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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Tuesday 23 February 2021

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Mardi 23 février 2021

The House met at 0900.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Good morning. Let us pray.

Prayers.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

WORKPLACE SAFETY
AND INSURANCE AMENDMENT
ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 MODIFIANT LA LOI
SUR LA SÉCURITÉ PROFESSIONNELLE
ET L'ASSURANCE CONTRE
LES ACCIDENTS DU TRAVAIL

Resuming the debate adjourned on February 18, 2021, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 238, An Act to amend the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997 / Projet de loi 238, Loi modifiant la Loi de 1997 sur la sécurité professionnelle et l'assurance contre les accidents du travail.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: I am happy to rise today to speak on the second reading of Bill 238, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, 2021. The legislation we're discussing today will ensure that WSIB premiums and compensation remain stable. This bill fits within the larger context of our government's efforts to stand with workers and employers during these challenging times, and what our Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development has been doing from day one: supporting and protecting workers and employers. This bill is yet another example of how the people's government—Ontario's government—is protecting its workers and employers during COVID-19.

For too long, individuals, families and businesses have been forced to feel like they're working for the government. It's about time that the government start working for the people and for them. That is the approach that our government has taken from day one, the government for the people. Our government understands a government must work to leave a legacy of hope for future generations and build on the progress it has made so far to restore that sacred bond, that bond and that trust between the people and their government.

The first piece of legislation our government tabled in March, which passed with unanimous support from all parties, was an amendment to the Employment Standards Act. Our government created a new, unlimited, job-

protected leave called the infectious disease emergency leave. This is available retroactive to January 25, 2020, the day the first presumptive case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Ontario. This leave ensures that workers and their jobs are protected as they follow the advice that our public health professionals have told us in combatting the spread of COVID-19. It also ensures that those who stay at home to self-isolate and to care for loved ones will not be fired.

This job protection will remain in place as long as is necessary, and includes protections for those who need it. For example, it protects the jobs of those who may be isolating or in quarantine, those who need to take time to take care of their kids due to school closures or daycare closures, or to care for a sick relative. This legislation also makes it clear that employers don't have to require a sick note from their employees if they need to take that time off.

I want to remind everyone that there is financial help for workers who need to stay at home. Thanks to an agreement by the Prime Minister and Premier Doug Ford and other Premiers, there is over \$1 billion—let me repeat, \$1 billion—available for workers to access 10 paid sick days. To date, over 110,000 workers in Ontario have accessed this funding. We know that this program needs to work better. There is \$800 million still in the bank, and workers need this support. So I encourage all MPPs, if you haven't done so, to advocate to your constituents that this fund is available and to uptake it.

The Minister of Labour, for example, spoke to his federal counterparts about this fund and what needs to be done to improve the federal paid sick leave program. He raised this with her: the need to pay workers faster, make it easier to access and raise awareness about the benefits. They agreed to continue working together to ensure workers get the support they need.

This is something our Minister of Labour and Premier stood shoulder to shoulder with workers on and employers all together to make sure that those supports are available. If we are doing our part in this Legislature, part of our part is to ensure that we are advocating for those workers who need to access these funds swiftly and quickly. If you haven't done it already, there are very little, easy things you can do. For example, you can take out an ad on your local radio station. You can do a mailer to let your constituents know that this is available to them.

Combined with that support and combined with the provincial job-protected leave we introduced in our first action this year, this will overall protect the workers and, of course, help the employers. This is a trend, Speaker.

From the very beginning, our government set out to create and protect jobs. Very early on, in our first budget for example, we reduced Workplace Safety and Insurance Board premiums. Well before COVID-19, we saw that this would help tremendously with creating jobs in our province and, of course, would help the employers. So, well before COVID-19, our Ontario government had the foresight to do what was needed to support these businesses, and that has paid dividends since.

However, more supports were always needed, and we have to look at all angles of health and all angles of helping workers. One of the things that actually came up in this Legislature well before COVID-19 was we continued to support emergency health first responders suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD. This disorder can affect paramedics and ambulance communication officers in Ontario who provide compassionate life-saving care 24/7, seven days a week and 365 days in a year, from corner to corner of our province.

Under the Supporting Ontario's First Responders Act, a PTSD diagnosis for certain workers is now presumed to be work-related. They no longer need to prove it. This includes first responders, including police officers and correctional officers, youth service workers, employment dispatch and others. It gives these workers faster access to WSIB benefits, resources and timely treatment. Again, this was well before COVID-19, but speaks to the fact that from day one this government has stood shoulder to shoulder with the worker and made the necessary changes to WSIB so they can continue with that employment.

That's not just it, Speaker. If you look to our recovery plan, we included things like the recovery assistance skills plan, something that was well received all around this province. If you weren't able to catch that, the province is now committing \$100 million in funding from 2020-21, through Employment Ontario, for skills training programs for workers most affected by COVID-19. This dedicated fund will help more workers and job seekers get advice, training and other assistance they need to upgrade their skills and find jobs. Again, this is something this government has continued to do, and it follows suit with that theme. Connecting workers, for example, in the tourism and hospitality sector and other most affected areas by the pandemic: We're helping connect them with the training and the skills they need by investing another \$180 million over three years, including towards the skilled trades strategy; an additional, as I was saying, \$100 million of dedicated investments through Employment Ontario for skills training; and of course, we're redesigning the Second Career program with a \$59-million investment in needed skills in those demanded areas.

Again, this builds on our record. If there's any debate or any question as to whether this government is supporting the worker and helping employers, our record stands for itself. For example, over 37,000 workplace inspections have been conducted, again keeping that worker safe. Over 38,000 orders have been issued as a result. Sixty-three unsafe workplaces have been shut down—again, to protect the worker. We doubled the

phone lines at our health and safety contact centre, protecting the worker. Over 200 new sector-specific guidelines and other resources have been created to protect the worker. This includes six tip sheets that we've created, 33 posters and, of course, a safety template—again, to protect the worker. Together, these resources have been downloaded one million times, Speaker, so it actually speaks volumes in terms of us protecting the worker yet again.

0910

And that's not it. Fifty employment standards officers have been hired to help businesses know what to do, because if businesses know what to do, they can keep their workers safe and healthy. Thirty health and safety specialists in the field have been also hired in the field of educating the workers themselves so that they know what to do on the job. There were also various webinars that were hosted with over 2,000 participants. In addition to that, there were 100 additional health and safety inspectors that were allowed to be issued so that they can directly work with employers to be able to create a safe workplace. Again, this in itself adds to the largest hiring initiative in over 15 years—again, with the premise of protecting the worker.

With a total of 507 inspectors, we know that that was an important investment to make to protect those on the job, so that they can go to work, know that they're safe, come back at the end of the day, spend time with their husband, their wife or their kids knowing that their employer and this government did everything they could to keep them safe on the job.

That's why it's so fitting that today we are discussing the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, 2021, that would, if passed, protect employers from an unexpected increase in WSIB premiums while maintaining an increase to the maximum earning cap for worker benefits. The loss of jobs among low-wage workers, including those in retail, hospitality and the service sector during COVID-19, has resulted in an increase in the average industrial wage of Ontario workers by 7.8%, compared to an average increase of 2% to 3%. The proposed amendments would limit the impact that the increase of the AIG has on WSIB premiums by 2%, Mr. Speaker, making sure struggling businesses' owners aren't subject to sudden, undue costs during these challenging times. Additionally, the new amendments will not impact the 7.8% increase in the earning cap for workers, ensuring they will continue to be fairly compensated for work-related injuries and occupational diseases during COVID-19.

As stated by the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development, "Our government is protecting jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic by giving employers the support they need to get through this difficult time. Our proposed amendments will help businesses, while making sure that we continue to support workers who are injured on the job."

It has been said many times, Speaker, that all of us have felt the effects of COVID-19 and this pandemic, and my heart goes out to all of those who lost a loved one. The pandemic has led to sacrifices of many front-line workers

who have worked day in and day out, often missing seeing their loved ones. This pandemic has also led to many small businesses, the backbone of our local communities, sacrificing their time and their money to keep others safe. They have had to lay off some of their team members that they often consider family.

I'll give an example in my riding of Barrie–Innisfil. Many people, I'm sure, know the Keg franchise, but what many may not know is how much of a family environment it really is. One of our owners of the Keg, Brammer, knew how much of an impact COVID-19 was going to be on his employees. He knew he had to shut down his restaurant, and he was worried that his workers were going to be living paycheque to paycheque. And if they were already living paycheque to paycheque and they no longer had one coming in because the restaurant was closed, he was very worried about them.

So one of the things he did was he went to Sobeys and he got gift cards for all his employees. He also created a rotational schedule so when they could open and have 10 people seated; he tried to do his best by really pivoting, getting creative with takeout. They had a really interesting New Year's takeout box option you could do, and he really tried to support his workers so they would still have that wage coming in and they could make their obligations and their payments.

But that shows you that real Team Canada, Team Ontario environment that we have across our province. It's not just this restaurant owner who cares more about his employees than his own bottom line because they're family to him, every single one of these employees. He cares for their well-being just like many community members care for the well-being of their businesses.

I've mentioned her many times, but Jennifer Richardson in my community, who is very well known as Keeping Up with the Richardsons, has created all kinds of initiatives in order to support local businesses that are struggling, and, of course, WSIB is one less thing they need to worry about, because, again, it's one less payroll tax that they have to worry about. They can also increase employment if needed.

It's now more than ever that so many of these businesses need help, so this particular change is not only just going to help that restaurant owner, but it's going to help people like the Last Shot Bar and Grill; it's going to help Harbour House Grill; it's going to help The Parlour ice cream shop. Not a lot of people are going out for ice cream right now, Mr. Speaker. I don't know if you checked the temperature, but it's quite chilly outside. But that is actually going to make an impact for that particular business owner.

It's going to help the Stone Grille, Davidson's Country Dining and Johnny Burger. It's going to help many of our Subway and Mr. Sub owners. It's going to help our Stacked Pancake Houses that we all like to have our morning coffee and our morning meetings at. Of course, with COVID-19, they have also been affected, and this small change, even for WSIB, is actually going to go a long way for many of these people because they'll feel the direct

impacts and it's, again, one less payroll tax for them to have to worry about. We've seen the impacts of what happens when they have to pay too much.

In addition to those restaurant owners who are also affected by this, there are also sales associates in retail, servers who have to wait in hospitality and those working in the housekeeping business and in tourism. They've all made sacrifices.

I know in my area—I always talk about I'm part of the snowbelt, and I might not be the buckle, but I'm part of the belt. We have a lot of tourism and hospitality businesses that are reliant on customers and a large flow of people, but if you cannot have that during COVID-19, of course it affects your bottom line, so the difference of freezing WSIB premiums is going to go a long way. The fact that it won't be increasing is a hope and a light at the end of the tunnel for many of these business owners. It complements many of the measures that have already been done to date by all levels of government, be they municipal, provincial or federal, to help these employers and, of course, by extension their employees, because now they have a job to go to at the end of the day.

When we talk about the stressors of the pandemic and the effect it has had on workers and businesses, it is truly unprecedented. We said this many times in this Legislature. That's why the Minister of Labour, Skills Development and Trade has been working hard during these challenging times in putting into action real initiatives to help protect the safety and well-being of workers; and, of course, supporting businesses in following health and safety requirements to stop the spread of this deadly virus; and by finding ways to ease some of the unexpected financial operating burdens that businesses have encountered while they do their part to protect their customers and their workers alike. For example, this government helped support them with things like the PPE grant, something we heard a lot about in terms of the costs on that.

But we know that people across Ontario will be the ones who lay the foundations for our recovery for tomorrow, and we need to support those people because they're going to be supporting us for a better tomorrow. At a time when so many have been left without jobs, our efforts will help them connect with new careers that they need to thrive, and of course help the young people and women and everyone. Whether it's in skilled trades or other employment, by having this WSIB premium not only are we supporting the employer, we're protecting the worker. Without this change, they would see an 8% increase. That's something that many people can't afford. That's why they are supporting this particular change.

I spoke to Christopher Franco in my riding. He runs Franco Investments. In support of this particular legislation, he says, "As a local investor and business owner, I have seen the devastating effects" of "COVID-19" and the impact it "has done to businesses. By passing this bill, you are supporting employers and employees. A capped increase in premiums while maintaining the benefits afforded to employees is essential during these unprecedented times. This gives businesses a fighting chance for another unfamiliar year."

It wasn't just Chris Franco. I also spoke to our local Barrie Chamber of Commerce; again, just like the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, it also supports this piece of legislation. Paul Markle, the executive director, says, "The Greater Barrie Chamber of Commerce strongly supports Bill 238, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, 2021. We are encouraged that the government is proposing this change to ensure businesses already severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic aren't further injured by an increase to their WSIB premiums for the 2021 calendar year."

0920

That's not just it. We don't just have folks in investment and small business, like the small business chamber—but even in the real estate business, Speaker. The retailers, for example, Steve Arseneault, with Century 21, said the following in favour of this particular legislation: "As a retailer, I feel safe knowing our provincial government has implemented steps to protect me, our staff, buyers, sellers from COVID."

It doesn't just end there. We've got support from, of course, different people within the province, not just in my local riding, as I had just stated. Dennis Darby, the president of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters association, says this on the following bill: "This decrease ... is critical for helping Ontario manufacturers compete for investment by reducing their operating cost. This continuing trend in rate reductions also reaffirms the tremendous efforts of Ontario manufacturers and their employees to reduce workplace injuries and related claims."

I talked about my local chamber, but let's hear from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce's Rocco Rossi, who said about this bill when it first was introduced: "Today's news is welcomed by the Ontario business community. Premiums come out of the pockets of business owners. This money saved can be better spent on job creation, new technologies, infrastructure, and better, safer workplaces."

Again, it's great support for why we need to be in this Legislature talking about this. We're laying the pathway to the future, to these businesses being able to thrive towards the future, because if they thrive now and we help them with this WSIB change, they could hire more people.

We talk about getting young people into the skilled trades and more women into the skilled trades. It's something that happened last year in my riding. The Barrie Chamber of Commerce, when they did their Women in Business Awards, it was the first year they actually gave a woman in trades award. Of course, I spoke about it in previous times in the Legislature. That shows you that, after the pandemic, even when it's over, the foundations that we lay today are going to create a better tomorrow and anything that we can do, even if it's, again, freezing WSIB premiums, is going to go a long way to supporting these businesses. If we support them, they'll support the worker, and the worker will have somewhere to go at the end of the day.

That is something I can support here. I can go to my constituents and say, "We helped you during this pandemic." Small businesses, there is a brighter tomorrow.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions.

Mr. Jamie West: Thank you to the member from Barrie–Innisfil for her debate on Bill 238. Several times, she talked about the importance of protecting workers, about the government for the people, and the importance of protecting injured workers. But what I see in terms of facts don't match up with this.

Injured workers, Speaker, face four times the rate of poverty. Forty-six per cent of permanently injured workers live in poverty; 9% live in deep poverty. One in five injured workers lives in extreme poverty. That means they make less than \$10,000 a year, Speaker. And over 40% report incomes of less than \$15,000 a year.

