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Monday 28 April 2008

Lundi 28 avril 2008

Speaker
Honourable Steve Peters

Président
L'honorable Steve Peters

Clerk
Deborah Deller

Greffière
Deborah Deller

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Monday 28 April 2008

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Lundi 28 avril 2008

The House met at 1845.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

LEGISLATIVE REFORM

Resuming the debate adjourned on April 23, 2008, on the amendment to the motion by Mr. Bryant to amend the standing orders.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): The member from Eglinton–Lawrence, you have about five minutes left on your speech from the other day.

Mr. Mike Colle: Yes, thank you. Last week, I was essentially talking about the various changes that have taken place in this Legislature over the last number of years, and I was just recalling the 1990s, when there were some pretty dramatic changes that took place. In fact, I can remember, as a result of those changes, there was the famous situation where the Honourable Alvin Curling had to make a statement in a very unusual way, but I think he made a very important statement, that the changes that were undertaken in this Legislature were quite unusual and quite draconian.

I can remember just sitting right across the way there. We were here for I don't know how many days and nights around the clock, and that was really part of Bill 26. I can remember many Conservatives who came before the Legislature, came to hearings and said they had been lifelong Conservatives and would never have anything to do with the party after those changes. It was the infamous Bill 26, the omnibus bill of omnibus bills.

The changes being offered at this point in time are modest proposals compared, again, to the upheaval that took place at that time. I think what is contained in the motion here is quite reasonable. As I said last week when I spoke, there's nothing perfect about any changes that are proposed by any government, but these changes that we're debating today are also subject to review.

It would be incredible, almost an oxymoron, to talk about the former government of the Honourable Mike Harris and say that he would review anything. He basically would say, "This is right. I'm doing it. You're wrong, and we're going ahead," and doing whatever it is. Whether it was amalgamation, market value assessment, he did it and said he was right. "I'm going to sell the 407. It's right." That was the way things were done, where we never had the luxury, when those changes were made by the Conservative government, of any review whatsoever.

There was no motion. There was no debate. There was no time for any kind of discussion—zero. It was just done.

It's quite incredible to see members of the Conservative Party standing up and talking about protecting democracy and the rule of democratic process when they sat in utter silence as the omnibus Bill 26 totally devastated any chance of debate. There was no debate; it was just done.

We are putting forward a fairly modest change in the hours of this Legislature, which is quite reasonable; plus, it is subject to review after the spring session to see if there can be some improvements made. I think that's quite a rational approach. It's dramatically different from the approach we've seen before, the last time any changes were made in this Legislature.

What is so dramatic in the change that's before us: the time change of question period? Let's look at it, debate it and see if it works or not. Question period and the hours of debate are going to continue. There's going to be more opportunity for private members' hours and debate. So what is the big—

Interjection.

Mr. Mike Colle: We are not like the Conservatives, who basically said, "My way or the highway." Like amalgamation, they forced it down our throats, and 76% of the people of Toronto said no to it. They still drove it down and had no debate on it—no debate.

Now we are debating this, as we should. We're seeing whether the motion is the right one, because we have review. I can just recall, again, that we went through order after order of changes that had no consultation, no debate. Basically, they had pride in saying, "We have all the answers." That's what they did. Day after day they stood in this House on this side and said, "We know everything. We are going to fix government"—they didn't say they were going to fix government—"We are going to basically create the crisis, destroy government and all of a sudden create a new regime here."

Therefore we in a very modest way are saying that there are some things that could be changed here. Let's look at these changes and see if they work better for the people of Ontario. Really, I would like to see the members opposite tell us: What's the big deal here? What is the big deal? There's going to be review to see if things can be made even better. I think that's a very reasonable approach. That's why I support the motion before us.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): Further debate?

Mr. Norman W. Sterling: I would like to answer directly the previous member with regard to these standing order changes. Mr. Colle, the whip, don't you understand that what your government is trying to do—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): Through the Chair, please.

Mr. Norman W. Sterling: What they're trying to do is have the power to pass a bill in two days instead of four. That's half the time. This is not a big deal? It's the biggest deal of all.

On that, I move adjournment of the debate.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry?

All those in favour, say "aye."

All those opposed, say "nay."

I believe the nays have it.

Call in the members. This will be a 30-minute bell.

The division bells rang from 1853 to 1953.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): Mr. Sterling has moved adjournment of the debate.

All those in favour will please rise and remain standing. Thank you.

All those opposed will please rise and remain standing. Thank you.

The Clerk of the Assembly (Ms. Deborah Deller): The ayes are 6; the nays are 30.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): I declare the motion lost. Mr. Sterling.

Mr. Norman W. Sterling: This is probably the fourth or fifth reiteration of the standing orders that I have been involved with and participated in. Save and except in minority Parliaments—I think we revamped the standing orders in 1987, before the 1987 election—they have, in large degree, diminished the role of the opposition and centralized power into the Premier's office and into the executive council, the cabinet.

Interestingly enough, in 1987 it was my suggestion that the opposition be given the opportunity to respond to ministers' statements, so the opposition's response in five minutes each was a direct result of my intervention back in 1987, because the minority Liberal government of the day didn't have any alternative but to accept what the opposition put forward. So it wasn't out of the goodness of the heart of the government of the day. But now what I have seen—and I just wanted to talk about ministerial statements for a moment—is that governments have learned how to use ministerial statements and not give the intent of the change of the rule to the opposition. My view is this: If the government of the day speaks for 10 minutes, then opposition parties should be given five minutes each. If they speak for 14 minutes by stacking all their ministers on top of each other—which is what government started to do back when we were in government and now has been picked up by the Liberals. They stack them all together, so they diminish the opportunity of the opposition to respond. If they come in, as they did today, with four or five ministers making statements, they may have taken up—I can't remember the time spent, but let's say they took 18 minutes. We were

still limited to five minutes to respond, and I think there were four ministers involved. It's difficult for each critic in the opposition parties to have a say in a total of five minutes. That's a standing order which I would encourage the government and the Legislative Assembly to amend, to make it more favourable to the opposition and more fair to the opposition in terms of their ability to respond.

I think it's interesting to note that we put on the table a shorter question period, because I believe that question period is too long in this place. An hour is far too long. If the federal government can get along with 45 minutes, I don't understand why the province of Ontario can't get along in 45 minutes. However, when I was the government House leader, I talked to the then-opposition House leader, Mr. Duncan, and I said to him, "You know, question period is too long." His response was that they would agree to cutting it back to 45 minutes if the government backbenchers didn't have the opportunity to ask questions. I think that's too dramatic in that if a government backbencher has a legitimate question—and I don't think I've heard one legitimate question in this session of Parliament by a government backbencher; they've been puffery questions and, "Minister, tell us how wonderful you and your programs are." But if we had a 45-minute question period that was to start at a certain time, preferably in the afternoon, of course, and if we had strict enforcement, gave discretion to the Speaker to really call the members in line—and of course we already have that under standing order 36(a), where it says that "the Speaker shall disallow any question which he or she does not consider urgent or of public importance." There's another part of the standing orders on questions too, 36(d): "In putting an oral question, no argument or opinion is to be offered nor any facts stated, except so far as may be necessary to explain the same; and in answering any such question, the member is not to debate the matter to which it refers."

I don't know how many times we've heard Liberal backbenchers get up and start talking about a generic issue. It's not urgent; it's an issue in which they are trying to promote something and it would be better put off into the ministerial statements. If ministers want to stand up in the House and brag about a program, brag about it in ministers' statements.

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My view is that these standing order changes that are now being put forward are more about jockeying for position and enhancing the power of the executive and of majority governments than seeking real change to make this place much more relevant than it is now.

