those who toss rocks into glass houses should be careful where they toss those rocks, because at the end of the day they may find some surprises in their own backyard. I just want to say for this debate, at the very beginning, I hope that others have been careful on the other side of the House when it comes to their expenses.

The other thing I want to say is in regard to how far back this legislation goes. We say we're going to bring it back to June 26, 1995, and I presume we're doing that so we don't have the opportunity, FOI, with Mike Harris's expenses when he was leader of the third party. Why is that? I would like to see and I would like to compare, if we're looking at opposition leaders, how different parties and different leaders have dealt with their expenses. I

would hope, as one friendly amendment, if we're going to make this legislation retroactive to June 26, 1995, presumably to line up with the Tories' election, we try to go back a little bit further.

What we're trying to do is compare opposition leaders, so I want to compare them well. I would like to see Mr Harris's receipts for the time he was the third party leader, from 1990 to 1995, so we can take a look at what the expenses were for one Mike Harris, leader of the third party, the Conservative Party; one Howard Hampton, leader of the NDP, the third party; and now Mr McGuinty, who is the leader of the official opposition, and compare them. Who knows? We might find some little surprises.

If we're going to start doing this, I think we should do it in a way that is as clear as possible. What we're trying to say to the public is that we're all honourable members, we all take our jobs seriously, we're all frugal when it comes to expenses and we want to make the process clear. So I want to propose a friendly amendment that we make this legislation retroactive to, let's say, September 6, 1995, so that we're really able to compare apples to oranges to see what people have done and when they did it.

The other thing I want to say—and this quote might come back to get me at one point, but I'm going to say it anyway. They've got a section in this legislation that deals with a complete ban on alcohol. There is one thing that bugs me: when we deal with public servants and how we do business within the public service, we have much different criteria for how we judge ourselves than the private sector judges itself. As members, as critics and as ministers, we all know, because we deal with private sector people in our ridings on a regular basis, man, if we had to FOI the credit cards of most people who work in corporations, at the upper echelon of that corporation, or sales people, I think the stockholders and the consumers who buy the goods might be a little bit surprised. I just bemoan the point that sometimes we do it to ourselves in this Legislature. I don't argue for a second that we shouldn't be as clear and transparent as possible and that we shouldn't be frugal with taxpayers' dollars. That's not my argument. But I would just say that we tend to treat ourselves differently and hold ourselves to a different standard.

As I look around downtown Toronto at places like Barberian's, Hy's Steak House, Bigliardi's and other restaurants out there that are known to be quite good, you don't see too many cabinet ministers and backbenchers and opposition leaders in those types of restaurants. It's by and large the private sector, and I would be willing to guess that most of them aren't paying that out of their pockets; most of them are paying with the credit card they get from their company.

I would just say to us, as members inside this House, that once we start throwing this stuff at each other in these types of tit-for-tat bills, I think we're racing down to the lowest common denominator. We tend to beat

ourselves up far too often in here, which I don't think serves any of us.

I give as an example the whole debate around pensions. I get an opportunity to put this on the record. The government was elected in 1995 on the idea that they were going to scrap the gold-plated pensions. Government backbenchers of the day, because they were not vested in the pension system, thought, "Oh, what a great idea. We're just going to stick it to those people who have been here a little while," not thinking for one second that they might make it to a second term. So now I hear government backbenchers bemoan the fact that they haven't got the gold-plated pension and how stupid they were—

Interjection.

Mr Bisson: I'm going to get to that—putting forward such a piece of legislation, which treats us as different and beats us up to any extent. The point I make is that sometimes we in this place tend to do that to ourselves, to our own detriment. I look forward to the day when there is a minority government back in this Legislature and we can actually get to negotiations, when the three parties are able to sit down at the government House leader's meetings and take a look at how the rules of this House should operate, how we deal with expenses and how we treat ourselves and the public fairly on all these issues. I think, by and large, doing these kinds of things, this tit-for-tat type of legislation, in the end is a disservice to all.

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If we want to talk about how we make government more transparent and how we deal with open accountability when it comes to how we spend dollars, fine. We, as members of the assembly, do that every day. Every dollar we spend as individual members, by way of our constituency budgets or by way of expenses for travel, is published every year. I think that's a pretty good system.

They look at it, they grab the book at the end of the year and they say, "Ah, who are the highest-spending members in the assembly?" And normally I'm one of them. I'm normally number two, number three, sometimes number one, because I live in a riding that's far away. It's \$980 for airfare, a \$40 cab ride there and back from the airport, and I travel about 60 trips a year. So I'm normally one of those members who gets really high on the expenses. My point is that at the end of the day, I like that system. They look at it and say, "Gilles Bisson, MPP for Timmins-James Bay, he's the second- or third-highest-spending member of the Legislature." I'm held up to public accountability in my own riding. The people in my riding have to make up their minds, "Do we think it's excessive for our member to be spending that kind of money?" The final test at the end of the day is that they will decide when it comes to election day if I have or haven't done a good job.