I'm just wondering if the member opposite could help me understand how much the government has helped these injured workers while they're a party for the people.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: As we're debating the WSIB freeze and how it's going to help through COVID-19, you see that we have a Minister of Labour who is really always fighting for the worker. Whether it's providing the skilled trade changes we need to get more people into the labour market—he's also advocating to the federal government, for example. There is a letter I am currently holding, Speaker, where he writes to the federal Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion. It's a very strongly worded letter, of course, and it's from the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development, calling for negotiating not only a historic restart agreement, but again, the \$1 billion and 10 paid sick days and, of course, having this program rolled out swiftly and quickly so that those workers, no matter what they're undergoing, have those leaves that they need.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Burlington.

Ms. Jane McKenna: Thank you so much to the member from Barrie–Innisfil for your 20-minute speech. It was very interesting to listen to.

I just wanted to touch on, just at the end there, you were talking about women in skilled trades. As you know, with our government, it's our mission to get people back in trades. There are over 100,000 jobs available in construction alone right now. Everybody in here would be shocked to know that one in three journeypersons is over the age of 55.

Can you just elaborate a bit more, at the end of your speech there, about women in skilled trades and just tell me a bit more about what you were going to say about that?

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you to that member. It allows me to highlight, as I was saying in my speech, that the Barrie Chamber of Commerce, for their Women in Business Awards, did do an award for women in trades. One of the guest speakers—we speak about her a lot in this House—is Jamie McMillan. She's a journeyperson ironworker and boilermaker and the founder of Kickass Careers. Jamie became an ironworker in 2002 when women only represented 2% of the workforce across Canada and the US.

One of the things that we're trying to do through the government is get not only more women in skilled trades but more young people by investing early in things like education, breaking the stigma, simplifying the system and having better, equal access to the skilled trades profession.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you to the member from Barrie–Innisfil for the debate on Bill 238 and her words on the debate.

St. Catharines is one of the most vulnerable cities in this province on COVID-19, because the government's refusal has made us a hot spot and provided us with not enough of the vaccines we need. We need our equitable share. Moderna was passed on and diverted from Niagara.

When I talked to the public health office officials, they are clear: Workplaces are one of the greatest areas of spread for COVID-19 in my community. But low-wage earners need support to make the right decisions and stay at home.

Why does this government not see that passing paid sick days instead of kicking the responsibility to the federal government is needed for small businesses in downtown St. Catharines?

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Great. Thank you to the member. I mentioned in my speech and in one of my answers to the question the fact that we have a Minister of Skills Development and a Premier who are advocating for the worker at the federal level to get the paid sick days. This is to the benefit of the worker, and something that we can all be doing in this House is letting our constituents know that there are still funds available.

We have seen other provinces who have tried to duplicate the program, for example, Quebec and Saskatchewan. They did duplicate the program and realized they made a significant error and then reversed the duplication, again pivoting to the federal program, which we are supporting and advocating for.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Ottawa West–Nepean.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: I appreciate the remarks from my colleague the member for Barrie–Innisfil, talking about how this measure is going to support our small businesses. I know that the member from Barrie–Innisfil also knows that this measure is going to support a lot of our not-for-profits around our communities.

In fact, Cathy Taylor, the executive director of the Ontario Nonprofit Network, said that Ontario Nonprofit Network “appreciates the government of Ontario and the WSIB freezing rate increases for non-profit employers, and recognizing the economic and social impact of non-profits and charities on communities.”

I wonder, Speaker, if the member for Barrie–Innisfil could talk a little bit about this important support for our non-profits in our communities.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: I was listening to that member's speech as well. He talked about the amount of charity and not-for-profit organizations that are going to benefit so well from the WSIB premium freeze. It's not just United

Way or the YMCA. It's our women's shelters, it's our food banks, it's our retirement homes and it's our Legions. This is, of course, going to help them and give them a brighter silver lining once we recover from this pandemic.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I listened to the member from Barrie–Innisfil recite a number of measures that this government has taken to so-called protect the worker.

I'm curious to know why this government is so opposed to a provincial program of paid sick days. This is a critical measure that has been almost unanimously acknowledged as an important way to protect the worker but also to protect public health. All of the mayors who are calling for paid sick days, all of the public health experts, all of the boards of health, all of the city councils that have passed motions, they know that a provincial program of paid sick days is very different from the federal CRSB. Why doesn't this government understand that?

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you to the member for that question. As she might be aware, the federal program went from two weeks to four weeks, so it has been increased, it has been extended, again thanks to the advocacy of our Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development and of course Premier Ford at the Premiers' table. But that's not it. Of course, we've got the Canada Recovery Sick Benefit. There's also Ontario's job-protected leave. There's Canada's paid sickness benefit, and of course we've got Canada's income support for parents, where they can pay for parents who have to stay at home with their kids. There's a payout for that. All these things support workers and people who have to stay at home.

0930

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry.

Hon. John Yakabuski: I want to thank the member for that excellent speech. She talks about the skilled trades. My son is a Red Seal carpenter. I've got to say that years ago, under the previous government, there just wasn't enough being done to encourage our young people to get into the trades—certainly not females, but males either. There just was this stigma that if you were in the trades, you were somehow not in one of the best jobs out there.

I can't tell you what his T4s are, but I'm going to tell you, he's making a really good wage working in the skilled trades, and I want to encourage more people to get into the skilled trades as a result of that. There are jobs out there. This province is growing and building under this government. There's going to be construction and projects that need to be done. We're going to need those skilled workers.

I want to ask the member, can she tell me what our government is doing to encourage more of our qualified, good, strong—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. Back to the member from Barrie–Innisfil to respond.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: That's an excellent question by the minister, and it's so important. We see it in Innisfil and

in Barrie in the schools. Lots of people want to get into the profession. They know it's high-paying jobs. But there are some of the parents where that stigma is still attached. That's why it's a key part of our three pillars of the Ontario Skilled Trades Strategy. We're going to be breaking the stigma. We're going to be simplifying the system and encouraging employer participation. These are the key pillars of success to also breed skilled trades from a young age and help lift them up through the profession, giving them supports they need, like the tools tax credit, which is going to help many of these individuals. Again, they can make a high salary and pass the torch to the next generation that can get into skilled trades as well.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Mr. Jamie West: It's always a pleasure to talk in the chamber. Today we're debating Bill 238, Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act. The goal of this bill is basically to legislate the freezing of WSIB premium rates paid by Ontario employers for 2021 and also the right of the minister to request some reports from the WSIB.

The bill is pretty straightforward. I would argue it might not even be necessary, Speaker. The WSIB already announced this rate freeze. Also, you don't have to put rate freezes through legislation, so it might be an opportunity just to signal that they're trying to do something to help small businesses.

I think it's important to talk about the history of the WSIB, or workmen's compensation, back in the old days. At the turn of the century, basically, in a workplace, death and injury was almost accepted as part of the job—almost accepted. There was a lot of pushback, and then in 1915, under a Conservative government, the Workmen's Compensation Act was passed. The act ensured that people were compensated for work-related injuries, occupational diseases, and then in turn, businesses weren't allowed to be sued by these workers who had been injured or became ill at work.

The act was based on Sir William Meredith's five basic principles for a compassionate system.

No-fault compensation: That meant that workers were paid benefits regardless of how the injury occurred. The worker and employer waived the right to sue, as I said earlier—no argument over responsibility or liability.

Security benefits: A fund is established to guarantee that funds exist to pay for benefits. That becomes important later on in the debate, Speaker, because we're talking about lowering rates of payment.

Collective liability: The employers would share liability for workplace injury insurance and the total cost of compensation.

Independent administration: That means that workers' compensation—well, actually “workmen's” back in 1915—is arm's length from the government. The WSIB is arm's length from the government today as well.

They would have exclusive jurisdiction to provide insurance for workers in workplaces.

I think it's interesting, as I said earlier, that it was a Conservative government that brought this forward, and I

think it's a great thing. They came forward with what's called the historic compromise. This is really, really important, because it was a solution where the workers gave up the right to sue their employers—and that's why you don't see all these lawsuits like you do in the States—but it was a guaranteed protection from loss of income. And I emphasize the guaranteed protection from loss of income because, as I had said earlier in questions and comments, a lot of the injured workers are really living below the poverty line and have lost their income.

The goal of this bill, Speaker, is to legislate a freeze that the employer will receive on WSIB premium rates. Since 2018, the Conservative government has dropped employers' premium rates by 47%. They justify a lot of these cuts because in 2019 they announced that the unfunded liability had been paid off. I'm going to get into this in more detail, but the unfunded liability was actually created by the previous Conservative government, which began cutting employer rates. The unfunded liability is basically the difference between the projected amount that you will have to pay out to injured workers and the amount of insurance money that the WSIB has access to.

Those five basic principles of Sir William Meredith I talked about: Two of them were security benefits—guaranteed funds that exist to pay for compensation—and collective liability, that all the employers pay into this and they're responsible for funding it properly.

A lot of injured workers consider the unfunded liability I mentioned earlier a bit of a manufactured crisis. It started with the previous government, under the Mike Harris government, and it was under the Mike Harris government that the Workers' Compensation Board became the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board. Literally, they took “workers” out of the name, and a lot of people feel like they removed workers as a priority.

As an example, in 1995, injured worker representation was eliminated from the board of directors of the Workers' Compensation Board. Since then, several independent or semi-independent bodies were also weakened, suspended or closed. I'm talking about places like the Workers Health and Safety Centre, the Royal Commission on Workers' Compensation, the Occupational Disease Panel and the Workplace Health and Safety Agency.

Then, in 1998, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act introduced fundamental changes to the workers' compensation system in Ontario. It created several new restrictions: It limited the types of injuries or illnesses; there was a time limit on filing claims and appeals; also, new limits on the duration of compensation.

The amount of compensation was reduced. It used to be 90% of your pre-injury net earnings. That was dropped down to 85%. Then, pensions of workers who were permanently disabled were de-indexed. What that meant was that pension you had wouldn't keep up with inflation, so you would have less and less buying power as inflation climbed. The cost of living, traditionally, is 2% or 3% a year, so over time you could see how that would really add up.

I want to remind everyone about the historic compromise. I'll keep repeating it: This is when workers gave up

the right to sue their employers for a guaranteed protection from loss of income. Instead of protection from loss of income, though, too many workers in Ontario are actually denied compensation, and they end up on social assistance.

In 1996, the Jackson report came out. It showed that the changes that the Conservative government made during Mike Harris's time resulted in \$9.3 billion in cost-of-living cuts, \$3.3 billion as a result of the reduction of compensation from 95% to 85% of net worth, and \$1.4 billion from the 50% reduction to injured workers' retirement income. What's interesting, following on that report, is that they found out that if they hadn't reduced the money employers paid into the fund, the unfunded liability would have been relatively small. If they had kept it at 1991 levels, the unfunded liability wouldn't have existed and it wouldn't have taken 15 or 17 years to pay off.

Just to recap: The previous Conservative government created a massive unfunded liability by reducing employers' premiums. It took 17 years to pay it off, and during that time, successive Liberal governments used the unfunded liability to deny claims and to make workers' lives worse. Now we're back with a Conservative government. They have declared the unfunded liability paid off and they have begun reducing employer premiums again. I can only imagine what's going to happen next.

Again, the historic compromise: Workers gave up the right to sue their employers for a guaranteed protection from loss of income, but reality doesn't reflect this, Speaker. Instead of a guaranteed protection from loss of income, injured worker groups tell me that the WSIB ignores the injured worker's treating health care professional. They bring in their own consultant to read a report and determine on their own. A recent study showed that 77% of WSIB people who they polled agreed with the reports from their own doctor and only 13% agreed with the reports from the WSIB doctors.

The WSIB also uses deeming. What they do is they tell an injured worker, "You could get this job. The job doesn't exist where you are, but if you had this job, you wouldn't need WSIB," and they use deeming to assess compensation and cut benefits based on pre-existing conditions. So instead of the historic compromise of a guaranteed protection of loss of income, injured worker groups tell me that WSIB is leaving workers behind. They leave workers fighting and appealing WSIB, often multiple times. Every single one of us has many, many calls from people who are fighting WSIB. Ultimately, it leaves a lot of workers on ODSP, or, as I prefer, "ODS-poverty."

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Here are the facts, Speaker: Injured workers face four times the rate of poverty. Some 46% of permanently injured workers in Ontario live in or close to the poverty level and 9% live in deep poverty due to WSIB. One in five injured workers are living in extreme poverty after an injury—"extreme poverty" is defined as making less than \$10,000 a year; that's less than \$1,000 a month—and over 40% reported an income of less than \$15,000 a year. That's shocking, Speaker, when you think about it.

Now, today we're debating something that really could have been brought through—it doesn't need to be legislation. I want to recommend that maybe what we should be debating is Bill 239, the member from London West's bill, the Stay Home If You Are Sick Act. This is what we're hearing from BIAs, and also from chambers of commerce and workplaces: that the best way to actually protect workplaces, so that they can keep working, is to allow workers who are feeling sick to stay home; that when you wake up in the morning and you lose the sense of smell and taste, that you stay home and that you get tested; or if your kids are sick and they can't go to school, you're able to stay home with them instead of sending them to school sick. It has been supported by more groups than I could name in a limited amount of time—I only have about 20 seconds—but I really want to emphasize the importance of this and that we could debate this. We could bring it forward. We could pass it in a motion like we tried to do last week. There is so much support for this and the immediate result.

I know that the government keeps talking about the liability premium rates being lower and how it would be helpful, but businesses are struggling today. They don't need a dry-off towel at the finish line.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I recognize for the first question the member from Burlington.

Ms. Jane McKenna: The NDP's words don't match their actions. When I introduced my bill in November, Bill 152, the Occupational Safety and Health Day Act, the NDP voted against a bill that recognizes the importance of supporting a health and safety culture in every workplace. And yet, today the NDP are saying they don't understand why we're not talking about workplace health. Today, the NDP is saying that this is our government's first labour bill since the start of the pandemic, but this is our second bill.

My question is, which NDP do Ontarians believe: the one that voted against a bill that promoted workplace health and safety; the NDP that celebrated Jagmeet Singh's push for paid sick days to the federal government; or the NDP that now opposes the only NDP government in our country, the BC government, which stands with Ontario as not supporting duplicating the federal paid sick day programs?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Back to the member from Sudbury to respond.

Mr. Jamie West: It's an interesting question. We have a health and safety awareness day already. It's on April 28. It's the day of mourning. It was actually started in Sudbury, and the result of it—

Interjections.

Mr. Jamie West: Thank you.

The result of it actually came out of a wildcat strike in Elliot Lake, where workers were forced to breathe in aluminum dust. What's ironic about that, talking to WSIB today, is that now, almost 50 years later, those same workers are fighting for compensation as a result of the aluminum dust that they breathed in. So the NDP that they're looking for is the NDP that stood with workers to

bring in the Occupational Health and Safety Act, and the NDP that is standing with workers to fight to try to get compensation today.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for London–Fanshawe.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I'm very glad the member mentioned the fact that workers are still fighting for compensation when they get injured on the job. That is one of the problems with WSIB. All of us hear from workers how devastated their lives have become when they're injured and they can't afford to continue to pay their costs. Their home, their food, their benefits: Everything is eliminated. Their life is devastated.