I don't know if backbench members realize the embarrassment they cause themselves by asking these soft questions as they're thrown to ministers. I know that when I was sitting on that side, I would have the Premier's office come up and say, "You know, Norm, you've got to take a question today. I want you to take a question." I would say, "Well, what's the question?" They would tell me the question, and it was useless. I

used to say, "I ain't taking those questions. If somebody wants to ask me a legitimate question about something that's happening in the riding, I will answer it and I will deal with it as a minister of the crown." But members of the Legislature who are asked—and there are a certain number of them who do it day after day—should really reflect upon it and wonder whether or not this is really enhancing their reputations, not only in terms of the public but in terms of the media and in terms of their colleagues in the Legislature. I really question whether or not they are enhancing their reputations and moving forward. I think it's something which members and ministers should do on rare occasions, and only if extremely pressed.

We heard from the previous speaker that these changes don't have a real effect on the Legislature. I would argue that they do, because having the question period at that time of the day I think is really going to affect the ability of the committee that I chair, the public accounts committee, to function as we have in the past. During question period we will no doubt not have any committees sitting; during routine proceedings we will not have any committees sitting. It's a practice of our committee to start at 9 o'clock on Thursday morning and go sometimes to 12, 12:30 or even 1 o'clock, if in fact the particular matter takes that period of time. So we need somewhere between three and four hours in order to conduct and complete our business. I just don't see, in the way that the question period is plunked in the middle of the morning, that we are going to be able to achieve that block of time that we need. And we need a block because, as you know, Madam Speaker, as you are a member of the public accounts committee, we have very important people in front of us. We have the deputy ministers, we have a lot of their staff, and I don't think it's fair to them to ask them to come for an hour and a half in the morning and come back at noon, in two pieces. We often ask people from out of town to come to that particular committee. It's much easier for them to deal with the morning than it is dealing with the very, very late afternoon. That's the effect it's going to have on our committee's time schedule.

The other thing that's really noteworthy here is that we used to be able to guarantee that private members' business on Thursday morning attracted at least a cadre of people into this place. I think it was the NDP government that found out in the early 1990s—one member of my caucus, David Turnbull, came in at 10 o'clock in the morning, he looked around the Legislature in private members' business, and there were only five or six members there. He called a quorum call, nobody showed up, and the day was cancelled. The penalty, of course, for the government was that they lost a whole day of the legislative session. The trick in the rules now is, with the business at the back end of Thursday afternoon, how much attention is going to be paid to it by members of this Legislature? Members will know that they come in here—

Mr. Bruce Crozier: All of the media will be here.

Mr. Norman W. Sterling: Oh, yeah. The media will all be here, I'm certain.

Private members' hour is a very, very important time for many of the members here. It's their one time in about every year and a half where they get a call on what's going to be discussed in this Legislature. They get a call on putting forward their particular matter. But I think that by switching public members' business to the back end of Thursday, you're going to have a tough time getting members to attend those sessions. I believe that the quorum will fall from time to time. If it falls, what will happen is that the Legislature will dissolve for the day and private members' business, or maybe the next private members' business, will be gone, and that will be it, whereas there was pressure on the government to keep the quorum going on Thursday mornings, because they didn't want to lose the legislative session on Thursday afternoon. It's a little bit of a wrinkle in the rules, but it's something that's important.

I spoke briefly before the adjournment about the ability of the government to pass legislation in quick order. We have a process here where a bill is introduced and the bill must be printed and appear in the order paper before it can be called for second reading debate. And the time really starts running from the time you call the first second reading debate and you finish the bill. Under our present rules, the minimum time that it would take you to do that would be four days because of the complexity of the rules; I won't go into all of the machinations of it. But under these standing orders, in the dying two weeks of the legislative session before Christmas and before summer, the government will be given the power to do that in two days. That's a concern, because when governments stampede legislation through this place, it's often not well thought out and there has to be a time for the public to react. There has to be a time for the public to go to their MPPs and express their opinion, and the debate should take some period of time. This is a tremendous reduction of time from four to two days. It also, of course, gives the government the right to sit until midnight in those last two weeks, which, because of the change in terms of the definition of "day" from a legislative session to two hours, they can start stacking the two hours on top of each other, thereby achieving the rapid passage of the legislation, perhaps to the detriment of the people of Ontario.

I can talk a little bit about the process of going to the legislative committee on procedural affairs. I don't know whether that is going to achieve anything in the end. I think that the best way to deal with changes of rules is to get a couple of people in from each party who lived through changes and negotiate with them. If the government wants to pull on one string, then they should be willing to give up on another string with regard to changing the rules that may favour the opposition a little bit more than the government.

Having said all of that, I'm sorry to say that I believe that this place is becoming more irrelevant as the days go by. This has to do not with the standing orders but with

the attitude of the Premier and the executive council—of any government. If they don't want to listen, if they don't want to answer, then it doesn't really matter what the standing orders are or what the rules are. This place was for debate. This place was for ministers to listen and not chirp in when they're not asked to. This place was to try to make legislation better. I don't see us going on that trend line.

I really think that until we get a Premier strong enough to stand up to the media and say, "There has been a good suggestion from the opposition. There have been good suggestions in debate. We should accept those and make our laws better," whether we have question period in the morning or the afternoon doesn't matter. It doesn't matter whether we have question period in the morning or the afternoon if the Premier and his ministers don't answer the questions that are asked in this place. If they talk about rose-coloured glasses when they're asked serious questions, that doesn't add anything to the confidence of the public that we are representing their interests.

I think that these standing orders will not make this a better place to be in. I don't think it will make a better Parliament. I don't think we'll make better laws because of those changes.

I think it will take a very strong leader in this Legislature to do things like giving the Speaker more discretion to make real rulings about the relevance of what is going on in this place. I think it will take a real leader to say that government will not control the Board of Internal Economy and that people in this place will get reasonable resources to do their research, to do their work in this Legislature. With that, I would like—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): Order. I can't hear the member. I would ask for order, please.

Mr. Norman W. Sterling: I wasn't going to move adjournment of the House, but I will move adjournment of the House.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): Mr. Sterling has moved adjournment of the House. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry?

All those in favour, say "aye."

All those opposed, say "nay."

I believe the nays have it.

Call in the members. This will be a 30-minute bell.

The division bells rang from 1943 to 2013.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): Mr. Sterling has moved the adjournment of the House.

All those in favour, please stand and remain standing. Thank you.

All those opposed, please rise and remain standing. Thank you. Please be seated.

The Clerk of the Assembly (Ms. Deborah Deller): The ayes are 6; the nays are 30.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): I declare the motion failed.

Mr. Sterling, I believe you have a minute left on the clock.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): No, sorry. My mistake. Further debate?

Mr. Norman W. Sterling: On a point of order, Madam Speaker: I'd just like to know whether the Speaker has control of this place or the Clerk of the House has control of this place.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): Actually, the clock does, Mr. Sterling. Thank you so much. Further debate?

Ms. Cheri DiNovo: I want to start out my comments with a quote from March 4, 1997, and I ask all members of the House to try to think who actually said this. It was somebody here: "Democracy imposes responsibility on those who govern. Democracy gives the people a voice, but it also compels those who govern to listen to that voice. Democracy isn't just something that takes place once every four years"; it's supposed to happen "each and every day."

Who said it? Dalton McGuinty said it. So I'm going to hold the government and the Premier of this province to those very words, because I think what we have in evidence here with the standing order changes is the tyranny of the majority. It's interesting to look at the etiology of that phrase, "tyranny of the majority," because there are all sorts of different theories about who said it first. As close as I could find, it seems to me that Ben Franklin said it first, talking about the tyranny of the majority.