I just argue that this legislation we bring forward tonight is more of us beating each other over the head, and for what? At the end of the day, I don't think we're treating the public fairly in this process. If we want to

talk about transparency, let's talk about a system that says that members are allowed to expense.

For example, I was just talking to a friend of mine, Mr Ron Millette. By the way, we came in from the airport together on the first Jetsgo service from Timmins, the second flight today; \$147 one way from Timmins to Toronto on jet service. I couldn't believe it. It was an MD-89, I think it is, or MD-83. But anyway, that's another story. We were chatting today about how we, as members—and we all know this. You get called in your constituency office to meet with X group in your riding, or as a critic you get a phone call to attend a particular meeting, and you end up at a coffee shop or a restaurant for lunch. Who gets stuck with the bill, normally? The MPP, right? Are we able to expense any of that? Not a dime. We can't expense any of it. I don't bemoan the fact. I knew when I got into this job I was going to get caught in those things, but we don't get to expense any of it.

I'm just saying that this type of legislation doesn't deal with the real issues. I would rather have a completely transparent system that says that anything I receipt as a member is FOIable, just as it is in this legislation, and we're allowed to incur certain expenses when it comes to what we do as members in our job. People just automatically assume you have an expense card because you're an MPP, and even though you don't, you end up picking up the bill anyway.

Interjection.

Mr Bisson: Our federal members? I don't want to go there. I'm going to get really upset.

What we need to have is a completely transparent system that says that any receipt I hand in as a member should be FOIable. Anybody in my riding or across Ontario who wants to check my expenses should have the right to do so. I think that's the sort of check of honesty to make sure we don't do things we shouldn't do, because I think there is a temptation if you don't have an accountancy process.

At the end of the day, publish it. I think that's the best system. At the end of the day, members are published in one book, and we turn around and say, "OK, who are the ones who spent the most in various categories?" You look at it. The media will figure out who to talk to. They're obviously going to go, "Oh, restaurants and meals, member X spent the most." They're going to go and talk to member X. If member X has a good explanation for what he or she did, fine; if he doesn't, fine. Then the voters will decide.

But I don't like the idea of putting a cabinet minister in a position of saying, "Oh, God, sorry, visiting dignitaries from Belgium, I can't afford to buy you a drink because we've got a ban on alcohol." And we're hosting these people? They're going to say, "What kind of province is this? Here we are, we've come all the way from Belgium to meet with the government minister on an issue"—or an opposition leader, because we meet with

those people as well. I met with groups from Ireland, I met with groups from different parts of the world. But to put ourselves in a position where a cabinet minister is afraid of submitting a receipt because of this public sort of debacle we have going around with this stuff I think is a disservice not only to the minister but to the people with whom we're trying to do business as a province.

At the end of the day, let me tell you, if I worked in the private sector and I had visiting dignitaries from Belgium, the credit card would be going, if they had been one of my customers, and my employer wouldn't say a bloody word. Do you think he cares if two thirds of my bill is alcohol versus meals? The employer wouldn't care. He'd say, "How come? Did you get a sale? Yes, you did? Good job, boy. Have a good day." That's what they would be telling me.

This idea of treating us differently I think is a disservice to all of us. I just argue, don't put people in a position of feeling as if they can't do their jobs. I'm advocating for cabinet ministers here. Because as backbenchers, private members or opposition members, we have no credit cards; we can't do that. I cannot expense one glass of wine or one bottle of beer. It's against the rules; I can't do it. But don't put our cabinet ministers in a position of their being so afraid to charge something because possibly they're going to be doing something wrong because of this sort of debate that we have in this Legislature where we start yelling, "Oh, I'm purer than the other guy." Come on. We've all been on all sides of the House. We all have a job to do.

I just look forward to a day when we in this House start treating ourselves a little bit better and giving the public some good, clear rules about how they can FOI our expenses and how they can see what it is we've been doing, and letting the public, through the voters in our ridings, decide if we've been doing it properly or not. To get into these kinds of debates with this legislation today is a bit of a disservice to all of us and, I would argue, to a certain extent a disservice to others.

With that, I would just say that I look forward to the leads that will be happening certainly from other people as they go into this debate. I also want to just repeat, to make sure that people who tuned in lately understand, that we as New Democrats will be supporting this legislation. We believe in transparency. We believe that it's public dollars, that you should have the right to know. We don't have a problem with that concept.

But I just want to say what I said at the beginning: this is more of this tit-for-tat stuff that we're doing in this House that I think is a disservice to all of us. At the end of the day, if we don't start treating ourselves a little bit better in this House, who will?

The Acting Speaker: According to the unanimous consent of the House, this House stands adjourned until 1:30 of the clock tomorrow afternoon.

The House adjourned at 1946.

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