Our member from London West has a fix to some of these concerns where people aren't even covered under the WSIB for illness if they're sick at work. Contract workers, for an example, aren't covered under sick days. I just wondered how important it is, that you've heard from your constituents, that sick days are part of the provincial government program if someone is ill, especially during COVID, and why you feel this government isn't making that a priority. Yes, there's a federal program—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Back to the member from Sudbury to respond.

Mr. Jamie West: It's an excellent question from the member from London–Fanshawe about paid sick days.

Speaker, paid sick days are a provincial issue. The federal program has several flaws that the government is aware of but it pretends to ignore. One of the flaws, for example, is that it's federal- and COVID-specific. It's going to end when COVID ends, and I hope to God COVID ends relatively soon because we're all suffering through this.

The other part of it is that the proposal for paid sick days at a provincial level is that you have the money immediately. So many of our workers are precarious, primarily because of the Conservative government's clawback in Bill 47, where they allowed temp agencies and stopped the increase to the minimum wage.

What happens at the federal level is that you have to take 50% of the week off, and then you have to apply and wait for the money to come in. If you can't afford to take a single day off, you can't take 50% of that week off, you can't wait to apply, and you can't wait for the money to come back.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: I listened to the member opposite and my question for him, with these plans that he has, is how much is he going to increase payroll taxes? We've seen time and again the federal government increase CPP hikes, and over 70% of small businesses said they cannot afford this pay increase.

We flash forward to the days of the ORPP, the failed Liberal plan, where they were going to, again, increase payroll taxes. Is this your ploy to bring back the ORPP and shackle small businesses and the CFIBs of the world by increasing the premiums to pay for your plan?

Mr. Jamie West: I believe the member from Barrie–Innisfil asked me if I agreed that Liberals were doing a terrible job—I do. I believe they do a terrible job.

It is always a question of cost when we bring forward important projects. It's never a question of cost when they bring forward things like reflective licence plates that nobody can see. It's never a question of cost when the Conservative government decides that they're going to fight midwives for pay equity. It's never a question of cost when they want to put stickers on gas stations and they want to fight that in court and lose in there. It's always a cost when it comes down to: How can we help workers and small businesses better survive? That's my answer, Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Mr. Chris Glover: Thank you to the member from Sudbury for the overview of workers' compensation and how it came to be.

My big question right now is, with the pandemic raging, with it really having an impact on both residents and staff in long-term-care homes, what is the state of WSIB compensation for the PSWs who are in long-term-care homes? There are 6,580 who have contracted COVID-19, probably on the job, and there are another 10 who have died. What is the state of the WSIB for those workers?

Mr. Jamie West: I think it's an important question. My background is in health and safety. A lot of that is risk management: the likelihood of something happening, and then what the outcome would be and how dangerous could it be as an outcome.

We all know with COVID-19 that it is affecting long-term care and it's in retirement homes even more than anywhere else. We know that front-line workers such as PSWs and RNs and RPNs are most at risk because they're working with these vulnerable individuals. It is unfathomable to me that if you get COVID-19 and you work in one of these workplaces, you aren't automatically recognized for WSIB; instead, you have to fight for it when you have COVID-19. That's a flaw in the system that would be much better if we debated it today. In fact, I think we'd pass our motion today if we were able to, Speaker. That's something that would help front-line workers immediately.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Mr. David Piccini: Thank you to the member for his comments and for being a strong advocate for his residents. I have a question for him.

Mr. Speaker, when I spoke, we spoke about a contractor who went out of business because of WSIB premium hikes, because of overnight raises in the minimum wage, all of which the NDP supported. They went out of business—cash jobs under the table.

My question is twofold: How does that support workers? If he can provide the House with that answer, that would be really helpful, because contractors who are out of work in my riding doing cash jobs—how does that benefit workers?

Mr. Jamie West: Thank you to the member from Peterborough-Northumberland South—I apologize for that.

The first thing I thought of when I heard about the member from Peterborough, I thought of the GE workers and the way they have been denied WSIB as well. I encourage him to fight for those workers and those widows who deserve compensation.

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Also, he talked about small businesses surviving. I remember last November, December, when we were here and Toronto was in a lockdown. Small businesses were closed. There was no rent relief. There was no support for small businesses. Walmart and big box stores were allowed to remain open, and as I'd walk to Queen's Park, I'd notice more and more small businesses closing.

It's ironic to me that on the one hand, they're saying, "Why won't you support small businesses?" Well, all around, small businesses are drowning in the lake and this government is sitting on the beach with a towel, saying, "If any of you make it, we'll dry you off."

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I share the passion the member talks about when he talks about the workers and his experience from the Sudbury area. I come from Algoma-Manitoulin, particularly in Elliot Lake. This is how the government is helping workers in Elliot Lake. They have shut down the OWA office, which was manned by Rick Hamilton and Theresa Maillet. They did fabulous work for injured workers for many, many years. That office is now shut down.

I have a question for the member, and I remember the wildcat strike in Elliot Lake that resulted in the April 28 day of mourning. That event is organized by Darla Hennessey in Elliot Lake, year after year after year. We share a common friend, Janice Martell, who is fighting aluminum dust for individuals that were affected in the many mines across this province and how it's affecting them. Can you tell me, within the context of this bill, how is this going to help Janice Martell in her fight for workers and the injuries and the diseases that they're suffering from for many, many, many years to come?

Mr. Jamie West: Thank you to the member from Algoma-Manitoulin. We share a friend in Rick Hamilton as well, but I want to talk about Janice Martell, because it's amazing. Whenever I speak about her, I actually say Janice Hobbs Martell, because her maiden name is Hobbs and she got into this because of her dad.

Her dad was forced to breathe aluminum dust while working in mines in Elliot Lake. While breathing this aluminum dust, the idea is it would coat your lungs and protect your lungs. Imagine that—protect your lungs from disease. What it did—there's no scientific proof—but what it did in result was coat your lungs with aluminum dust so that when you had X-rays, you couldn't see the tumors.

What happened, actually, is the government of the day said there were no issues here. Even though all these

people had cancer, there were no issues. It was a steel worker, Homer Seguin, who was former president of the union I belonged to, who went over to France and found out that the government actually knew and were doing studies on these workers. That caused the wildcat strike that led to Janice Hobbs having to fight for her dad to get WSIB for the Parkinson's he got from breathing in aluminum dust.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Mr. Parm Gill: It's always an honour and a pleasure any time we get an opportunity to rise in this chamber and speak to pieces of legislation, especially one that's as important as the one we're debating today.

Much like the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development, I have experience owning and operating a small family business myself as well. I say that only to give confidence to those small business owners in Milton and across the province that the minister, along with his PA, has done tremendous, tremendous work in terms of consultation, in terms of reaching out to business owners right across this province, hearing them out, speaking to them.

Especially the PA to the Minister of Labour: She represents a neighbouring riding, and I know how hard she works on this file. I want to thank her, of course, on behalf of my constituents and all Ontarians and all of my colleagues here for her tremendous work, along with the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development. Both of them do a tremendous, tremendous job.

The ministry has also worked their backs off to ensure our path to the reopening was methodical, and most importantly, safe for customers and employees. Moreover, before Christmas, the minister put forward Bill 238. It is meant to address, on a temporary basis, an unexpected rise in the Ontario average industrial wage due to the economic impacts of COVID-19.

Most years, the average industrial wage rises anywhere from 2% to 3%. This year, due to COVID-19, it led to far fewer low-wage workers being employed. As a result, the average industrial wage increased by 7.8%. The effect of this unanticipated rise is the total premiums payable by some employers will increase in 2021, despite the WSIB board of directors' decision to freeze premium rates in 2021 at 2020 levels.

This is smart legislation, Mr. Speaker. This is smart for businesses. It is smart for our communities. It is something that supports manufacturers, retailers and main street businesses.

In this province, there are three components in the calculation of total WSIB premiums payable by an employer, which include, of course, the premium rates, total payroll, and the maximum insurable earnings ceiling. Employers pay premiums on each of their worker's earnings up to the maximum insurable earnings. The maximum insurable earnings are only germane to those workers' earnings who are at the ceiling. It is not relevant to the calculation of the premiums for those workers whose earnings are below the ceiling.

The amendment would reduce total potential premiums payable by impacted schedule 1 employers—those employers with workers earning at or above the maximum insurable earnings—in the face of the unanticipated increase in the average industrial wage. Without this legislative change, the maximum insurable earnings will increase by 7.8% in 2021.

Let me take you through the numbers for a minute, Mr. Speaker. The businesses I am speaking about amount to almost 300,000 small mom-and-pop shops, small family-owned manufacturing companies or second- or third-generation operations that are fighting to stay afloat. Five million: That's the number of workers who are covered by the WSIB insurance program. That means roughly one in three Ontarians.

Two per cent is the increase in the 2021 WSIB maximum insurable earnings ceiling under the proposed Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, 2021. And 7.8%: That is the increase in the 2021 WSIB maximum benefits payment ceiling for workers. This is important. Our government will always stand with the 300,000 small businesses and five million hard-working men and women. The Premier and our entire caucus have been absolutely clear on this.

Some in this chamber know—but many don't—that my brother and I also owned and operated a manufacturing facility before I entered politics. We employed dozens of people and manufactured products that we sold domestically and exported to the US. We worked hard to not only support our families, but those families of our employees, too. That's what the members opposite so often forget: that small business owners aren't just in it for themselves.

Most of the time, small business owners are the last ones to get paid. Small business owners will work their backs off to keep the doors open and keep those they work with employed.

I am proud to be part of a government that has a depth of experience when it comes to owning and operating small businesses right across this province. Our Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade was a former small business owner. Our Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development, as mentioned earlier, was a former family business owner. And of course, our Premier formerly operated a family business that spans two countries.

Speaker, this is the kind of experience you need in government to ensure things like WSIB premium increases that would negatively impact jobs are addressed, just as we are doing through the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act.

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Speaker, small businesses need our help now more than ever. Throughout this pandemic, all across my great riding of Milton, people have stepped up to support small businesses. There has been a push to purchase gift cards from stores and businesses that are closed. There is a #TakeoutTuesday and a Pizza Friday in my house, and

before Christmas we strongly encouraged everyone to shop local, but we know that more needs to be done.

That's why the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, along with the entire provincial government, has brought forward many, many programs to do just that: to help small businesses, including the small shops supports the minister recently launched. Businesses can access the ministry's broad range of comprehensive safety webinars. They can take advantage of a free 30-minute course on infection control and prevention, or call the dedicated phone line any time at 1-888-444-3659. Hundreds of small businesses right across this province have taken advantage of these resources, and I have heard from many in my riding that have referenced them when planning to reopen.

Speaker, that's not all. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the WSIB has announced that the premium rates will be frozen in 2021 at 2020 levels. The WSIB deferred premium payments for employers between March and August 2020. These gave employers \$1.9 billion in relief from premium payments and saved an average business \$1,760. On top of this deferral, the WSIB premiums have been reduced by over \$2 billion since 2018. When introducing a new rate framework in 2019, the WSIB cut premium rates for approximately three quarters of the employers who pay them. To further assist non-profits, the WSIB froze their premium rates for five years.

Speaker, that is what we're all collectively working towards: a reopening. We are staying two metres apart so that we can all get back to normal in the very near future. I honestly hope that the members opposite will support this piece of legislation.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions. The member for London—Fanshawe.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I want to bring a story to the Legislature about a PSW who contacted my office very early in the pandemic. What happened was that she got sick with COVID before the government announced the bump-up pay for PSWs, so she was home sick already from COVID and didn't get the pay bump. She wasn't eligible, because the announcement was after she was sick. She also couldn't get WSIB, because her illness wasn't covered under presumptive sickness.

So my question—I know we're talking about WSIB and understanding that small businesses have that expense, but also, workers bear the burden of not having the right coverage under the WSIB—is just to ask this government: Would they consider in the future, or even any time soon, supporting the member from Niagara's bill for presumptive illness in WSIB?

Mr. Parm Gill: I want to thank the member opposite for that question, and I can assure the member that this government is all about serving Ontarians, taking care of our small and medium-size businesses, and we're always consulting. We're always looking at ways of making our systems better, not just for small and medium-sized businesses, but also for Ontarians.

So thank you for sharing that example that you used. Anything we can do to support workers, to support families out there—that's what our job as a Legislature is: to introduce changes as we see, as they're needed to help everyone in this province. Thank you for the question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: My question to the member: He was talking about the impacts it has on not just the employers, but the employees, and how the employers really care for their employees in the steps that they're taking. Could he give us some examples from his area of people who he's spoken to about this?

Mr. Parm Gill: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. First and foremost, I talked a fair bit in terms of small businesses in my riding of Milton and individuals that are impacted, workers that are impacted. Things have not been easy for both the businesses and for workers for the last year or so, especially with this COVID-19 pandemic that's going on. That's why we work hard each and every day to look for ways to help businesses, to help families, to help Ontarians. I've got small businesses such as Troy's Diner on Main Street in Milton, Mr. Speaker. It is sort of a landmark in our town of Milton. Troy shares stories with me all the time in terms of some of the challenges that they're facing and how these changes would help their business.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Mr. Jamie West: Thank you to the member from Milton for his debate. I want to recognize, Speaker, that we don't actually need provincial legislation to have a WSIB employer rate freeze. In fact, WSIB already announced that there was going to be a rate freeze. So I'm interested from the member opposite why the Conservative government chose to debate this bill when there's a bunch of COVID support bills we could be debating, such as ending deeming for WSIB, presumptive illness, making payments for health care workers while they're getting COVID swabs—mandatory to pay them for it—paid sick days, PSW fair wages, rent support for small businesses and tenants so they stay in their places and landlords also get paid. There's a whole list of things we could actually do that could move the bar forward for everybody, Speaker.

Mr. Parm Gill: I would say it's unfortunate that the member does not see this piece of legislation as a COVID support piece of legislation that would support about 300 small businesses right across this province, Mr. Speaker.

We've introduced many, many pieces of legislation since COVID-19 started. In some cases, the opposition supported those pieces of legislation; others, unfortunately, for whatever reasons beyond my understanding, they chose not to support.

I would encourage the member to read this piece of legislation again and try to get an understanding of how this will help businesses and workers and possibly consider supporting this piece of legislation if he really

cares about workers, if he really cares about small businesses.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Burlington.

Ms. Jane McKenna: A couple of points: The Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry was talking about how he didn't see his son's T4 slip, so he wasn't sure how much he was making. I'm just going to point a few out. The elevator constructors and mechanics make \$108,000; power engineers and power system operators make \$103,000; boilermakers are \$87,000. The reason I'm saying that is that these are fabulous jobs, and I think people just need to know what exactly the money is for that.

I also want to point to the member from Northumberland–Peterborough South, because he made a very valid point. We did need minimum wage to go up, but we also realize that every small business—and businesses including my partner's—struggled because they had to be able to adapt to that. They had to hire other people to come in. He owns his own company as well, and I don't know how many people—obviously all in this House—heard that question over and over again.

As our government—which we've done numerous times over and over again: We're looking out for the people that are working and also for the employers. I can tell you this—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. Is there a question in there somewhere?

Ms. Jane McKenna: Can you just answer me the question: Do you think we listen to the employers and employees with this Bill 238?