What the standing order changes really are: There's what they present themselves to be and then there's what they really are. What they present themselves to be, of course, from the government side, is that they're family-friendly and that they rationalize the hours of work with the hours that other Ontarians work. What they really are is an absolutely direct and partisan attack on the role of the opposition. Because it's a partisan attack on the role of the opposition in this House, it is also an attack on democracy and an attack on the electorate in Ontario. Again, I want to definitely make clear that we in the New Democratic Party don't have a problem with the general thrust of the standing order changes. But we do have a serious problem, a perhaps insurmountable problem, with the change of the question period.

I'll go into that further, but first, why is it not family-friendly? The government side has said they've made these changes to be family-friendly. Look at evening sittings as a case in point. Evening sittings—it was interesting: I went through Hansard and read the comments of the member from Etobicoke–Lakeshore, who talks about her beautiful children, and the fact that she would like to be home with those beautiful children around the dinner hour. I think every mother and, hopefully, every father can ring with this, that when your children are little, you want to be there at least until they go to bed, in that 6 to 8 or 9 time slot in the evening.

Surely, then, evening sittings in this House are not family-friendly, yet the member herself voted for evening sittings. In fact consistently, over and over, the Liberal Party, the Dalton McGuinty government, has voted for evening sittings over the concerns of the opposition.

Evening sittings surely are the most family-unfriendly move of all. What's amazing when you read through Hansard on this debate of the standing order changes is the number of Liberal women who voted for evening sittings who now speak against evening sittings. One has to ask, is this a kind of road-to-Damascus change or is this really just subterfuge? My point is that this is subterfuge, because this is not about family-friendly at all. This is about an attack on the opposition's role and about its ability to function; also, by the way, the press's ability to function and the electorate's and democracy's in the Westminster model's ability to function.

If they really wanted to be family-friendly, here are some suggestions. Number one, they would have an in-house daycare centre at Queen's Park so that young mothers and fathers who have small children could have somewhere to bring their children. We could go on about daycare and the lack of it in the province of Ontario generally, but certainly there should be something here. This would be not only practical, it would also be symbolic. It would say that this government actually cared about children and about the role of family.

Another thing they could do—and I brought in this motion last year that I called A Place for All People—is to have a room set aside, and we even pointed out the room it could be, for those of other faiths, representing the diversity of this place, who could go and fulfill their religious obligations. So we're talking about our Muslim members, our Sikh members and others who have to walk across five lanes of University Avenue to go to the Hart House chapel in the middle of the winter to do that; also, the Humanist Society and anybody else who wants to use the room. We don't have that room, hence this place really isn't family-friendly.

That's what they would do if they wanted to make it family-friendly. They would never have voted for evening sittings, they would have daycare in this premises and across the province, and they would have a place where people can fulfill their religious obligations. That's what they'd do. So it's not about being family-friendly, nor is it about rationalizing our workdays with the rest of Ontario's workdays. I think it was cynical in the extreme that the Premier of this province would make the assertion that we in the opposition just don't want to work hard and that we don't want to come in early. We all know—backbenchers, the Liberal Party, everybody knows—that we work extremely hard in this role. We choose it, but we work hard. We work starting at 9—at least 9—in the morning, usually earlier. We know that we work from 9 in the morning because we have committee meetings then, and we have caucus meetings; I know all the caucus meetings are in the morning. We know that we already work in the morning, so it's not about workload. It's not about rationalizing our work with others in Ontario.

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We know—and perhaps this is one of the myths that needs to be dispelled: that politicians, that MPPs don't work hard. We know we work hard. We work seven days

a week. When we're not here, we're in our ridings and attending functions in our ridings. That's what we do. We choose this role, but it's not an easy role. We're certainly here early in the morning, and we don't have any problem with being here early in the morning.

I want to hold out too, to that cynical view that we don't work hard in the opposition or don't want to, that we, particularly in the New Democratic Party, carry a number of portfolios. I have four portfolios, so I have to know the issues related to my four areas of responsibility. I hold that against any member of the government side. Even the cabinet ministers have only one, and when they have that one area of responsibility, they have an entire staff and an entire ministry that helps them with that. We on the opposition side, who have an executive assistant, at best, at Queen's Park, have to do the work that they do with very little staff, and sometimes the work of more than one of them with very little staff. So it's not a question of workload.

It's a shame that that point was put forward by the government, because it diminishes us all. It adds to the cynicism of the electorate. It adds to low voter turnout. It adds to the conception that the public has—a misconception—that we don't work hard, that we don't put in the hours like they do. Shame on the government for putting forward that assertion.

So it's not about family-friendly and it's not about rationalizing work hours. What it is about is a direct partisan attack on the opposition.

We know that this is an intensely partisan place. We know, in a sense, it's a place of verbal warfare at times. I mean, the mace is a weapon. That is its symbolism: It's a weapon. We know the distance between the government and our side is a distance of two swords drawn. That's the history of this place, because, literally, two swords sometimes would be drawn. We know that it's intensely partisan, but perhaps those who are watching at home don't know quite how intensely partisan it is. Sometimes the spin of the government lets them think that it's not.

Let me tell you a little bit about my experience coming here as a new member, which was only two years ago, introducing my first bill of substance, Bill 150, about the \$10 minimum wage. You learn very quickly in this place that a private member's bill from the opposition side has no chance. Let me say that again: no chance of ever becoming law in the province. So we walk into a place that is really not transparent and democratic already. We already did that; we already knew that. We know that even if it passes second reading, it will be kyboshed by the government and never make it to committee. We already know that. We know in the opposition that the best we can hope for—the very best—in a majority government like this one is that the government takes up our bill and makes it their own. This is called plagiarism in the school system, but here it's called politics. The government takes up our bill in the opposition, makes it their own and introduces it.

One of my most poignant memories from my first year in service here was when the government did just that. It

was the member from Hamilton Centre's bill. She worked very hard on it. It was concerning firefighters—I'm sure I'm tweaking some memories here. And what do we know, but a member of the government, the Minister of Labour at the time, stood up and introduced a bill—very similar; almost the same—with not a word of credit to the member of the opposition who had worked so hard on this—I know others can ring with this experience too—and introduced it as their own. That's as good as it gets. That's as good as it gets in opposition. And I might say that for the backbenchers on the government side, it doesn't get much better.

We saw a member here, the member for Niagara Falls, who introduced a perfectly valid bill trying to include grandparents in the Family Law Act the other day. We spoke in favour of that bill, on this side of the House, three times. Three times this member of the government introduced a private member's bill. Will it have a chance of passing? Only they know, but chances are no. So this goes even for backbenchers who have legitimate concerns on the government side. Already there's very little chance, if not none, that a private member's bill will pass.

What do we have left? Here is what we have left. The same way that the \$10 minimum wage campaign was built, we have the chance to galvanize public support, to speak on behalf of the public and of stakeholders in this place, to galvanize a grassroots campaign that will hopefully get the press excited, that will put pressure on the government, that will somehow—I've always used the metaphor about pushing an elephant uphill—push the elephant uphill just an inch, so that maybe the elephant will react, maybe we'll get some response, maybe something will happen for our stakeholders, for our public, on behalf of the government. We live for that moment in opposition.

The crux of that moment, the jewel of the Westminster system, the one hour in which we get to hold the government's feet to the fire, to make all of this public, is that hour we call question period. That's the crux of our Westminster system. When we complain on this side that what they are doing with the standing order changes is a direct attack on democracy, we're essentially saying it's a direct attack on all we've got left over here, which is question period, and the organizing that we do with stakeholders that leads up to question period.

We're not alone in this. We know we're not alone in this. We know that the press gallery has given their unanimous opinion with Randy about this. They've said unanimously that these order changes are bad for the freedom of the press. The press, let us remind everyone here, is an essential component of democracy. So when they're angry, when they're upset, when they say with one voice, "There's something wrong," we should listen. We should listen because they also speak for the public. So they've said it's wrong.

We also have Graham White, the legislative expert, who has come out publicly and said that this is not appro-

priate, that this is, again, a direct partisan attack on democracy.

Christina Blizzard talked about the fact that this is a way of the cabinet hiding, because, of course, now the press has two full scrums. With the standing order changes, they will only really get one.

The other way it's an attack is that it hastens the passing of legislation. Now the government can pass legislation in maybe four days. Let me make very clear that the role of the opposition is to frustrate the government in passing legislation that we feel is inappropriate and bad for the electorate. That is our job. Our job is to oppose that legislation because, remember, they had a mandate, a majority mandate to govern, but not necessarily a majority mandate over every single bill that they bring in. No. There again we hear from our constituents, the press hears, we all hear from stakeholders who say no to some bills and no to some legislation. It is our job—trust me, this is the crux of democracy—to hold the majority to account to their very own electorate. This is what takes away from what Ben Franklin called the tyranny of the majority and makes it simply the majority in a democracy, and that's our role here.

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We cannot emphasize that role enough. Their partisan role—not their democratic role, but their partisan role—is to frustrate us in our enacting of democracy itself. Really, their role here is to eliminate the opposition; let us be clear about that. Their role here is to silence the opposition, to eliminate it. That is the thrust of partisan politics.

But I remind those across the aisle that things change and those across the aisle over there might one day be those across the aisle over here, and exactly this role is the role that, in a sense, is most quintessentially important: to remind them of that—that very fact that times change.

I want to sound the ethical bell here, because it's not only a matter of procedure; it's a matter of ethics. It's a matter of being heard. When KI came down here to demonstrate on the lawns of Queen's Park, can you imagine, if we had a question period at 10:45 and not at 1 o'clock, getting people from northern Ontario down to Toronto organized there? You can see it would be difficult, if not impossible. This is about transparent democracy in action. We need to be able and stakeholders want to be able to galvanize their discontent—and it is often discontent—with the government's actions. They need to be able to do that, and to do that well. They can't do it at 9 o'clock in the morning; they can't do it knowing that all of the cabinet ministers will be out of here, that it will be empty of cabinet ministers at about 1 o'clock.

I find it really quite hypocritical, the smear on the opposition that we don't want to work, when in fact we know what's going to happen in this place, particularly on Thursday afternoons when private members' public business will be debated: There will be nobody on the benches opposite—there will be very few. It will look like this on Thursday afternoons; this is what it will look

like. When we're debating some important points, nobody will be here; they'll be running back to their ridings. We know that cabinet ministers and others on the government side will be back in their ridings doing the photo ops in the afternoon. We know the news that could be so salient at 6 o'clock will be old news with a question period at 10:45, and that by 11 o'clock it will be yesterday's news.

To keep the public current, informed, listening and watching, we need a vibrant question period at a time of the day when the press can get the most out of it, when the public can hear what the problems and concerns of the day are and when they can mobilize around it, in the morning or in the afternoon, to get people here when people are actually paying attention to who's here. That's the reality.

Again, to reiterate, this is not about family-friendly. It's certainly not about democracy. Many others have spoken to the fact that there was no consultation. I went to two House leaders' meetings as deputy whip, when the whip was away. Both of them lasted a total of half an hour. I heard more from the House leader in this House on the rationale behind these standing order changes than I ever heard in the House leaders' meetings. That's not democracy, that's not transparent and that's not engaging the opposition; that's playing to the camera. Maybe we should have a camera in House leaders' meetings. Maybe then we'd have more of a flow of democracy there.

This isn't about family-friendly, this isn't about rationalizing work hours; this is a direct shot across the bow of the opposition, a direct, partisan attack in a very partisan place called Queen's Park, and neither the electorate nor the press are really fooled by this. We will make sure that they continue to hear about it. We don't want a tyranny of the majority here.

Mrs. Amrit Mangat: I will be sharing my time with the member for Scarborough Centre.

I would like to express my gratitude for our government's decision to explore ways in which we can modernize the Legislature by changing the standing orders. One of the important questions in this debate which deserves a non-partisan and thoughtful answer is, "Do we sincerely believe that Queen's Park should be more family-friendly in order to attract more women into provincial politics?" I believe that this question deserves an affirmative answer.

The Progressive Conservative platform said they would, "work with MPPs to reform Ontario's provincial Parliament based on our four principles," the fourth being to "encourage more diversity and gender balance through family- and MPP-friendly reforms."

In February, the member for Nepean-Carleton praised our government's proposed changes. She said, and I quote, from the Canadian Press news, February 11, 2008, "I'm encouraged the government is thinking outside the box and looking at ways to make the Legislature more family-friendly."

On the challenges facing MPPs, the former member from Nickel Belt said, and I quote from the Hamilton

Spectator of July 12, 2007, "Some weeks my son had four hockey games to attend," said Martel, whose children are nine and 12. "I was getting ready for the next campaign, and I thought, I can't do this again for another four years. I can't manage the travelling and homework and doctors' appointment and birthdays. I've tried as hard as I can."

On the same issue, the member for Hamilton Centre said, and I quote the Toronto Star of September 10, 2007, "The job isn't family-friendly anymore," agrees Horwath, whose son, 14, has been dragged to more political barbecues than she cares to remember. "We need to keep acknowledging that barriers are there, and let's not pretend they're all gone," she said."

The proposed changes are in the public interest, and I believe that the citizens in my riding of Mississauga-Brampton South will appreciate that their local representative will start legislative work in the morning and finish by dinnertime, with the exception of when the duty of my office requires me to do otherwise.

We are indeed privileged to live in a province blessed with natural beauty, densely populated with trees, shrubbery, greenery and nests. Every day, when evening descends and twilight appears on the horizon, the law of nature prevails: Birds, including eagles, return to their nests, rub their beaks with each other's, and then, hugging their little ones, they retire to rest in the security and warmth of their nests.

Every one of us fully understands the demanding nature and serious responsibilities we undertook when opting to be MPPs. By the same token, every one of us also fully understands the nature of our responsibilities towards our families and children, which cannot and should not be ignored, if the balance can be achieved by adjusting the hours of this Legislature. The trial for modernizing the Legislature is only exploring the possibility of a balance to fulfill these two very important responsibilities.

There was a time when our forefathers would use the bark of a tree in order to write, but today, we use computers. Change can be stimulating. It can be very easy; it can be very difficult. It can also invoke new challenges for some of us. But I believe the proposed changes to the standing orders will bring positive results.

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I'm happy that we are expanding debate time and increasing private members' public business time. I also believe that by eliminating evening sittings, we are encouraging more women to enter provincial politics.

It is in this very context, when I look to the owl on the wall of this Legislature facing the government benches, in the wisdom stimulated by the glow of his beautiful wide-open eyes, that I see the expression of gratitude for my government's initiative to explore ways in which we can modernize the Legislature. I believe this is a step in the right direction, and I fully support it.