Mr. Parm Gill: I want to thank the member from Burlington and the PA. I mentioned this in my speech. Absolutely, I think every single member of our caucus—I can tell you because I see them—works hard each and every day and has done a tremendous job in terms of reaching out, especially during COVID-19, and listening to small and medium-sized business owners, listening to Ontarians, families and what we can do to support them during such a challenging time. Once again, I want to thank the PA and also the minister and all of our caucus members for spending a countless number of hours reaching out, listening to their constituents, speaking to the small and medium-sized business owners and bringing those suggestions forward and delivering relief for all Ontarians.

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The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you to the member from Milton for his contribution in this debate, but it is very clear that this government has turned away from its responsibility to properly protect workers during COVID-19. I'm hearing stories from teachers who are worried about contracting COVID at the workplace because of improperly fitting PPE and crowded classrooms. I'm hearing stories about how there are workplaces in big box stores in St. Catharines that have COVID

outbreaks that are still not being publicized—which this government should be doing, publicizing it.

This enforcement program came much too late, 11 months later. Why does this government refuse to accept its responsibility to introduce paid sick leave into the province of Ontario? They vote against paid sick days when given the opportunity by my colleague here on this side of the House, the MPP from London.

Mr. Parm Gill: I would beg to differ, Mr. Speaker. I think our government and everyone within government have been doing a tremendous job since the start of COVID-19. Why, our government has invested billions of dollars to support Ontarians, to help with COVID, to help with PPE. The Associate Minister of Small Business and Red Tape Reduction introduced a number of pieces of legislation to help small businesses. The PA to the Minister of Labour just informed me of the total inspections done by the inspectors to date, 39,001; total orders issued, just over 40,000; stop orders, 67.

Of course, we are bringing forward all of these measures to help businesses. At the same time, we want to make sure they're safe, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): There isn't enough time for a question and answer—hold on a second.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): There isn't quite enough time to get into further debate this morning.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Mr. Rod Phillips: Mr. Speaker, as everyone in this chamber already knows, February is Black History Month. In Ajax and across Ontario, celebrating the many contributions of Ontario's Black community is going to continue throughout the month of February. As the MPP for Ajax, I am proud that our town is home to the largest Black community per capita in Canada, with more than 16% of the population identifying as Black.

On Saturday, February 6, Durham Black History Month hosted its annual Black History Month celebration. This year's is entitled FEAST of Black Excellence. Hosted again this year by co-chairs Esther Forde and Dane Lawrence, the virtual event honoured Sandra Forsythe, from Durham Community Action Group, with the prestigious Madiba Award.

This year's event featured talented musicians, poets and performers, including some from Nigeria, Jamaica, Trinidad and Senegal, and was truly a window on what this community adds to our rich tapestry. The performances were not only inspiring but they also gave myself and others attending the ability to see first-hand the talented young people we have across Ajax and across Durham.

Tonight, I look forward to attending the women's multicultural resource centre Black History Month event, hosted by another brilliant Esther, Esther Enyolu, and her team, who do so much to support our community 365 days of the year.

As we continue to celebrate this month, I want to thank all of those who have diligently and excellently produced fabulous events for this year's Black History Month.

HOMELESSNESS

Mr. Chris Glover: Last night I was out delivering some Polysporin with pain relief to a gentleman who lives under a bridge. He's been living under that bridge for years. It's part of a program I have been volunteering with that has delivered more than 20,000 food and care packages during the pandemic.

The irony is that he was able to go to the hospital—the Polysporin was for gout and frostbite in his foot. Because we have a public health care system, he's able to go to the hospital, and he went there last week, and they sent him home—or sent him back to under his bridge—and then they said, “Come back,” and they made an appointment with a plastic surgeon. The irony is, because we have a public health care system, thanks to Tommy Douglas, we can give him an appointment with a plastic surgeon but we can't give him housing. He's got frostbite and he's suffering under a bridge.

There are 10,000 people in the city of Toronto who are doing without supportive housing who need housing. The federal government and the municipal government have set up a plan to build 2,000 units this year. The government level that's missing is the provincial level. The provincial government is not supporting that plan to build supportive housing in 2021. That's what we need you to do. To end the suffering of people like the gentleman who is under the bridge, please support this plan to build supportive housing during this pandemic.

LADIES OF THE LAKE

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Today I would like to shine light on a volunteer group, Ladies of the Lake, a dynamic, organic grassroots organization made up of 100 warm and friendly women who are bringing people and government together to keep Lake Simcoe clean. Most of them live in the Lake Simcoe watershed. Some live along the shoreline; others came from the farming community. The majority of these ladies are in their fifties, sixties and even seventies, but age will not define them, for their positive spirit and their drive will more so define them.

These Ladies of the Lake made a daring debut with the 2006 Ladies of the Lake calendar, a calendar that captured the beauty and spirit of Lake Simcoe. The huge success of this first project made Ladies of the Lake into a household name throughout the watershed and brought public awareness to the state of Lake Simcoe. They have continued to raise awareness over the years.

Today, I would like to honour the memory of a local change-maker in Simcoe county, Mary Jane Brinkos, who recently, unfortunately, passed away on January 29 at the age of 77. Mary Jane was one of the original Ladies of the Lake. Her energy and her tireless efforts to protect Lake Simcoe and raise awareness of issues affecting its health leave wonderful legacies to come, and her advocacy was tremendous. I send my sincere condolences to Mary Jane's family and I am so honoured that I was able to call her a friend and learn from an incredible mentor.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I want to tell you about Donna, a woman who is almost 60, with declining health. Donna has been on the housing wait-list in Durham for five years. Donna is on disability and Canada pension and has \$1,300 a month, which cannot afford market rent. She is fortunate to be in a place today she can afford, unlike most people desperate for housing. The problem is that her doctor says that her declining health will mean she can't stay where she is for much longer. She won't be able to do the stairs. She won't be safe in her own home.

MPPs in this room know all too well that people cannot find housing that is safe or affordable. Donna wants to know how much longer she will be on the wait-list, and it is hard to have to tell someone that people are waiting decades to get into housing. There are at least 7,000 households on the wait-list in Durham region.

And COVID is making things so much worse. Folks on ODSP and OW have so little money to live on that they are forced, if they can find shelter, to accept substandard, unsafe and often unsavoury conditions. We know that many folks right now are forced to work when we should be staying home due to illness or advice from their doctors. They go to work because they don't have paid sick days and they can't afford to lose their wages or they won't be able to pay their rent.

Speaker, while evictions may be backlogged for the moment, the arrears that folks and families are facing are insurmountable. People who live in poverty cannot imagine how they can climb out of this mess without direct financial rent support from this government—a government that is sitting on billions and won't give any of it up, especially to vulnerable people. If this Premier is really “for the people,” he sure as heck isn't for the poor ones.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Lindsey Park: It's a pleasure to rise to speak about a health care town hall I recently hosted in Durham. Health care continues to be the issue that's top of mind for my constituents in Durham, and in particular, questions around the COVID-19 vaccine. That's why, on January 14, I hosted a virtual town hall. I was pleased to host Dr. Robert Kyle, our commissioner and medical officer of health for Durham region, and Dr. Tony Stone, chief of staff at Lakeridge Health, for a virtual question-and-

answer for constituents in the Durham riding. Not surprisingly, there was much anticipation and participation. Most of the questions centred around the effectiveness and safety of the different COVID-19 vaccines and the plan for distribution of the federally approved vaccines to Durham's most vulnerable.

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I'm pleased to report, Speaker, that since the town hall, with the impressive leadership in Durham, we were one of the first regions in the province to offer both doses of the vaccine to all residents in long-term-care homes. That was achieved on February 7. I want to thank our local leadership team, the COVID-19 vaccine steering table, which has been expertly planning and implementing the COVID vaccine distribution and administration for Durham residents according to the provincial ethical framework, local needs and vaccine availability. For the latest updates on vaccine distribution, please visit durham.ca/coronavirus.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. Roman Baber: Most of the province has been in lockdown since Thanksgiving, but cases, cases, cases—the only thing that seems to matter—continue to climb. On December 25, the day before the stay-at-home order, Ontario's total case count was 167,000 total cases. Today, almost two months later, the total count of Ontario's cases is 295,000—almost double. Just think: In the two months since the stay-at-home order, we got almost as many COVID cases as we did in the entire nine months prior. You would think that with all these cases, cases, cases, the dire predictions of the COVID command table would wreak havoc on all of us, but no—not even close. Not much has changed. ICU occupancy remains flat; like every other time, the modeling is wrong by three to five times.

But seniors continue to die in group homes because the government is unable to institute infection protocol and control; because it can't fix staffing shortages or ban agency staff. Almost 80% of all deaths are in group living settings. That's a tragedy we must admit. That's the medical reality that the government is trying to spin, because it's not about how many cases of COVID; it's who gets COVID. You see, locking all of us down doesn't do anything. The government keeps blaming community spread on what is happening in group homes to distract from its own failure. All it takes is one worker, one agency worker who goes from one home to another and brings COVID. The problem is not healthy people; the problem is a government that can't fix long-term care, but blames us and locks us down instead.

Protect long-term care. Protect the frail elderly. You're not saving any lives by locking us down. Instead, you are locking down healthy people and you're making them sick.

LAND USE PLANNING

Ms. Bhutika Karpoche: People in Parkdale–High Park and across this province are fed up with the Ford

government that continues to make decisions for the benefit of their developer friends rather than for the public good. People want development that is in the interest of our communities, development that promotes affordable housing, community benefits and environmental sustainability.

Take, for example, Highway 413. It will pave over 2,000 acres of prime farmland and cut through almost 100 waterways, and sheds only 30 seconds off of an average commute. The government is willing to spend \$6 billion on this project and ignore the vocal opposition of affected municipalities. Wealthy developers who have donated thousands to the PC Party stand to make millions developing all along the route.

The Duffins Creek wetland is another example. With a provincially significant designation, it is one of the most important wetlands in this province. The government has issued a ministerial zoning order to pave over the wetland, ignoring the vocal opposition of conservation authorities, the Ajax town council, Williams Treaties First Nations and tens of thousands of Ontarians across this province. Again, a developer who donated thousands to the PC Party will build a warehouse for a casino development.

This is Ford's Ontario: a dream for wealthy developers, but a nightmare for regular people. We deserve better.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll remind all members that we refer to each other by a ministerial title or the name of our ridings, not by a surname.

MEMBER'S GRANDCHILDREN

Mr. Rick Nicholls: First of all, I want to start off on a very happy note. On Valentine's Day, a new life appeared. My granddaughter Shiloh Minnette was born, weighing seven pounds—

Applause.

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Thank you. The proud parents are my daughter, Brooke, and her husband, Steve, and they're all doing well. But our granddaughter is not our first grandchild. My wife, Dianne, and I now have five grandkids, with the ratio now being boys three, girls two.

I remember my oldest son, Jeff, and his wife, Leslie—they have three children as well. Like his dad, they have two boys, Calvin and Nathan, and a daughter, Samantha, who by the way was born the next day following her papa's birthday. I immediately said, "She deserves to have her own special day, not one shared with me."

My son Kris has a little boy, Phoenix, who is full of life and loves his action figures. My fun with him is when I do the theme song from Batman—na na na—and he yells out, "Batman!"

But when your only daughter, who I affectionately call my baby girl, gives birth for the very first time, it's very different. It seems I was often in communication with her—you know, dad being dad. But when I saw my daughter the next day after giving birth, we both shed tears of joy. I was so grateful for yet another beautiful baby girl. So yes, I now have two baby girls. When I saw Shiloh, I must admit it was love at first sight. I was reminded of

what her great-great-grandma Woolworth would say whenever there was a birth in the family: "Make sure the baby has 10 fingers and 10 toes."

Life is precious, and had I known that being a papa was going to be so much fun, I would have been nicer to their parents. Thank you.

MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION SERVICES

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Congratulations to the member across.

In St. Catharines and across Niagara, I have been in communication with our mental health community partners. Even though these meetings are separate, I've been hearing the same thing over and over again. It's the same message from Shaun Baylis at Pathstone Mental Health, Tanja Loeb at Gillian's Place, Terri Bruce and Tammy Dumas at INCommunities, Frances Hallworth from United Way Niagara, and from many, many more. They want help from myself, from my colleagues sitting beside me. They want help from the colleagues across the aisle and from the broader community to amplify that people should be continuing to access mental health supports and should not wait until the pandemic is over. Their concern is that people are moving away from seeking help. It would create a tidal wave of needs for services after the pandemic.

Right now, we have an increase in domestic violence. The stress of the pandemic is creating more instances of mental health, more drug use and more deaths, doubling in Niagara last year. But no one needs a report to know that people are hurting, as isolation, loss of income and the prospect that a lifetime of operating a business is being threatened right now.

These organizations need everyone to know they are still there. They are still open and doing what they do. Our mental health resources need to connect with more people. We need to help amplify that message in every way we can.

GO TRANSIT

Mr. Parm Gill: I am proud to announce that Metrolinx released their initial business case for a new GO station in my riding of Milton on Trafalgar Road. This is a great first step towards expanding transit options in my riding of Milton.

The business case shows that the new station could eventually serve a daily ridership of nearly 2,000 passengers, providing more convenient travel options and improving accessibility for travellers along the Milton GO line. As a result, the station on Trafalgar Road would provide Milton with much-needed mobility choices, helping our community move seamlessly around Milton and the GTHA.

Milton—it's no secret, Mr. Speaker—is one of the fastest-growing communities in the province, if not the country. That's why we are increasing parking at the

current Milton GO station by an additional 800 spaces and adding a new station on Trafalgar Road. These are examples of strong action being taken to improve GO services in my community of Milton.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much.

I've been advised that the member for York South–Weston may have a point of order.

Mr. Faisal Hassan: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I seek unanimous consent to immediately pass the private member's motion 135, calling on the Ford government to implement a COVID-19 equity strategy for racialized communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic.
1030

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member is seeking unanimous consent to immediately pass private member's motion 135, calling on the government to implement a COVID-19 equity strategy for racialized communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Agreed? I heard a no.

QUESTION PERIOD

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My first question is to the Premier, and it's in the context of the fact that the people of Ontario are exhausted from battling COVID-19. What we've learned from all of the experts is the successful way to avoid a catastrophic third wave is to be very careful and slow, for example, with the reopening of our province. Another piece of advice that was really clear from the experts is that the public health measures to protect people need to be increased. And of course, then there's always the vaccinations that are coming down the pike.

But Speaker, when public health units and doctors and hospitals are all saying that the government has been rushing the reopening, all the Premier has to say in response is not to worry: There's an emergency brake in place that they can rely on should something go wrong. Well, that was announced a couple of weeks ago. We have no idea to this day what would be the criteria for the implementation or utilization of that emergency brake. Perhaps the Premier can shed some light this morning?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To respond, the Deputy Premier and Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: What we have today is not a reopening of Ontario. It is a transition back into the framework that we had before. We're taking this very slowly and cautiously, because we know of the variants of concern that are out there: the UK Variant, the South African variant, the Brazilian variant. And I'm sure that there will be others.