Hon. Brad Duguid: I'm absolutely privileged to follow the member from Mississauga-Brampton South, who spoke extremely well today, telling us about some of her

own experiences here, as a woman who has chosen a political career, talking about how she feels personally about the rule changes and how they affect her, and also talking about how we all have to adapt to change in everything we do. No matter what profession we're in, no matter what line of work, no matter where we live, change is something that's constantly happening and we must adapt to change. I think the member expressed that extremely well.

She suggested that change can be stimulating. I agree with that. I think change is important. I think we have to be in a constant state of change. In particular, if we're trying to represent what's going on outside of this building, we've got to be able to change. We do things; we should be in a constant state of change.

Yes, the traditions of this place are extremely important to each and every one of us. We all respect the traditions here—at least, most of us do. One of the reasons why many of us are here is out of respect for the traditions. I think each and every one of us in this place respects the position of being a member of provincial Parliament. I think it's something we're all very, very privileged to serve in; it's something that I think we all feel very honoured to be part of. That being said, we all have a responsibility, before we leave here, that we do everything we can to make this place better for the next group of MPPs who come in.

This is an opportunity to try something a little different. It's not extremely different; it's a little bit of shuffling around of the timetable. My goodness, you would think that what we're talking about here is some kind of dramatic shift; that somehow we're getting rid of question period, that we're doing something draconian. We're changing around the times when we do things. It's fairly slight, but it will ensure that we have fewer of these night sittings that we're engaged in, like we are tonight. It won't eliminate them altogether, and I think reasonably so. The government needs to know that at the end of a session, when things get sometimes logjammed, we have to probably sit a little more to make sure we get the bills through that we all want to get through this place. That makes sense. I think it's rational; I think it's reasonable that we may have to have some additional night sittings.

I sat through a number of night sittings last session, and I know many of the members here—the member from Northumberland is nodding his head. He sat through many night sittings, Madam Speaker, and I know you did as well, that weren't exactly stellar debate moments, weren't exactly moments when this place rose to the level that I think we rose to on Sunday, when we came together and showed what can happen when we all work together. In fact, I think there have been many moments in some of these night debates when some of us went home a little embarrassed about what our constituents would have watched on TV.

It's not just the opposition; it's probably all of us. When we get tired, when it gets late at night, when the place is pretty much empty, as it is tonight, other than the security guard upstairs there—I can see him—a few

others over here and our Hansard people, there are not a lot of other people watching the debate here in this place and the tenor of the debate can kind of change.

Sometimes it gets a little more easygoing and less partisan. We've had some good moments in the evenings when that happens. Sometimes it gets little jocular, and sometimes that can be fun as well, but other times the debate has declined to a level that I think is probably beneath this place. So changing the way we do things, getting rid of most of the night sittings, will probably improve the quality of debate around here. When we improve the quality of debate, we lift the level of interest that each and every one of us has in being here.

I don't want to say there's any place I'd rather be tonight, but I can tell you there probably is. I'd rather be home tonight with my family. They haven't seen me in a number of days. It's been a busy number of days for all of us over this last weekend, but I'm here and I'm happy to be here. This is part of my job. I'm fulfilling my duties to be here. But I'll tell you, for my family tonight, it would be a lot better for the Duguid household to be together. They didn't get a chance to see me all weekend long—maybe they're lucky they didn't get a chance to see me all weekend long; maybe they're as happy as all of you are to be spending this evening here with me. But I would suggest that they probably would rather have me home tonight.

That's the nature of our job, and we accept it. We do the work we're expected to do. I think we would have a better quality of life, when we talk about family life, if we were to do away with some of these night sittings, if we were to start earlier in the morning. I don't think it's asking too much of any member to be here for 9 o'clock in the morning to begin routine proceedings, to begin our day. I don't think that's asking too much.

Most people out there, if they hear us debating this, are going to say, "How can you possibly be debating that?" Almost every resident across Toronto and around Ontario has to get up and get to work. Most workers have to be at work at that time. In fact, 9 o'clock is late for probably half the workers we have in our society in this province. So I don't think it's too much to ask members of provincial Parliament to do what we ask of workers right across this province, and that's to come to work a little earlier in the morning.

I'm not suggesting that members don't do anything in the morning, that all members do is sleep in and come here in the 1:30 when the traditional routine proceedings take place. I know that's not the case. Most members work a full morning, but I don't think it makes too much difference whether we're working here in this Legislature, in our offices or in our communities in the morning. I think there's plenty of room for flexibility in terms of members to adjust their schedules.

This early question period start: You'd think we were doing away with question period by the response from the opposition in some of these debates and in some of the question periods we've heard in the last little while. Question period is question period. This government will

be held accountable at 10:45 in the morning as much as it will be held accountable if we have question period starting around 1 o'clock, 1:30, 2 o'clock or 2:30. Either way, the opposition have one of the longest question periods known in all Parliaments around the world.

Interjection: The longest.

Hon. Brad Duguid: The longest.

Our cabinet and our Premier, like previous cabinets and Premiers in previous governments, are quite willing to hold ourselves accountable to the opposition. It's part of what we do. I think it's one of the beauties of our parliamentary system, frankly, that the opposition can get up when the House is sitting and ask us a question every single day, ask us anything they want on any issue. It certainly keeps us, as ministers, on our toes. We'd better make sure we know what our files are when they do ask us those questions. I think it keeps us sharp as a government, and whether we're going through questions at 10:45 in the morning or in the afternoon, I don't think it's going to make a difference one way or the other; in fact, I know it won't a difference.

I have worked at other levels of government: I've worked in the House of Commons; I was a city of Toronto councillor for a long time. The debate revolves around the quality of the issues and the quality of the people engaged in the debate. Whether we're having that debate in the morning or the afternoon, whether we're having question period at 10:45 in the morning or in the afternoon, I really don't get how that is going to make that big a difference at all.

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We're going to see a 50% increase—this is something that's really significant—in private members' business. That's something that should be important for each and every member of this Legislature. Some of the greatest moments in the last session in this place occurred during the private members' sessions. I think back to some of the bills that were brought forward that did pass and did receive support from all sides of the House. I remember the member for Brant's anaphylactic shock bill—

Mr. Bob Delaney: Now law.

Hon. Brad Duguid: It's now law. It passed in private members' business. That helps provide protection for our kids in schools, ensuring that schools right across this province have programs to ensure the very health and safety—and potentially save the lives—of many of our young people. You can't tell me that's not an important bill. You can't tell me that wasn't good, quality private members' time. You can't tell me that increasing the amount of private members' time by 50% is not going to be a good thing for each and every member of this Legislature.

I think back to our former colleague Ernie Parsons and the effort he went to, and the bill that he brought forward—I believe he called it Sandy's Law—on fetal spectrum alcohol syndrome. All members of this House were very touched that day. It was a wonderful moment in this Legislature when Mr. Parsons brought that forward. It's a bill that is making a difference on an issue

that was important not only to Mr. Parsons, but to people right across this province and probably every member of this Legislature. I think we make very good use, for the most part, of private members' time, and that's why a 50% increase is good for this Legislature. It's something that we all should be in support of.

Change is difficult, but as the member for Mississauga–Brampton South said, change can be stimulating. Look at the changes that have taken place in terms of the way we debate over the last 10, 15, 20 years. With the advent of the computer, we no longer have written notes; we now write our notes on our laptops or write our notes on our computers, and we bring them home. They're typed and much easier to read. We have our Black-Berries, and we do use them in this place. We can communicate outside of this place, check our correspondence; we can do all kinds of things. Our job is changing; technology is changing our job. Surely shifting around the hours of work here is not that big a deal that we should be spending this much time.

It's funny—and I think it's indicative of not just this place; I'm not blaming the opposition—I think it's indicative of human nature that when politicians talk about something that personally affects them, it seems to take precedence over everything else. I remember my days on council when we talked about salary increases. That was a good two- or three-day debate. When we talked about shifting around committees or shifting around procedures, that was good for two or three days of debate down at council, and I guess it's the same here. When we're talking about ourselves, it seems to consume us.

I don't think this is a debate that should be taking place too much longer. I think this is an issue that brings positive changes to the way we do business here. I think it's reasonable.

Mr. Bob Delaney: Let's give it a try.

Hon. Brad Duguid: The member for Mississauga–Streetsville said, "Let's give it a try." That's all we're doing. This is a trial; it's a pilot. Give it a try. The members opposite have said to send it to committee. We're going to do that. But we're going to give it a try, see how it works, and then it will go to a standing committee, like this government has with almost everything we've done. We've been very democratic when it comes to our legislation. It will go to a standing committee, and it will be looked at, and I'm sure there will be good recommendations brought forward. And if it's in the public interest and it works, great. If there are problems with it, maybe it can be adjusted. We're not afraid of change. I'm not sure why the opposition would be afraid to try this. That boggles my mind. I really think this is an opportunity to make life better and improve family life for many of us. I think it's something that's worth trying. It's something that I'm proud to support and look forward to supporting. Let's give it a try.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: Actually, I'm not very pleased to speak on this motion, because I'm not very happy with it. To put it in rural terms, maybe the minister can drive for a while and it's my turn to spread.

Some of the things he spoke about amount to a little bit less than bovine excrement, and I have to tell you that realistically, the people don't give a water retaining device's care about this at all.

Mr. Mike Colle: On a point of order, Madam Speaker: What he just said was not parliamentary language.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): I thank you for the comment, member for Eglinton–Lawrence, and remind members to please keep in mind the decorum of the House in their remarks.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: It really upset me to listen to the Premier answering the question, when he specifically spoke about having no problem with his members starting work at 9 o'clock in the morning. Quite frankly, I took offence at that, because I don't view myself as any different from any other member in this Legislature, and many of these days we're starting far earlier than 9 o'clock, as mentioned by the third party. This Thursday, I am going to be starting at 4:30 a.m., and my night on that day will probably end at about 11 o'clock, and I'm no different than any other member in this Legislature. We put a lot of hours into this, and to say we're going to start work only creates a mindset within the public and the media that—guess what?—we don't work unless we're sitting in the Legislature. That's far from the truth.

The number of hours we put in here last week was close to 25 and a half. I would ask the Speaker, if that's the only time members are working, how many hours was the Premier in the House? We're not allowed to comment on the number of hours, but I would ask the public, or their own members, to talk about how many hours, realistically, the Premier was working in this Legislature.

I took offence both at that and at the comments the minister just made that, "We don't have a problem starting." Any other member in this House is working far more than what takes place in this Legislature. That's all part of the job, and we expect that.

As I said, I'm no different. I have two young sons, 11 and 12 years old. On September 27, 1995, my wife sat in that gallery up there and went into labour, and my first son was born. My kids know absolutely nothing different from what has taken place in my life in this Legislature. I move my whole life around what takes place here.

Now, who is it going to benefit what is taking place? You've got to look at the members it is going to benefit. For those of us who drive in each and every day, as I believe you do, Madam Speaker, it's going to take that much more time, because when we get home, we're working in the riding, doing events. Let me see: Tomorrow night, I am working with the volunteer awards; the night after that, I'm working with the Provincial Volunteer Awards, at the South Oshawa Community Centre; on another night, the chamber of commerce. There won't be one night when I'm done at 11, and that goes for this Saturday and Sunday as well. This Sunday, I expect to see all members out at their Battle of the Atlantic ceremonies, celebrating with their naval associations. Saturday night is another awards night—that's no

different. To try to come in here and put this in the perspective that people watching would say, "The only time they work is in here," just degrades us to the point where it really bothers me, but I want to get to some other aspects.

Each party that comes in makes rule changes, and we were just as bad. When we came in, as the member who spoke earlier would remember, the only time the Legislature sat in the evenings was during the last two weeks, and we were allowed to sit until midnight. We set a heavy agenda at that time, so we changed the rules to allow us to sit every single night. Not only that, but there was another rule change that was extremely significant, and that was allowing for the introduction of bills and debate. You see, at that time you couldn't introduce a bill and debate it during those last two weeks. We changed that in order to help fill our agenda. I don't think that was the right thing to do.

Every government comes in and makes changes. One of the other significant changes that I was opposed to is the way it is now—you look up and see the clock; there's 15:54 left—and that is the allocation of time. People watching this wouldn't know that. The first speaker gets an hour; after that, there are 20-minute speeches; and then, after a certain period of time, there are 10-minute speeches. The debate is not so much about the content or the importance of the issue anymore; it's about who can fill the clock. Who's got 20 minutes to speak on this?

I would suggest, if you want to make that change, that the thing to do would be to take that first hour, and if they only want to use 45 minutes and save 15 minutes, add that to the next speaker. If they want to speak for 35 minutes, then you would have that person speak for 35 minutes. If they only use five of their 20 minutes, then you could add that 15 minutes, so that the next person could speak for 50 minutes, and add up that way. That would change the context of debate, so that you're actually speaking about issues, not filling time and clocks. That's one of the big concerns. It would certainly help.

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There are a number of other issues. For example, there's a perception—and I have to say that I haven't had a problem with the Speakers in the chair. I think that the Speaker's role or establishment should change, such that once the Speaker has been elected by the Legislature it is very much like another British parliamentary system, whereby nobody can run against that individual in the next provincial election.

The reason for that is that there is a perception, whether it is right or wrong, that the Speaker is siding with one particular party, and that's the party that they come from. It doesn't matter if it's our party or their party. There is a perception out there, and we sit in our caucuses behind closed doors saying, "It's not fair," "This isn't right," and "That's not right." You can remove that from the Speaker by eliminating the party affiliation, because that person would not have anybody running against them the next time. Those are some of the things.

Interjection.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: Well, that was from a former Speaker; he would certainly appreciate that.

Then they'd have to be re-elected by the Legislature the next time as the Speaker, in order to give some impartiality to the individuals.

I would have hoped there would be an all-party discussion on this. I have to tell you, we heard about some of the other Premiers, and it was the first Premier that I had the privilege and honour to serve with, Mike Harris, who did one of the things that I think would be very beneficial to this Legislature. That was an all-party committee that was established; it was the alternative fuels committee.

As I look around, I'll try to see if there are any members who participated in it. It was outside the guidelines of the current committees out there, and it was reaching out. It included the opposition parties in an immense way that gave them the opportunity for input on such an important thing, which was the fuels—it doesn't matter if it was solar power, wind power, gasoline fuels or those other areas. It gave an all-party agreement, and it gave much more outreach. More importantly, it allowed for more authority and input by the opposition parties.

That would be one of the great ways that this Legislature could establish and move forward with some things. We have some very serious issues out there that could be discussed in all-party committees, and I know that there was an attempt in the previous government to move forward with one, but it didn't come to be.

First of all, why are we moving forward with this? Is it a requirement that we need more hours? Is it going to be more time on the clock that we're going to have to fill, and who can fill these time slots? No, we have to find out the real reason. I do have some concerns, and quite frankly, I'm the morning person in my household. What this means to me is that I drive home and back and forth, and although I have an apartment allowance, I've never used it in my entire time of coming to Queen's Park, because I try to spend my time with my family.