But the emergency brake has been applied. It's applied on the basis of the number of cases that are out there, the ability of public health to be able to respond in a timely manner, the ability of our hospitals to be able to deal with people with COVID and with other issues, and the level of

variants. We've seen the brake be applied, even this past week, with having both Peel and Toronto remain with the stay-at-home orders because of the variants and other issues that they're trying to deal with, as well as in North Bay, which otherwise would have been in green, but because of the variants of concern and the concern about them escalating, has remained at the stay-at-home order for the safety of the people in the North Bay area.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, I'm not sure if the Minister of Health noticed the news last night, but people are flocking to the malls in places like York region. It seems to me that the message the government is trying to send is really not getting through. Most experts have actually said that by the time the government gets to implementing an emergency brake, it will be far too late. Fearfully, that's what might be happening as we speak.

In fact, Dr. Michael Warner said this: "Instead of waiting until we have a critical number of people vaccinated first" the Ontario government "has jumped the gun," because they have not put in place proper measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

When you see people flocking to the mall, when you see the fact that our caseloads are no longer falling, the question that we have for the government is—this claim of caution is not holding water. Why is this government jumping the gun when it comes to the opening of our province?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you, Speaker, and I would say through you to the leader of the official opposition, it should come as no surprise to you that I vigorously disagree with what you're saying. We are seeing the numbers coming down, but we recognize that with the variants of concern, they can go back up again exponentially. That is something that is being very carefully watched by Dr. Williams, by the public health measures table, which includes a number of the local medical officers of health from across Ontario. They will not hesitate to use the emergency brake again if they need to. This is being very carefully watched in York, as well as in every other part of Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The final supplementary.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: The other thing that has been indicated by most experts in terms of avoiding a catastrophic third wave is the fact that more public health measures need to be put in place, and yet this government is refusing to do so: measures like, for example, an eviction ban for tenants; measures like, for example, reducing class sizes to 15 in the schools; and measures like paid sick days. And yet none of these measures are being seriously considered by this government, nor implemented.

So the question, then, is, when Dr. Williams—even Dr. Williams—says he favours the idea of paid sick days, why is our Premier stubbornly refusing to implement them?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development.

Hon. Monte McNaughton: The very first initiative that our government undertook was to bring in job-protected leave for every single worker in this province. If you're home because of COVID-19, in self-isolation, in quarantine, if you're home looking after a son or a daughter because of the disruption in the school system, you can't be fired for that. Furthermore, and the member opposite should know, we eliminated the need for sick notes during COVID-19.

But, Mr. Speaker, the thing that the Leader of the Opposition is failing to mention to working women and men across the province is that there is one month of paid sick days for every single worker in this province. We need to raise awareness of that program, and it's a disservice to every woman and man who is working in the province of Ontario that the Leader of the Opposition and the NDP don't make them aware of that program.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My next question is also for the Premier. The disservice is in not recognizing, however, that paid sick days are a requirement if people are going to do the right thing and stay home when they're feeling sick.

Having said that, the other people that are in a very bad situation now are seniors, who are really concerned about when they're going to get their vaccine. They're worried and they need information. In fact, even family doctors are worried, and they need information. They're saying that the government is being confused in its communication around the vaccine rollout.

In fact, Dr. Michelle Cohen says this: "When patients call my office anxiously looking to get on a vaccination list because the government told them their family doctor would soon be calling, I will have nothing to offer them but frustration.... Creating confusion makes it easier for the government to evade accountability."

So my question to the Premier is, what is happening here? Is this physician and are other physicians correct in saying that the government's aim here is to evade accountability? If not, why is there such confusion around the vaccine rollout?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: The aim here is to be clear and transparent with the people of Ontario about the vaccination rollout, as we have thus far. But the reality is that each of the 34 public health units have been asked to develop their own plan and submit them to the vaccination task force, because what is relevant in one part of Ontario in terms of doing vaccines—in a rural area, it may be going to your family doctor. In an urban area, it may be going to a mass vaccination clinic.

There are many different ways that this is going to be rolled out, and it is going to be made clear to the people of Ontario in a very short while how they can do it. They can do it by contacting their family doctor. In many cases, they can do it online. Many people may not feel comfortable doing that; they can also call a centre to book their

appointment. This is going to be specific and clear to the people, and it's going to be produced within a very short time.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: I think everybody knows that part of avoiding a catastrophic third wave is a successful vaccine rollout. However, it's really clear that before this pandemic hit, our Premier was not all that confident in our public health units. Now, of course, we are in a situation where we're going to be relying on them—and, I think, importantly, because I actually do have confidence in them—with the planning and distribution of the vaccines, contacting people, the administration. All of this will be done by public health units—the same ones that the Ford government was cutting and trying to amalgamate with forced mergers before the pandemic hit. In fact, in 2019, the Premier said, referring to public health units, "All they know how to do ... is tax people and spend their money, not drive efficiencies."

So my question is, has the Premier all of a sudden had a change of heart? Does he suddenly respect public health units? And will he provide the support that they need to successfully vaccinate everyone in Ontario?

Hon. Christine Elliott: In fact, we have every confidence in our public health units. They have done a spectacular job during the course of this entire pandemic from the very beginning, in terms of increasing case and contact management, in terms of being in touch with families, in terms of being in touch with individuals; in some cases, issuing their own section 22 orders where they feel that there are measures in their own particular area that need to be further protected.

But I would also—again, through you, Mr. Speaker—remind the leader of the official opposition that our public health units have been implementing our flu vaccines for many years, and this year implemented our biggest flu vaccine in our history, with over six million vaccines being given to the people of Ontario, with more to come.

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I have every confidence that our public health units have the knowledge and the experience to drive a very successful COVID vaccine campaign.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order. The final supplementary?

Ms. Andrea Horwath: It's curious that this government has had such a change of heart when it comes to public health units. Let's hope it stays that way, Speaker.

The bottom line is, it's clear the government has not undertaken the measures needed to ensure that the province is not plunged back into a third wave that's devastating and catastrophic. We clearly don't see a reopening that has been slow enough or careful enough, say all the public health experts. We clearly don't see increased measures, like paid sick days, for example, and a ban on evictions and lower class sizes. We clearly have a confusing vaccine rollout that the government is creating confusion and chaos around.

I guess the question I have is, how can we guarantee to all of those seniors who are worried about the COVID-19 pandemic resurging that this government has it together enough to stop a third wave occurring?

Hon. Christine Elliott: It will be very simple to do that because we're going to roll out a clear and transparent plan within the next very short while, and people will know when and how they will be able to get the vaccines. In some cases, people will be able to do it themselves online. In some cases, they will need to have their family members help them. In some cases, they'll be able to call. Some of the public health units may have their contact information. In other situations, they're going to be working with the family doctors in order to make sure that they can receive the information about when and where to come in.

We will be ready when we receive the vaccines—which we don't have in great quantities right now. When we receive them, we'll be able to triple or quadruple the number of vaccines we can do in a single day. We are ready for it, and the people of Ontario can count on that. All of our seniors will get the shots if they wish to have one.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Marit Stiles: This question is for the Premier. Parents and education workers are counting on this government to keep students safe and schools safely open. We know from the experts that in order to do that, we need a broad, asymptomatic and truly accessible testing program, but despite a commitment to conduct up to 50,000 tests a week, the ministry is reporting just 3,706 tests completed since late January. In what's become the practice of this government, school boards are scrambling to establish testing systems after being given just days to prepare. In the meantime, the number of schools closed due to the outbreak has doubled since last week.

Speaker, where are the promised safety enhancements in schools, and when will we see a truly comprehensive in-school testing plan that matches the scale of this pandemic?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To reply, the Minister of Education.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: A very interesting admission from the education critic that under the NDP plan, they would mandate compulsory testing for parents, students and staff, unlike any jurisdiction in the world. In this province, we're providing voluntary choice to parents, but yes, we're making it accessible, more convenient and local. That's why we've stepped up the testing capacity.

The Minister of Health, through Ontario Health, has already provided symptomatic and asymptomatic testing to public health units throughout this entire pandemic—certainly since September to the present. But the Ministry of Education, given the variants of concern, given the new challenges we face as a province and country, has expanded capacity in asymptomatic testing programs that were unveiled as recently as yesterday. The average rate of positivity in Toronto, in Peel, in Hamilton, Ottawa and Sudbury is 0.86%, demonstrating, I believe, that the rate

of transmission remains low, but underscoring the necessity to keep up our vigilance to keep our kids safe.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Mr. Speaker, they're slow-walking testing in this province. It's outrageous.

It's not just parents and education workers asking these questions. People for Education released preliminary results of their annual school survey today, and it paints a very bleak picture of overworked school administrators trying to keep up with constantly changing directives without the resources and the support they need. Seventy-three per cent of principals responding to the survey ranked enforcing physical distancing as a top concern. One said, "It is impossible to keep students socially distanced. I have class sizes of 24-27 students and can't possibly space them out to eat (at lunchtime)."

Speaker, through you to the Premier: If the goal is to keep schools safely open long-term, why are we still seeing up to 30 kids crammed into classrooms in this province?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: This is a once-in-a-generation crisis, and our province is standing up to make sure that our schools remain safe and that our schools remain open. That is a position that is a contrasting one in this Legislature. There are two parties in this House that would rather our schools be closed. It was the words of the member opposite a month ago, when community transmission was around 2,000 to 3,000, who said we didn't have to have it this way when schools were closed, which thus would conclude you'd keep them open at a time of community transmission of 3,000 cases a day.

We have cautiously, against the position of the opposition leader, reopened schools. We're actually the only province in the nation that cautiously reopened, waiting until those rates got down, while we expanded capacity for testing, enhanced our requirement for screening before a child enters a school and, of course, mandated masking all the way down to grade 1 with a better-quality mask.

This government is on the side of parents. We're on the side of teachers. We're going to keep our schools open.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to ask the member for Davenport and the member for Waterloo to come to order.

The next question.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Donna Skelly: My question is for the Minister of Health. As we continue our fight against COVID-19, I know it's critical that we all continue to follow public health advice until more vaccines arrive, as this is our best and only defence against the virus. While I know the delay in shipments of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines had affected our government's initial rollout, we still managed to offer the first doses of the vaccine to all long-term-care residents across the province.

As we continue to receive more vaccine doses from the federal government, would the minister please update this

House on our government's progress in the rollout of these vital vaccines?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you to the member from Flamborough–Glanbrook for your question and your advocacy ongoing.

Let me be clear: Our government is committed to having one of the most effective COVID-19 immunization campaigns in the country, and we are well on our way to achieving this goal by having recently administered over 575,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccines in phase 1 priority populations throughout the province. This was done even after the unexpected reduction in supply coming to us from the federal government. Our government swiftly acted by making critical adjustments to our vaccination plan to ensure the most vulnerable, like those in long-term care, receive the vaccine as quickly as possible.

As we receive more shipments of the vaccine from the federal government, we are looking forward to continuing to expand our vaccination rollout to include even more Ontarians.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Thank you, Minister, and thank you to all of the front-line workers for helping us administer these crucial vaccines. As our government builds on this early success, I know constituents in my riding can take comfort in the fact that this government is working tirelessly to ensure as many Ontarians as possible are vaccinated as quickly as possible, pending the availability of supplies.

It's important for Ontarians to know that this is only the first phase of our province's rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines, and as more vaccines get approved and the supply increases, so will the number of people receiving the vaccines. Can the minister inform the members of this House how our government plans to build off these early successes in our vaccine rollout?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Yes, and thank you. Building from some of the early successes our government has achieved, even with the limited supply of vaccines, we are continuing to expand our capacity and ramp up efforts for phase 2 of our vaccination rollout, which is expected to begin this April. This will be done by working collaboratively with local public health units who have developed plans to operate mass immunization clinics as soon as enough supply becomes available, as well as continuing to offer mobile clinics to vaccinate our most vulnerable. Additionally, an online booking system will be implemented in order to further support this next phase of the vaccination rollout, and a customer service desk will also be made available to those who are unable to book an appointment through the online tool.

Our government will stop at nothing as we continue to implement the most comprehensive vaccination campaign in the country.

LAND USE PLANNING

Ms. Suze Morrison: My question is for the Premier. Yesterday I asked this government to come clean and tell

Ontarians which developer is lined up for the sweetheart deal to buy the Dominion Wheel and Foundries buildings in my riding of Toronto Centre. This government's response was about as clear as mud.

First the minister told us that the site isn't being sold to anyone and there's no sale of the property, but hours later, the Premier said the deal hasn't been signed 100% yet and that the process is moving forward. So which is it? Speaker, why is this government refusing to tell us who in the Premier's inner circle is getting dibs on the purchase of the foundry buildings in Toronto Centre?

1050

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Stop the clock. I think the government side would expect me to listen carefully to what the opposition member has to say, and if she says anything unparliamentary, I think the government side would expect me to be on my feet. It makes it harder for me to listen when there's heckling from the government side when one of the opposition is asking a question, and the very same thing the other way.

Start the clock. Response? The member for Milton.

Mr. Parm Gill: Mr. Speaker, I will remind this House one more time that the site has not been sold. Our government is leveraging vacant, provincially owned property to build the new affordable housing and community space. Our government completed a heritage impact assessment for the site and it determined that the building requires demolition to allow for environmental remediation.

Speaker, it's astonishing that the member opposite is against environmental remediation and much-needed affordable housing in the city of Toronto.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): And now I will say the same thing to the opposition side: When there's a government minister answering a question, you would expect me to listen carefully, and if the member says anything inappropriate or outside the rules, you'd expect me to be on my feet. It's harder for me to listen carefully and intently when there's heckling from the other side, so I'd ask you to consider that too.

Supplementary.

Ms. Suze Morrison: Back to the Premier. Once again, this government is putting political favours for their developer friends ahead of people. This government has brokered a special deal with one developer for the heritage-listed foundry buildings, without any other bidders and without actually listing the property for sale in an open, fair and competitive process. They didn't even bother to notify the city.

My community has had enough of this government's contradictory statements and vague talking points. We want answers. Who is being offered the deal behind closed doors, how much are they paying and how much have they donated to the Ontario PC Party for that right?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to ask the member to withdraw.

Ms. Suze Morrison: I withdraw.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The response? The member from Milton.

Mr. Parm Gill: Mr. Speaker, we have been clear that the negotiating mandate to facilitate the future sale of the site has been approved. However, the site has not been sold. We're currently consulting with the community to hear more from them. We also have an ongoing conversation with Mayor Tory, and the ministry staff is also having an ongoing conversation with the city staff. We look forward to completing our public consultation and moving forward with the environmental remediation of this site.

LAND USE PLANNING

M^{me} Lucille Collard: My question is for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, or somebody who can answer. Ministerial zoning orders are directives that allow the minister to decide how a parcel of land can be used, overriding local planning and existing zoning rules. While these directives can sometimes be justified, they should be used sparingly, as to not regularly deny Ontarians the opportunity to voice concerns, or appeal. This is especially important when the projects raise environmental concerns.

In the 15 years before 2018, only 16 of these orders were issued, yet suddenly this government has issued 37 over two years, and 32 of those were issued last year alone. We've seen decisions over the last two years that have further reduced environmental protections, and I worry that these orders are being issued with the same lack of concern.

How can the minister justify issuing so many MZO's, when we know they should be used sparingly so as to not override important planning processes?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Response? The member for Milton and the parliamentary assistant.

Mr. Parm Gill: Mr. Speaker, our government has been crystal clear that every single ministerial zoning order issued on non-provincially owned land has been at the request of the local municipality, full stop. MZO's are a tool our government uses to get critical local projects that people rely on, located outside of the greenbelt, moving faster.

Mr. Speaker, let me list some of the projects the member opposite has opposed: the creation of 3,700 long-term-care beds; nearly 1,000 affordable homes and hundreds of supportive housing units; 26,000 new jobs; the expansion of the Sunnybrook hospital; a made-in-Ontario PPE facility. And, Mr. Speaker, I can go on and on.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Mr. Speaker, 14 ministerial orders were issued to push through projects where environmental concerns have been raised. We can understand the use of these orders to approve projects for much-needed long-term-care beds, producing urgently needed medical supplies, and other similar cases, as the minister pointed out. However, when the government uses this exceptional power under the guise of recovery measures

for the pandemic to allow for the destruction of protected wetlands, endangered species or important agricultural land, it may be in the interest of some developers but it is certainly not in the public interest.

Economic recovery is important, but not at the cost of the future generations who will have to grapple with the impact of these decisions. If MZO's are meant to be used for fast-track urgent infrastructure needs, can the minister explain how using them to approve building projects such as market-price housing and a film studio is crucial to our COVID-19 recovery?

Mr. Parm Gill: Mr. Speaker, ministerial zoning orders are not new. In fact, they have been used since 1972. The previous Liberal government issued 19 MZO's. One difference between our government and the previous Liberal government is that the Liberals built only 600 long-term-care beds, compared to the 3,600 long-term-care beds that our government has built by issuing these much-needed MZO's to help communities right across this province, and we will not apologize for that.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Ms. Donna Skelly: My question is for the Solicitor General. I was pleased to see that yesterday the government introduced the Combating Human Trafficking Act. This fulfills a key commitment by the Premier during last year's announcement of Ontario's five-year anti-human trafficking strategy: that Ontario would take a hard look at legislative options available to combat this heinous crime. I know that all members of this House agree that human trafficking has absolutely no place in communities across this province. But Speaker, I'm sure that this is no easy feat, given Ontario has the most reported incidents of human trafficking in the country.

Can the House receive more details on how specifically this legislation will help hold offenders accountable so that those who perpetrate this heinous crime face justice?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Thank you to the member from Flamborough–Glanbrook for her interest and advocacy in our anti-human trafficking strategy. You know, Speaker, our young people are at the greatest risk for being exploited by traffickers. We have said it before but it bears repeating: The average age of recruitment is only 13 years old.

Because of the strong foundation laid by our colleague Minister Laurie Scott while we were in opposition, we have been able to provide a government-wide, comprehensive approach to dealing with human trafficking in the province of Ontario. If passed, this legislation would provide police services with the authority to access motel, hotel and short-term rental guest registration information, with a penalty of non-compliance of \$5,000. It will require companies that advertise sexual services to have a contact for law enforcement to request information as part of a human trafficking investigation. These are government-wide, ministry-wide proposals that are going to make a real difference in our community and for our young people.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and through you, it is reassuring to hear the Solicitor General highlight how the proposed legislation would provide new tools to more effectively hold offenders accountable. But these tools can only work if police are well-resourced to take on traffickers. I've heard the Solicitor General say that criminals don't respect municipal boundaries, and I have no doubt that this is especially true when it comes to human traffickers. Moreover, our increasingly digital world has made trafficking even more complex, with traffickers able to rely on new forms of communication to identify potential victims and to evade detection.

1100

My question, again, to the Solicitor General: Can you identify what resources police have to fight the perpetrators of this heinous crime?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: The member is absolutely right. Human trafficking investigations can often be complex, spanning across multiple jurisdictions and, unfortunately, over many years, which is why a new intelligence-led joint-force investigation team was established, bringing together police agencies from across Ontario, including the OPP, municipal police services and First Nations police services. The capacity of the OPP Child Sexual Exploitation Unit is also being expanded by adding an additional 23 officers.

Police services are also enhancing the use of major case management for human trafficking by investing in software development. I think, if the pandemic has shown us anything, it's our reliance on digital and the fact that our children and our young people are spending more and more time online. Frankly, the traffickers have used this as an exploitation pathway.

So these initiatives are already seeing results, with a number of joint operations resulting in traffickers being charged last year and into January.

EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS

Ms. Peggy Sattler: My question is to the Premier. The Premier likes to claim that he's the reason the federal sickness benefit program exists, but when the program was first proposed, the Premier's response was blunt and clear. He told everyone, "I don't support it," even though it would be temporary and even though it would be funded entirely by the federal government.

Speaker, why does the Premier think he deserves credit for a program that he fought against from the beginning?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Labour.

Hon. Monte McNaughton: We've worked every single day, Mr. Speaker, to protect the health and safety of every single worker in this province. In fact, the very first initiative we brought forward in this Legislature, supported by all members of this party, was to bring in legislation to protect jobs. If any worker is home in self-isolation in quarantine, if you are a mom or a dad who has to stay home

to look after a son or daughter because of the school closures, you can't be fired for that. Furthermore, we eliminated the need for sick notes.

But Mr. Speaker, thanks to the Premier of Ontario, all provincial and territorial leaders worked together with the federal government to deliver \$1.1 billion worth of paid sick days to workers in this province and to all Canadians. I'm proud to report today that over 110,000 workers here in Ontario are either receiving benefits or have applied for benefits. We're going to continue to advocate on behalf of workers to bring improvements to this program.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: The minister should know that unpaid leave isn't going to help workers pay the bills and pay the rent.

Speaker, if it wasn't for the federal government coming to the table in the first place, and for the other Premiers—like the Premier of BC, who fought back against this Premier's refusal to support workers—Ontario workers wouldn't have even the limited and the inadequate federal sick benefits they can apply for now.

Last week, this Premier said he doesn't want provincial paid sick days because he thinks that investing in Ontarians is a waste of money.

Speaker, why is this government so focused on preventing Ontario workers from getting the paid sick days they deserve?

Hon. Monte McNaughton: Mr. Speaker, there is still \$800 million left in the bank account through this federal program.

We're going to continue to advocate on behalf of workers, Mr. Speaker. That's why I have worked really, really closely with Minister Qualtrough, the federal minister who is responsible for this program. We've worked together to raise awareness of this program and to also push for faster payments. In fact, 80% of the sick day pay is now being directly deposited into Ontario workers' bank accounts within three to five days. That's good news for workers. Furthermore, thanks to our advocacy on behalf of workers, the federal program is now one month of paid sick days.

But Mr. Speaker, I have to ask the member opposite: One of the NDP members last week called the federal program "useless," and the Leader of the Opposition, last week, said, "What we want to see is paid sick days in Ontario, 10 paid sick days. Seven. Rather, 10 sick days. Seven paid—and yes, that would be small businesses' responsibility"—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. The next question?

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. Roman Baber: To the government House leader: Almost a year ago, the Premier told Ontarians, "We need to lock down for two weeks to flatten the curve." Two weeks turned into two months for most of the province and almost four months for most of the GTA and my beloved

city of Toronto. Four months turned into a year. “Flatten the curve” turned into “Slow the spread”; “Slow the spread” turned into “Stop the spread”; and now “Stop the spread” has turned into, “Until we all get vaccinated, we should stay home.”

It's been a year—a year of depression, of economic devastation; a year of missed cancer diagnoses and cancelled heart surgeries; a year of children and adults developing depression and anxiety. My city of Toronto is in ruins. North York is not recognizable.

My question to the government House leader: Will the narrative become “until we address all variants”; “until we get the Pfizer booster shot”; “until Moderna adjusts the formula”? When will you let us free, what is that parameter, and why should we believe you?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I will of course remind the honourable gentleman that as of March of last year, he voted in favour of lockdown measures. He did so again in April. He did so again in May. He did so again in June. He voted in favour of the Reopening Ontario Act in July. He voted in favour of measures in September. He voted in favour of those measures in October. He voted in favour of those measures in November. He voted in favour of those measures in December.

I thank the honourable member for the support that he has given to help keep the people of the province of Ontario safe in March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November and December.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question?

Mr. Roman Baber: I have not heard a response. I have not heard a response because there is no exit strategy; there never was. The government keeps stumbling and fumbling along, adjusting the narrative to the politics of the day, governing by opinion polls.

As most of the world is already open, a recent UK study concluded that there are already more than 4,000 variants of COVID-19. On January 12, Moderna said that its vaccine is only good for a year; open a Fortune magazine. Pfizer is contemplating a third booster shot. Dr. Steini Brown, the modelling expert, during the February 11 public health briefing, called some of the variants potential vaccine escapees.

So why? Why is the government offering an unviable exit strategy again: “just four months more”; “just until the fall”; “just until we get the third shot”?

My question to the government House leader: What is the exit strategy? And will he apologize for the millions of lives ruined by this government?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, I think the Minister of Health and the Premier have been very clear on what the exit strategy is. It is to keep the people of the province of Ontario safe and healthy. That is why I am quite proud of the fact that, as the Minister of Health highlighted yesterday, and the Premier, as a matter of fact, highlighted yesterday, Ontario has done better than almost any other jurisdiction in North America in terms of keeping its people safe. I'm quite proud of that.

There is a lot of work left to be done. I'll let the honourable gentleman now, who sat with this government and

voted for many, many, many, many months on all of the very same measures he somehow now disagrees with, explain that to his constituents.

For us, the health and safety of the people of province of Ontario come first. That's what we are doing. We are putting the resources in place to ensure that that can continue to happen. The Minister of Education has put in place resources to ensure our students are safe. The Minister of Long-Term Care has done that. The Minister of Finance will be highlighting measures to get this economy moving and back on track as soon as possible.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Ms. Donna Skelly: On December 5, 2019, the government introduced Bill 159, the Rebuilding Consumer Confidence Act, 2019. The bill received royal assent on July 14, 2020. Once in force, it will enable the government to issue administrative penalties against businesses that do not comply with specified provisions of the Consumer Protection Act or its regulations.

The Consumer Protection Act is designed to protect consumers from harm when purchasing goods and services in the changing marketplace. The Ministry of Government and Consumer Services is now consulting further on the Consumer Protection Act. Can the Minister of Government and Consumer Services explain the objective of the current review?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Thank you to the member from Flamborough–Glanbrook for that question. She is one of the hardest-working MPPs in this House. Your constituents are lucky to have you.

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Speaker, I want to share with you that our government is conducting the first comprehensive review of the Consumer Protection Act in 15 years. This is the most comprehensive act that governs and protects consumers and businesses with regard to how consumers and businesses interact. Specifically, this particular act needs to evolve, and I'm sure everyone in this House will agree to that.

Our review of this act is specifically looking at how the act can adapt to changing technology and marketplace innovations, support compliance, and include effective enforcement powers and tools to deter non-compliance. We are looking at how to make the act clear and easier so consumers and businesses alike can determine their rights and their obligations. All the while, we are continuing to look at how to better protect our vulnerable consumers from practices like aggressive, high-pressure contracts.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Donna Skelly: Last summer, the Ontario government took action to protect the province's most vulnerable consumers by amending the Payday Loans Act. The government set the maximum interest rate that can be charged on payday loans in default to 2.5% and the maximum fee that payday lenders can charge for dishonoured payments at \$25.

The impacts of COVID-19 have made it more important than ever that consumer law be clear to business, avoid imposing undue burdens on companies and entrepreneurs focused on recovery, and stop dishonest competitors from harming consumers and taking business away from honest businesses.

Can the Minister of Government and Consumer Services explain what else the province is doing to protect vulnerable consumers through the Consumer Reporting Act consultations?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Government and Consumer Services.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and again, thank you to the member from Flamborough–Glanbrook. I have to share with you, not only does she take care of her own constituents, but when called upon by people from throughout Hamilton, she readily assists them as well.

In terms of assisting, our government is committed to protecting consumers and ensuring they have the information they need to make informed decisions when it comes to borrowing money. We are looking to establish new procedures for users with regard to high-cost alternative financial services like instalment loans, lines of credit and auto title loans provided outside of traditional financial institutions like banks. That is why we are consulting with stakeholders as well as the public to identify ways that we can improve the regulation and make available more specific information about these high-cost services so that we can protect vulnerable borrowers from potential harm. We will be consulting, and I invite people to look at this particular—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. The next question.

PERSONAL SUPPORT WORKERS

Ms. Sara Singh: My question is for the Premier. Yesterday, the Minister of Long-Term Care announced that they are finally investing to help train 373 new PSWs for our long-term-care sector. While other provinces have already hired and trained thousands of PSWs, in Ontario there is still no real staffing strategy, and there's definitely no real plan to ensure we address retention and recruitment issues in the sector, like increasing PSW pay.

Speaker, through you to the Premier: PSWs deserve a clear answer. Why won't this government commit to increasing pay for front-line workers like our PSWs?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Long-Term Care.

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton: Thank you to the member opposite for the question. We know that staffing was long neglected in long-term care. That's why we've had three approaches to addressing the staffing crisis: the emergency response, the stabilization response, and then the longer-term. We had to do all of this simultaneously because of the way COVID-19 hit a very at-risk sector because of the capacity issues and staffing issues that were neglected for so long. That's why we made sure that we took every measure to deploy hospital staff. We had matching portals.

We had the temporary wage increase after the pandemic pay.

We're continuing to make sure that we have a better place to work and a better place to live for our long-term-care sector. This is absolutely important while we have the four hours, on average, of direct care per resident per day—how we build the staffing. The 373 that were announced the other day are part of a much larger scale, and we'll have more to say about that.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Sara Singh: Speaker, with all due respect, this government had almost a whole year to figure out how they were going to address staffing issues in our province. Almost every other province has stepped up by boosting salaries or paying for training. But here in Ontario, thanks to this Conservative government, PSWs are falling further and further behind and the crisis in long-term care continues to grow. We need you to stop thanking them for their good work and actually put some action into play here.

Why won't this government increase PSWs' pay and give them the raise that they deserve here in Ontario?

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton: We saw with the pandemic pay and then the temporary wage increase how complicated this area is, and we worked very diligently with other ministries, including the Ministry of Health, to understand, when we do something in one area, what its effect is on the rest of the system. It is really important to have this depth of understanding.

In Quebec, where more than half of Canada's long-term-care deaths have occurred, 86% of the long-term-care homes were publicly funded. I want to mention that because there's a lot of discussion about how Quebec is doing, and if we actually look at the data, Ontario is doing much better in comparison. So I think the comparisons are relatively specious. Many long-term-care residents are waiting a very long time to receive their vaccine. They're waiting 90 days. We've moved ahead, and we've got over 120,000 people vaccinated in long-term care. So I think this comparison that's being created with what Quebec has done is—we've chosen a different approach, and our approach is working.

If we look at the rate of attrition, of the 10,000 people that they promised to hire, they have lost significant numbers, and were not able to hire that many—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. The next question.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. John Fraser: My question is for the Premier. On Friday, the government made a vaccine announcement that was short on details. In fact, they created another problem by telling people that their family doctors would be responsible for calling them and telling them about how and when they could get their vaccine. One problem: They didn't tell the doctors. All this caused unnecessary confusion and anxiety for too many Ontario seniors. Then they announced an online booking system that's not ready

yet, which is no good to those PHUs who are ready to vaccinate people over 80.

What the Premier announced on Friday was more of an idea than a plan. A plan has specifics, details, targets. You inform the people you're working with about the plan before you announce it.