It was a former Premier here, Mike Harris, who said that it would always be family first, constituency second, and all other responsibilities after that. That's what you should focus on; all members should. Because, quite frankly, at the end of the day when you're no longer here, you still have your family, and you need those individuals around you. You need to dedicate that time, and any way that we can move forward to make it a family-friendly place would certainly be more beneficial.

So, for example, my understanding is that federal members can take their family members on committee hearings with them. We don't have that allowance here, nor would the public understand why they would or should allow that. If you want to move forward with the family-friendly, I don't necessarily believe that these changes will assist in moving forward with that, particularly from my own perspective and that of other members who drive in on a local basis—or for those who come in from long distances on Monday morning, that will now

eat up a Sunday evening, as opposed to Monday morning travel to come in.

You're also going to get committee time and House time taking place at the same time. I don't know how beneficial that's going to be, because members will be running back and forth and trying to fill time spots. If you have to speak on a bill and you're in committee, it's tough to be in two places at one time. The structure of Queen's Park and the committee set-up has been around for a long time, to try to accommodate members and try to move forward with a number of other ways.

I don't know how this is going to be family-friendly, particularly for those individuals who come in from out of town. So they're going to have no evening sittings, and that's the guise under which we're told it's supposed to be. Well, those members who are coming in, I don't know how many members bring their families down to stay in Toronto when they're here, when they have to be in school and in other aspects. I don't really see this happening. I don't know if any of the members here actually bring their family members down to be at Queen's Park. So how does that free up time?

Those individuals who drive back to their ridings, as the speaker just previous to me mentioned, are at home doing events in their ridings, because they're more accessible, and they're there on a regular basis, which is part of—we understand that's taking place, and how do we do that?

I don't know where this perception of family-friendly has come in to free up the evenings, because I don't see it as happening. One, the members who come in will have to come in earlier, on a Sunday night as opposed to a Monday morning. Two, they're not there with their families unless they can leave early, not be around and be back at their home with their families. And those individuals who drive back and forth will end up working, as we all do, in the evenings and on weekends to try to fill the demands.

Realistically, as an MPP, the demands are everywhere. I can remember some of the things that have taken place. It doesn't matter where it is, there's somebody always asking for some help. You try to do that, because that's your job. You get in to make a difference with the community, with the families, with the people who surround you, to try to make a change. It's not so much that you go to events to be recognized as the speaker or at the head table. The reason that we go to events is accessibility. Those individuals at the events in the evenings don't realistically have the time to come in and see you through the week, or to come to Queen's Park when the House is in session, to try and be here with you. So you're out there with your community, trying to outreach to those individuals, at all times. That's part of the job, and we all accept that. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that. I don't know realistically, for one, how the additional hours are going to help.

Another thing: the 50% more private members' business. There were only two government members that the former speaker spoke about where their bills had actually

passed in private members' business. There may be others, but I would have liked the opportunity to have heard about some of the other ones, some of the non-government members' bills that got put forward.

The private members aspect is more than just the expectation in regard to the third party member, who spoke realistically about passing. It's not always about passing a piece of legislation; it's about raising the profile of a very key issue that needs to be addressed by the province. When a government is out there and the Legislature is debating specific issues that are being brought forward, private members' business is an opportunity to raise the profile of an issue that needs to be addressed, with the potential expectation that it may pass, but realistically, the hope is that you've raised the profile of an issue enough so that, in the event that the government is addressing an all-government or an omnibus bill, they may be able to include a clause that will address an issue that hasn't been addressed before.

I don't necessarily know about the 50% more private members' time, with the expectation of passing—unless they change the structure. Most people wouldn't realize that after second reading, if it passes, the bill then becomes the property of the government. Correct, Clerk? To get it to third reading, it's up to the government to call that. Why not allow it to then become not the property of the government, so that there is third reading debate, so that extra 50% of air time is allowed to be used to debate the third reading of some debates? At that time, the government can decide whether they're going to support it or not support it, or not give it royal assent, which may take away from it. But it's more opportunity and better discussion with more potential input there.

I do have some concerns. Realistically, I look at the time and the guise of family-friendly; I don't see how that's going to change. But passing the bill in two days—is that one of the issues? I don't see a large legislative calendar or a large number of issues that are being brought forward to be debated, so I don't know why it's being changed. We talk about parliamentary tradition, and we've changed that tradition. From my perspective, it wasn't something that I didn't agree with, although I'm told it's supposed to benefit the current sitting members when you go to a fixed election date so that you can plan and you have it all laid out prior to that. Even when I had the privilege and honour to be in the cabinet, I had no idea until the day the election was called that that election was being called. It was something you would try to prepare for, but you could never really guess. Now it's a fixed date, so it has gone to a more American system. I think some of the changes, although I don't necessarily believe this one is—we've made some changes that I don't think are necessarily in the best interests of all.

I think we need to look at how we can move forward. I was hoping for an all-party committee to try and get some input on that. If there was an opportunity, some of the suggestions I made, such as the Speaker, the other one such as the amount of time to be speaking, to revert back to—it was simple. It was the standing orders. You

couldn't sit until it was the last two weeks of the session and you were able to sit until midnight. Those were some of the key things that I wanted to bring out. I'm sure there are many more.

I got a little wound up because I really take offence at the fact that there's a perception—and projecting that perception—that members only work when the House is in session. Unless people start to know you and really realize the work—I don't think I'm any different than any other member in this Legislature. We're dedicated, committed, and we're here to make a change and stand up for what we believe in.

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I'm just going to take a quick check here. I think that the family-friendly aspect is not really there, the number of hours, the journalists, the authorities coming forward—yes, change can be necessary, and yes, change is good, but I don't necessarily think that all change is going to be. What it is, it's trial and error in some cases.

The one thing that I would ask is whether any member in the House right now, for those who are here, can tell me what the motto of the legislative crest or assembly is and what it says in Latin. Is there anybody there now who can tell me what it says? Probably not. Just to inform the members, very clearly—and it's very distinctive and has a large impact—it's, "Listen to the other side". That what the crest and the emblem says in Latin.

What is taking place is the same thing that takes place—I can't remember if it was Mr. Bradley or Mr. Sterling who mentioned that every government that comes in makes these changes, and when a new government comes in, they don't revert back, because they quickly forget what it's like to be on the other side in opposition.

If the government members sat back and looked and recalled what it was like to be in opposition and what they felt their role was, what would they do to change that? Because what goes around comes around, and I am not one to stand up. I just take it as a privilege and honour to be elected every time. I appreciate the opportunity but I don't necessarily believe this is going to be in the best interests of the province of Ontario.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I must say, I have been quite amazed by this whole debate that we're having—this whole process of changing the standing orders.

People around this room have talked about the reality of what's on the table, what's before us. Initially, it was entirely a question of being family-friendly. The member from Nepean-Carleton, Ms. MacLeod, made some very good points about the way this place is structured and how it actually limited and constrained the ability of those with young families to function fully, and to function the way they should be able to in a modern 21st-century workplace. In fact, she made some good points. What happened here, in this chamber with this government, is that those points were used to cover for an extraordinarily substantial rewrite of the standing orders.

For those of you who are out there watching this on television, those of you who may have insomnia right

now, you should know that the standing orders govern how we work in here. It may not seem like a lot, but I have to tell you, I used to be on Toronto city council and it was astounding to me when I found out that a change from “and” to “or” dramatically rewrote the substance of a motion. There was one time when we were having a debate about privatizing part of the St. Lawrence Market, and I was able to get an “and” changed to “or” in a third sub-amendment that gutted the privatization, to the shock and horror of all those who voted for the final motion before council. So when we deal with standing orders, we talk about the ability of this place to actually be relevant to your lives and to deliver to you the accountability that you vote for when you go into that voting booth.