Speaker, through you, when is this government going to release detailed information for seniors over 80 on how to get their vaccine?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: I thank the member very much for the question. The reality is there are going to be 34 plans that are going to be released because each public health unit region is submitting their own plan to the vaccine task force. It's being gone through with the members of the vaccine task force to make sure that it's thorough and complete, and it's going to be a variation, depending on what part of Ontario we're looking at: urban versus rural, northern versus southern.

In some cases, primary care physicians are going to be contacting their patients when the vaccines come in—because I would remind the member, through you, Mr. Speaker, that we are still waiting for vast quantities of vaccines to come in. But in some cases, the physicians will be calling their patients to come into their offices. In other cases, physicians and pharmacists, and in some cases nurses and nurse practitioners, will be offering the vaccines in multi-vaccine sites for mass vaccination clinics.

There are a variety of ways that this is going to be done, but there isn't just one plan for the entire province. There are plans that are relative to the local public health unit—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. The supplementary question.

Mr. John Fraser: Respectfully, Minister, we need a plan. In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, "It's déjà vu all over again."

In December, the Premier told us that we were ready, and what happened over Christmas? The Ford government took a vaccination holiday over Christmas, and then they failed to take the advice of Pfizer to move their vaccine into long-term-care homes. So Ontario was at the back of the pack, weeks behind other provinces in getting a first dose into every resident in long-term care. We clearly weren't ready, as the Premier said, and vaccines didn't get into the arms of those who needed it first. This can't happen again, Speaker, with over-80s or in phase 2, and it feels like it's happening again.

Once again, I will ask, when will the government release the specific details of the how, when and where all seniors over 80 can receive their vaccine, and commit to doing the same thing for phase 2 of the rollout?

1120

Hon. Christine Elliott: In fact, we have been planning for this for some time. There is a plan that is available, but it's going to be delivered individually in the different public health unit regions.

With respect to the vaccines, I'm sure the member is very well aware that we've had delays—significant

delays—in the delivery of the Pfizer vaccine, as well as the Moderna vaccine. Yet we've still been able to change the plans so that we've been able to cover all of the residents of our long-term-care homes at least with the first dose. That is no small feat to do.

With respect to the Pfizer vaccine, we were advised—in fact, told—by Pfizer that we were not to move that vaccine because it could become unstable and perhaps ineffective for use for long-term-care residents. We thought about the best way to deal with that. We wanted to make sure that it would be safe and effective for the people that were being immunized, and that's why the decision was made to make sure that all of the workers could then be immunized.

As soon as the Moderna vaccines became available, which are more movable, they were moved. When Pfizer changed their recommendation and indicated that the vaccines could be moved to limited places, that's what we did. We stepped up immediately to do that—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. The next question.

MUNICIPAL FINANCES

Ms. Catherine Fife: My question is for the Premier. Does the Premier of Ontario believe that Conservative MPPs should be able to threaten communities with funding cuts if they're criticized by the local mayor?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Actually, I'm quite proud of all of the work that the members on this side of the House have been doing to work with our partners at the municipal level, and indeed, we've been hearing criticism in this House that we're working too closely with our federal partners.

Ultimately, what I expect our members to do—and I assume that they would do it on that side of the House—is fiercely advocate for their communities, fiercely advocate for the things that are important to their constituents. I'm quite confident that Conservative members of provincial Parliament do that every single day, even when that means working across party lines to do so.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Well, I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, that isn't happening in Peterborough. The mayor of Peterborough is fighting back this week after the local Conservative member sent a letter to city council threatening to pull \$6 million in funding away from the municipality.

Remember, affordable housing—this funding was for housing—is a crisis in every place in this province. This is not a game, and it's not PC money. The mayor quite rightly says that pulling funding for homelessness in the middle of a pandemic is "wicked and immoral." She went on to say that provincial money is "not a gift that can be lorded over us and taken away." We agree.

So my question to the Premier or the House leader, again, is, does he think it's acceptable that his MPPs

threatened to take away funding just because they don't like being criticized? Do you think that is appropriate behaviour for an MPP to conduct himself in this province?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Again, I'll remind members to make a comment through the Chair, not directly across the floor.

Government House leader to reply.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'm not fully aware of the issue that the member raises. But I do expect, whether it's the member for Peterborough or any of the members on this side of the House, to fiercely advocate for what's important to them, what's important to their constituents, even if that means, once in a while, being offside with a partner at a different level of government.

Do I think members should work hard to do that? Absolutely, I do. I expect our municipal partners and our federal partners to understand the pressures that our members and that our government and the people of Ontario are in, in the midst of an enormous pandemic.

If the member is asking me, has this government done a lot for housing in Peterborough?—yes, absolutely. Has it been the member for Peterborough that has advocated for millions of dollars in different areas of housing in Peterborough? Yes, absolutely. Should that member and any member of this House, on either side of the House, strenuously advocate even if it means disagreeing with a member of a council or a federal member of Parliament? Yes.

Do what you're elected to do, which is represent the people of the province of Ontario as vigorously as you can. We won't apologize for doing that.

LAND USE PLANNING

Mr. Stephen Blais: My question is for the Premier. The government has a clear track record of backroom deals. Time and again, decisions are made in secret to the benefit of the Premier's friends, while the people of Ontario are left in the dark. Before the Christmas break, we saw this government push through legislation that would allow a well-known bigot to get university accreditation for his college. And now, we're learning of another secret deal to sell Toronto's Dominion Foundries after months of closed-door negotiations.

Mr. Speaker, Ontarians deserve to know who has won this government's game of Let's Make a Deal. Will the government—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to ask the member to withdraw—

Mr. Stephen Blais: I withdraw, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): —and place his question.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Will the government tell us who is getting this sweetheart secret deal?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Milton.

Mr. Parm Gill: I want to thank the member opposite for the question. Once again, I would remind all members in this House, one more time, that the site has not been

sold. I'm not really sure what the member opposite is talking about. But I would say the government, in this case, is leveraging a vacant, provincially owned property to build a new affordable housing and community space.

Our government has completed a heritage impact assessment for the site. It determined that the building requires demolition to allow for environmental remediation. Speaker, it's astonishing that the members opposite continue to stand against environmental remediation in this case.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question?

Mr. Stephen Blais: My supplemental is also for the Premier. We've heard time and again in this House that the government wants to defend the proper use of process. They never miss an opportunity to preach about transparency and accountability, and yet, they rarely practise it themselves. The government, once again, has refused to disclose who is getting this backroom deal here in Toronto. The Premier's decision to use the—

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Stop the clock. The Minister of Education must rise in his place and withdraw.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I withdraw.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Start the clock. The member can place his question.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Once again, the government has refused to disclose who is getting the secret deal here in Toronto. The Premier's decision to use the cover of a pandemic to ram through a deal to demolish and sell Dominion Foundries is completely unacceptable.

Mr. Speaker, will the Premier practise what he preaches and commit that any future sale of this land or the development rights on it will be made at market value, in a clear and transparent way, for the benefit of Ontario taxpayers?

Mr. Parm Gill: Mr. Speaker, we've been clear: Only the negotiating mandate to facilitate the future sale of the site has been approved, and the site has not been sold. I can continue to stand here again and again and let the members know again and again, in case they have a hard time understanding. I'm happy to stick around after question period and also help them understand that the site has not been sold.

We are currently consulting with the community to hear more from them. We've also had ongoing conversations with Mayor Tory, and the ministry staff are having ongoing conversations with the city staff. We look forward to completing our public consultation and moving forward with the environmental remediation of this site.

SMALL BUSINESS

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: My question is to the Premier. I recently met with local officials and restaurant owners in St. Catharines to talk about the need for more sector-based support. They have a point: CFIB described Ontario as having the worst support for small businesses in the country.

The owner and chef of Dispatch in St. Catharines, Adam Hynam-Smith, says the injections from the grants are not enough and expects to run 2021 at a loss.

The Premier knows Niagara and St. Catharines is a tourist and restaurant destination. Losing our restaurants means losing our main streets. Will the Premier stand up and hear the cries for help, and will he immediately announce more emergency funding for hard-hit sectors that will help them weather the storm during a third wave?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The parliamentary assistant, the member for Willowdale.

Mr. Stan Cho: I appreciate the member raising these important issues, because we recognize the hospitality sector, the tourism sector has been one of the hardest-hit areas of business in this province. That's why, from the very beginning, we have outlined a series of supports. The most recent one we talked about just yesterday was the small business support grant program, which allows for a grant of up to \$20,000 for these hard-hit restaurants, for these hard-hit tour operators. I'm proud to say that even since yesterday, the funding that has reached the hands of many of these businesses, even in St. Catharines, is now up to \$930 million. That's over 66,000 businesses that have received funds in hand.

However, we recognize, of course, that this is a very serious pandemic that will have long-lasting economic effects. That's why we have also outlined a series of permanent tax reductions, whether that is property tax coming down by up to 30% or EHT, a tax on jobs that has been permanently eliminated for the smallest of small businesses—a series of measures for today and for tomorrow so that we can indeed weather the storm.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Back to the Premier: Adam ended our meeting by saying that he had to go lay off another staff member. Other restaurant groups at the meeting had already laid off all of their staff. Niagara is in grey. These businesses just want to open their doors, but they can't unless it's safe.

Our chief medical officer cited low vaccine supply for Niagara's continued lockdown. He said that to avoid the third wave, it is a race for vaccination. But Niagara has not gotten its fair share of vaccines to justify a safer reopening. In fact, Premier, you diverted 5,500 Moderna vaccines somewhere else.

Will the Premier stand up and tell small businesses across Niagara and in St. Catharines why Ontario—with its worst small business support in the country—won't do more to help businesses through a lockdown while it does not provide its fair share to St. Catharines?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Deputy Premier and Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: I thank the member for the question, but what I can assure the member, through you, Mr. Speaker, is that Niagara has received its fair share of vaccines; in fact, in some cases, overly so. Their vaccines were sufficient to vaccinate all of the residents in the long-term-care homes.

We had to reshipe some of the vaccines because of a significant reduction in supply that we have received through the federal government via Pfizer and Moderna, but there were sufficient vaccines delivered to Niagara to make sure that all the residents of long-term-care homes were given at least the first injection. Then, we will continue with that. We have a phased priority of people to receive the vaccines.

I can assure the member opposite that Niagara did receive its fair share.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): That concludes our question period this morning.

This House stands in recess until 3 p.m.

The House recessed from 1133 to 1500.

REPORTS BY COMMITTEES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I beg to inform the House that today the Clerk received the report on intended appointments dated February 23, 2021, of the Standing Committee on Government Agencies. Pursuant to standing order 111(f)(9), the report is deemed to be adopted by the House.

Report deemed adopted.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

SUPPORT FOR ADULTS IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 SUR LE SOUTIEN AUX ADULTES AYANT BESOIN D'ASSISTANCE

Madame Gélinas moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 253, An Act respecting reporting of adults in need of assistance and the provision of assistance to those adults / Projet de loi 253, Loi concernant le signalement d'adultes ayant besoin d'assistance et la fourniture d'une assistance à ces adultes.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? Carried.

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I invite the member for Nickel Belt to explain her bill.

M^{me} France Gélinas: The bill enacts the Support for Adults in Need of Assistance Act. The act requires that regulated health professionals report to a board if they have reasonable suspicion that an individual who is 16 years of age or older is being abused or neglected. The failure to report would be an offence.

The act requires a board of health to ensure that each report it receives is assessed and verified within a certain

time period. The act also permits certain employees the right of entry into premises to carry out these requirements.

The act provides that every board shall establish a team that will review cases and recommend a support-and-assistance plan for individuals in need. The review team must include at least one legally qualified medical practitioner. For each case, employees and the chair of the review team have reporting obligations. They will ensure that the number of reports received, the number of cases for which the reported information was verified, the reasons for which reports were made and the outcomes of the reports are published on the website every six months.

PETITIONS

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Fleurette Rioux from my riding for these petitions.

“Whereas it is important to have your exact name on government-issued cards such as your health card...;

“Whereas many francophones have accents in the spelling of their names;

“Whereas the Ministry of Health” has “confirmed that the province of Ontario’s computer systems do not allow the recording of accented letters;”

They petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows: “to make sure the French accents are included on all documents and cards issued by the government of Ontario...”

I support this petition, will affix my name to it and send it to the Clerk.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Mr. Lorne Coe: “To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas since the start of the pandemic, the growth of e-commerce has exploded and online shopping has doubled in Canada;

“Whereas with the dramatic increase in doorstep deliveries, thieves have more opportunities than ever before to steal packages addressed to consumers;

“Whereas one in three online shoppers in Canada say they’ve had a package stolen from outside their home;

“Whereas, if passed, the Trespass to Property Amendment Act would:

“—make Ontario the first province in Canada to impose provincial fines for package piracy;

“—impose a minimum fine of \$500 for a first offence, \$1,000 for a second offence, \$2,000 for each subsequent conviction, up to a maximum of \$10,000;

“—create a deterrent for package pirates while offering more protection to consumers, retailers and couriers from this costly crime;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“That the Legislative Assembly of Ontario vote on and pass the Trespass to Property Amendment Act, 2020.”

I support this particular petition, Speaker. I’m going to affix my signature to it, date it and provide it to usher Darlene.

BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Mike Trotter from Hanmer in my riding for these petitions.

“Improving Broadband in Northern Ontario.

“Whereas people and businesses in northern Ontario need reliable and affordable broadband Internet now to work, learn and connect with friends and family; and

“Whereas too many people can only access unreliable Internet and cellular or don’t have any connectivity at all especially in northern Ontario; and

“Whereas the current provincial Broadband and Cellular Action Plan has failed to provide northern communities with the same opportunities for economic growth, recovery and participation;”

They petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“To call on the Ford government to immediately provide a plan with dates and actions to be taken for every area of northern Ontario to have access to reliable and affordable broadband Internet.”

I can’t wait, Speaker. I’ll affix my name to this and send it to the Clerk.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: “To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas though most consumers are unaware of the high environmental cost of fast fashion, fully 85% of unwanted clothing and textiles in North America end up in landfills;

“Whereas companies who engage in fast fashion practices capitalize on low operational costs, creating dangerous working conditions with minimum pay to employees;

“Whereas fast fashion textile dyeing is the second-largest polluter of clean water globally;

“Whereas these unethical garment production practices constitute more than 24 billion pounds of waste clothing every year, rendering fashion one of the world’s worst polluters;

“We, the undersigned, support MPP Donna Skelly’s Don’t Dump, Donate initiative to encourage retailers and consumers to shop ethically, and to donate old textiles to charity, diverting more clothing from landfills into donation bins. The initiative also encourages manufacturers to have additional ‘donate’ tags or stamps on clothing items and encourages retailers to set up donation bins in their stores. These efforts, along with those outlined in Ontario’s comprehensive Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan, will help reduce waste and pollution, preserving the province’s beautiful and ecologically important natural environment.”

I will affix my signature and pass it to the usher.

GASOLINE PRICES

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Mrs. Betty McIsaac for signing this petition.

“Gas prices....