I want to strip away all the other arguments; I'll come back to them. But I want to go straight to the question of the question period itself. Because people out there, and you, Madam Speaker, know that question period is the point in the day, the point in the political cycle, when the government is at its most vulnerable. Right now in this chamber, those assembled here are speaking within a very strict format. We get a chance to speak, we make our arguments, we turn to each other, and we try to convince. In the end, orders have been given, and members vote pretty much the way their parties tell them to vote. But in question period, it's like quantum mechanics; all is unpredictable. Now, there's a reason they call it question period and not answer period. Rarely, in my short career here—a little over two years—have I actually seen a question answered with an answer. But on occasion, one finds, by asking a question of the Premier or of a minister, that the Premier or that minister can no longer keep up the façade of a policy that has changed.

I was here when the Minister of Energy had to admit that no longer could they keep the promise, the façade, that they were going to close down the coal plants in this province. It was interesting to watch the media gallery up here, because they knew exactly what was happening, even though there was never a direct answer from that side of the room.

Question period is the time at which the government is most exposed, the time at which random and unpredictable events can shape—and shake—careers, and we today are debating a process by which this government is going to take that point of vulnerability and try to bury it, move it in the news cycle so that it's before noon, move it so that the chances of recovering from a mistake, recovering from a slip-up, are dramatically increased. So if things go wrong at 11:30 in the morning, if a minister says something that, boy, they want buried, then everyone in this chamber knows that that afternoon something will be announced to fill up the news space so that it's all dealt with for the evening news cycle, or if not all dealt with, at least covered quite significantly. That's what this is about. That's what these standing orders changes are about.

It isn't, as the Minister of Labour said, a question of this side being averse to change. Everyone looks at change. But it isn't a question of changing things so that

question period is in fact sharper. It isn't a question of changing things so that those who reside outside Toronto and outside the GTA are going to find it easier, because the changes that have been made will in fact make it more difficult for those families who will have a member leave home on Sunday afternoon, and not Monday morning. So it's less family-friendly.

Let's go back to question period. There were three things that I learned on city council—well, there were more than three, but three always stuck with me. First, never ask a question you don't have the answer to, because sometimes unpleasant things happen. Secondly, always read the report first. There were a number of times when my colleagues and I found ourselves asking questions that were answered in the report, so I learned that one. The third is, be careful what you ask for—be very careful what you ask for—because as you know, Madam Speaker, the process of election is unpredictable. Parties get elected that no one expected to get elected; governments fall that everyone thought were rock solid. There's nothing God-given that keeps this group of people on this side of the aisle and that group of people on that side.

Something I argued when I was a councillor, when my group was in a stronger position and the others were in a weaker position, and vice versa, was that in the next election, no one knew with any certainty who was going to be leading things. So if this government asks for a substantial weakening, a burying, of the ability of the opposition to actually hold the government to account, then a number of them may well survive the next election to be on this side and find that their tools to hold government to account are dramatically weakened. That matters in a democracy.

I don't care what your political perspective is; there will be times when governments do things that will make you crazy and that you believe, for good reason or ill, will have a detrimental impact on the future of this community that we call Ontario. And you will want to have the instruments to hold that government to account, to prove—not just assert, but prove—in the face of withering criticism and tough, tough questioning that what has been brought forward is actually useful.

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In some ways, what we have here—I know that when I go out and talk to people, they say “Why don't you work together?” Sometimes we do. But the reality of this chamber is that ideas are put forward and they are subjected to boiling water, they are subjected to acid and they are put through the wringer. At times that chemistry of acid and hot water, of tough questioning—sometimes not even tough questioning, but emotionally effective questioning—determines whether they're strong or weak. It's the tradition of our courts, where you have a defendant, where you have a plaintiff, where ideas are put forward on the stage, put forward before a judge and where they are thought through—and in this place as well. When you make sure that the government's position is increasingly unassailable, is increasingly one where

they can manipulate the media cycle, then you do a disservice to the people of this province.

There are a few ministers who may be concerned about this or a few backbenchers who are concerned about this, but I say to everyone in this chamber, whether you're in opposition or in government, what's being done is a disservice to the democracy of this province—very much a disservice. It was pointed out that this government is going to be asking for time allocation on this motion, which is extraordinary to me. Not only are you rewriting the rules of this democracy within this chamber to weaken debate and weaken the whole process of questioning and critical analysis, but you're going to limit the debate as well. Family-friendly? Pro democracy? No.

Mr. Kormos, the member for Welland, spoke about the Minister of Transportation, the member for St. Catharines, and his comments in 1997 about rule changes. I wasn't here. I was out doing other stuff. But Mr. Bradley had a very interesting line of argument: Changes are not made to make this chamber better; changes are made to strengthen the hand of government. Mr. Bradley was entirely correct.

It's suggested that these will be temporary changes. Are you kidding? I have to tell you—no, I can't say that, because it wouldn't be parliamentary. But I have to tell you that if you think changes that are extraordinarily convenient to a government in delivering its agenda are going to be temporary and chucked out mid-summer, then you didn't go through the same education system that I went through. It's a very simple process.

Do you believe this stuff? Have you gotten beyond pixie dust? Because if you have, you don't believe that these changes will be temporary if they're useful to the government. If they're a disaster for the government, I have no doubt in my mind that we'll be debating them again. But if they're really convenient, if they're really effective, if they bury stories that would embarrass this government, then they're in. The next government, whoever it is, because it's so tempting—if you are in government, you have the ring and you get to do what you want. It's very tempting to just keep on going that way.

No one in the general public out there and no one in this House should be confused about what's going on. To take that and bring in time allocation is quite extraordinary. You're doing something that's undemocratic and then you're jamming it through. In the end, there are only so many members of the opposition. In the end, you can probably talk this out. But to have to rely on time allocation for this should be written up. I doubt that it

will be written up. People should be aware that a weakening of democracy is being put in place with steps that, in and of themselves, are undemocratic.

We should all remember that there are big issues that will be before us in the next four years. The state of our economy is quite substantial. This government will have to be held to account for its management or non-management of the economy. You, out there in the general public, are going to have big questions if far more people start losing their jobs.

I was on a city council in the early 1990s during the recession and I have to tell you: big questions all the time about what city government was doing to protect the economy. You out there will want those questions to hit home with this government. It will be much more difficult for us to hit home when question period is buried.

We have big questions about the environment and about climate change. Ten months have passed since this Premier promised a climate change plan for this province. None exists. No allocation in the budget; no legislation that was talked about in terms of transparency and reporting—none of that. Yet if you look at the food price issue that's happening in the world, everyone talks about biofuels, but if you look at what has happened to the price of rice and its availability, one of the largest factors was the drought in Australia, one of the world's major rice producers, that is generally recognized as being tied to climate change and that has led to food riots in Haiti and sub-Saharan Africa. That issue will be on the front burner as the world gets hotter and hotter. Our ability in this chamber to hold that government to account on that issue is diminished substantially by their efforts to manipulate and run the news cycle. That is of consequence for us.

It is unconscionable for this government to be running this approach. They have made a fundamental mistake in terms of protecting our democratic interests, and we on this side, for whatever reasons, are correct in opposing it. It doesn't matter what our motives are. In the end, if you want to have a democratic government that can be held to account, that can be subjected to the full glare of publicity, then this direction that has been taken by this government is the wrong one.

Debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Andrea Horwath): It being almost 9:30 of the clock, I declare this House adjourned until tomorrow, Tuesday, April 29, at 1:30 p.m.

The House adjourned at 2127.

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