“Whereas northern Ontario motorists continue to be subject to wild fluctuations in the price of gasoline; and

“Whereas the province could eliminate opportunistic price gouging and deliver fair, stable and predictable fuel prices; and

“Whereas five provinces and many US states already have some sort of gas price regulation; and

“Whereas jurisdictions with gas price regulation have seen an end to wild price fluctuations, a shrinking of price discrepancies between urban and rural communities and lower annualized gas prices;”

They petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“Mandate the Ontario Energy Board to monitor the price of gasoline across Ontario in order to reduce price volatility and unfair regional price differences while encouraging competition.”

I support this petition, will affix my name to it and send it to the Clerk.

WORKPLACE SAFETY
AND INSURANCE BOARD

Mr. Dave Smith: I have a petition for the Legislative Assembly of Ontario entitled “Workplace Safety and Insurance Act Petition.”

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“Whereas businesses need support to keep the lights on during a time of uncertainty and hardship; and

“Whereas helping employers survive this challenging period and providing stability is an essential part of our government’s response to COVID-19; and

“Whereas COVID-19 has made the future uncertain and many businesses are facing risk factors outside of the norm;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“Pass Bill 238, An Act to amend the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997, so that:

“(1) Amendments are made to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997;

“(2) New section 88.1 sets out the special rule for the calculation of certain premiums payable by employers for the 2021 calendar year. The Lieutenant Governor in Council is given regulation-making powers with respect to the calculation and the period during which the special rule applies. New section 167 provides that the minister may direct the board to provide the minister with information that the minister considers necessary for the proper administration of the act. The board is required to provide the information on or before the date specified by the minister and in the form specified by the minister. The minister may delegate the minister’s powers under section 167 to the deputy minister.”

I fully agree with this petition. I will sign my name to it and send it to the table.

ADDICTION SERVICES

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Glenn and Mary Jane Drury for these petitions.

“Whereas Ontario is expecting more than 2,200 opioid-related deaths in 2020;

“Whereas opioid-related deaths are up 25% in northern Ontario compared to 2019;

“Whereas death rates in northern Ontario are almost double what they are in southern Ontario;

“Whereas northern Ontario has fewer health resources to handle the opioid crisis than southern Ontario;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly as follows:

“To declare the opioid crisis a public health emergency in northern Ontario and commit to funding local, evidence-based initiatives, such as harm reduction strategies, awareness programs, anti-stigma training, residential treatment and overdose prevention services, including a supervised consumption site in Greater Sudbury.”

I support this petition. I will affix my name to it and send it to the Clerk.

LIFE INSURANCE

Ms. Donna Skelly: “To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas at a time when many people, especially seniors, are struggling due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, more needs to be done to meet the needs of vulnerable people;

“Whereas important updates in order to modernize the Insurance Act are required;

“Whereas changes are needed to allow Ontario seniors to access the fair market value of their life insurance policies which could potentially give seniors tens of millions of dollars more than they now receive, each year;

“Whereas, if passed, Bill 219 would:

“—modernize the Insurance Act to create a well-regulated secondary market in life insurance;

“—provide access to an alternative financial resource and allow Ontario seniors to access the fair market value of their life insurance policies;

“—ensure consumers are protected by requiring full, true and plain disclosure;

“—require a 10-day cooling-off period;

“—ensure the right to consult a financial or legal advisor;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“That the Legislative Assembly of Ontario vote on and pass the Life Settlements and Loans Act.”

I will affix my signature to this and give it to the appropriate usher.

SMALL BUSINESS

Mr. Rick Nicholls: I have a petition here addressed to the Ontario Legislative Assembly regarding support for the Ontario Small Business Support Grant program.

“Whereas small businesses required to close or significantly restrict services under the province-wide shutdown have suffered significant losses in revenue;

“Whereas small businesses need urgent relief to help navigate through the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic;

“Whereas, if approved, the small business support grant program would:

“—give struggling small businesses a minimum grant of \$10,000;

“—offer eligible businesses a grant up to \$20,000”—that’s \$10,000 plus \$10,000;

“—help businesses pay their bills and meet their financial obligations;

“—help businesses continue to employ people and support their local communities when it is safe to do so;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, support the Ontario government’s initiative to help struggling small businesses through the Ontario small business support grant program.”

I wholeheartedly agree with this petition. I will affix my name to it and ensure that it gets to the appropriate personnel here in the Legislature.

OPTOMETRY SERVICES

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I have a petition to save eye care in Ontario, from my constituents in Guelph.

“Whereas the Ontario government has underfunded optometric eye care for 30 years; and

“Whereas optometrists now subsidize the delivery of OHIP-covered eye care by \$173 million a year; and

“Whereas COVID-19 forced optometrists to close their doors, resulting in a 75%-plus drop in revenue; and

“Whereas optometrists will see patient volumes reduced between 40% and 60%, resulting in more than two million comprehensive eye exams being wiped out over the next 12 months; and

“Whereas communities across Ontario are in danger of losing access to optometric care;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“To instruct the Ontario government to immediately establish a timetable and a process for renewed negotiations concerning optometry fees.”

I support this petition. I will sign it and send it to the table.

FISH AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Mr. Dave Smith: “To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas the ban on hunting and trapping in sections of Ontario to protect the eastern hybrid wolf was put in place without regard for the overall ecosystem;

“Whereas this ban has adversely affected the ability of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR), hunters and trappers to properly manage animal populations and Ontario’s ecosystem;

“Whereas this ban is no longer needed and is in fact causing more damage to Ontario’s ecosystem and increasing unnecessary encounters between wildlife and Ontarians;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“That the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry immediately lift the ban on hunting and trapping set in place to protect the eastern hybrid wolf.”

With the number of sightings that we’ve seen in this area, I’m very happy to sign this petition.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Point of order.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Barrie–Innisfil has a point of order.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: I’m seeking unanimous consent to revert to statements by the ministry and responses.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Barrie–Innisfil is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to revert to statements by the ministry and responses. Agreed? Agreed.

STATEMENTS BY THE MINISTRY
AND RESPONSES

SMALL BUSINESS

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: I’m honoured to rise today in continued support of Ontario’s small businesses.

As the minister responsible for small business and red tape reduction, I’m in a very unique position—one that has brought me face to face with the reality of daunting challenges that are faced by main streets today, but also one where I can help protect the people of Ontario and help businesses sustain our communities.

Mr. Speaker, it’s prudent that we highlight the number of supports that currently exist. Today, businesses can log on to the provincial portal at www.ontario.ca/smallbusiness, and access our all-in-one small business support page. Here, they can access a one-time grant of up to \$20,000, where businesses that are eligible will get a minimum of \$10,000. They can access 100% of their electricity energy costs through that same portal. They can also access 100% of their property tax costs. They can also apply for the main street PPE relief grant—up to \$1,000 for businesses with between two and nine employees.

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On top of that, we’ve also made available Digital Main Street grants to help businesses pivot to a digital e-commerce marketplace. Up to \$2,500 is available for those

businesses, and many other technological marketing supports are also available through that program.

On top of that, we have worked with our partners at the federal level to ensure up to 90% can be covered on your monthly rent payment. Up to 75% of your wages can also be covered. The federal government has also provided supports of almost \$60,000 in terms of loans, with certain portions of that being a grant as well.

But there's still a lot of work to be done. The weight of recent restrictions, though necessary, has greatly affected Ontario's smallest enterprises. These businesses are the heart of the economy, are necessary for our neighbourhoods and create thousands of jobs for hard-working families. In 2019, small businesses employed 2.4 million Ontarians across this province, and 98% of all businesses in Ontario are small businesses. Today, we acknowledge that many have struggled to stay afloat. The pandemic has overturned much of their business, making it harder to attract local customers, keep people safe and adapt to new demands. We've all seen examples of this through our own communities: retailers closing their doors to do business curbside, service providers reconfiguring their work to go virtual, restaurants redesigning menus and options for takeout, and businesses organizing to help the sheltered and bring food to the vulnerable.

Businesses across our province have done all this and more to keep serving the people of Ontario, and our government wants them to know that small businesses across this province can continue to count on our support to help them get through this.

Like I mentioned before, the Ontario Small Business Support Grant, the largest-ever small business support investment anywhere in Canada, has been designed to help lighten the load for those small businesses during this most difficult period of time. It is the centrepiece of this comprehensive plan—one designed to give small businesses the tools they need to stay safe, stay solvent and stay competitive. We have committed \$1.4 billion to this grant to provide a minimum of \$10,000 and up to \$20,000 to eligible small businesses to help them during this period. Small businesses can access these funds quickly and use them in whatever way they see fit. Whether it's funds to maintain inventory, to cover wages or to sustain their great, local workforce, we want small businesses across this province to be able to access this support, and fortunately, many small businesses across this province already are, with funds benefiting their families, their workforce and their local communities.

Consider my hometown of Brampton, one of the most diverse and fastest-growing cities in all of Canada. J Red and Co. is one of those proud businesses in Brampton—one of over 64,000 businesses that have been approved for this grant, with more than \$900 million in support having flowed into the accounts of small businesses province-wide.

We created this program to provide small businesses with a critical injection of funds that they can use to meet urgent needs, and we're delighted to report that it's providing a much-needed hand up for small businesses

weighed down by the economic impacts of COVID-19. Small businesses have made it clear that this is exactly the kind of support that they are looking for, responding in extraordinary numbers that continue to grow week after week. We appreciate the pressure that small businesses continue to operate under, and we thank them for trusting us to deliver these supports and funds in a responsible and accountable way.

To help get the money into hands of business owners quickly, we have accelerated the approvals process for this grant. This includes tripling the number of staff who review applications to increase the number of grants that are processed daily, releasing a detailed step-by-step video on the application portal to help guide small business owners through this process, and working directly with applicants to ensure forms are filled out correctly and eligible businesses are not denied funding.

Speaker, our government has committed to providing payment to small businesses within 10 days after their application being approved, and we're proud to report that we are meeting that target. Applications that require further review or that may contain incomplete or incorrect information do take a bit longer to process, and that is why we have tripled the number of staff handling these processes. But thanks to those additional resources, we have continued to reduce the wait time and release funds for all approved applications regardless of their complexity. We have also enabled businesses to check the status of their application online so they can know with confidence once those funds are approved and when they will arrive.

As we move forward, we remain committed to ensuring that this grant goes where it is needed: to hard-working small businesses. Of course, this isn't the only financial relief our government is making available to them.

We encourage small business owners to continue applying for the COVID-19 financial supports we've designed to help them weather the storm. And because the last thing that struggling small businesses need right now is to navigate endless red tape or onerous mechanisms to apply, we've made it easy for them to do so by combining them into one simple application. Small businesses can go to ontario.ca/smallbusiness to learn about financial relief that they may be eligible for. This includes \$600 million in property tax and energy cost rebates as well as the \$60-million main street relief grant for personal protective equipment.

Speaker, I mentioned earlier that our government's three-pronged plan is focused on helping small businesses across Ontario stay safe, stay solvent and stay competitive. It's about supporting small businesses so they can keep supporting us, enabling them to serve our communities, employ our neighbours and boost our economy. Our PPE grant is one way we're helping to ease their cash flow concerns and keep their staff safe. In fact, we have recently increased the number of small businesses that can apply for the main street relief grant. Businesses with two to 19 employees in all eligible sectors, including those that deliver arts, entertainment, recreation services, can now apply for up to \$1,000 to help cover and offset the cost of

PPE. With the province moving forward into the COVID-19 Response Framework, this expansion will help more main street businesses to prepare for a cautious and gradual reopening with funds that help offset the cost of PPE. It will help them protect their employees while increasing confidence for consumers, bringing more traffic back to our main streets when it's safe to be there.

To help small businesses find more PPE, we ask that they look at the Ontario-made equipment supplier directory. This directory can be accessed through our government's small business recovery page, again at ontario.ca/smallbusiness. We created this online hub to connect small businesses with dedicated financial supports, safety resources and programs designed to help them stay competitive in the midst of these new demands and rapid changes. There, they can download a checklist to protect their workplaces from the spread of COVID-19 and develop a plan to keep people safe. They can get financial advice through Advocis Connect to help them prepare for their recovery. And they can access financial literacy resources from the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada on how to manage cash flow and risk.

This dedicated web page also includes information on a variety of small business supports available both provincially and also nationally. These include funding programs like the COVID-19 Energy Assistance Program for Small Business, designed to further help them with their energy bills. They also include resources that help small businesses maintain strong export ties during this pandemic, and materials they can use to promote safe practices and attract local customers.

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To help educate our small businesses on best practices to keep their customers and employees safe, our government recently announced that we would be providing free online safety training supports and webinars, giving them the tools and resources they need to prepare for a safer tomorrow.

Speaker, we know that main street businesses truly reflect the communities they are part of. To help them get local support, our government has linked 47 Small Business Enterprise Centres into the Small Business COVID-19 Recovery Network. Through this network, they can access advice and tools tailored to their local community.

Our government has also created supports to help more small businesses expand their markets and reach past their main streets, selling goods and services to customers all across the province and around the world. The Internet has provided new opportunities for small businesses to sustain their operations through this pandemic and help them grow beyond it. That's why our plan has digital service squads going live across this province. The squads, composed of talented graduates and students with strong technology and marketing backgrounds, are providing one-on-one help with digital assessments, social media advertising and e-commerce platforms and solutions. They're part of the \$57-million Digital Main Street

program, which is helping nearly 23,000 small businesses across this province while also creating 1,400 jobs for students in Ontario. It's another way we're helping main streets adapt to the pandemic's demands, while preparing them to become more competitive when we re-emerge on the other side.

Speaker, our government continues to prioritize the needs of small businesses throughout this pandemic. That's why we've also introduced a number of legislative changes, ones specifically designed to help small businesses.

Consider Ontario's Main Street Recovery Plan. Among other things, it has permanently allowed licensed restaurants and bars to include alcohol with their food as part of their takeout or delivery orders. This enables restaurants across this province to maintain new revenue streams the government opened up to them in the early days of the pandemic. It has been a lifeline of support to boost businesses at this very critical time. It's helping them refine their business model beyond the pandemic, allowing them to carve out new product offerings and increase their competitive edge well into the future.

Consider also, Speaker, our Supporting Local Restaurants Act. At many times during this pandemic, food delivery has been an added revenue generator for many restaurants across this province. When small and independent restaurants in many parts of this province were required to close their doors to in-person dining this fall to help keep Ontarians safe, our government had to act to help support them. The Supporting Local Restaurants Act will continue to reduce food delivery fees for small and independent restaurants in areas where indoor dining has been prohibited. And to ensure that these savings aren't made off the backs of essential workers helping to keep us fed, the compensation of employees or contractors who perform delivery services remains protected. This act has given small and independent restaurants the chance to successfully pivot to delivery and takeout, while making payroll and meeting their financial obligations. It has also bought them time to build a thriving takeout operation to complement their traditional in-person dining experience.

Speaker, as they have in the past, small businesses will continue to play a vital role in Ontario's future. Whether they employ a couple of close family members or dozens of people from all over the province, small businesses matter to our government and to our province. They've been there for us through the worst of this. And with the extensive supports we're making available to our small businesses, we're making it known that they do not walk this challenging journey alone.

Everyone has a part to play in sustaining the small businesses that bring pride, character and opportunity to our communities. By supporting local and staying safe, we can be sure that better days for small businesses are ahead.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Responses?

Ms. Catherine Fife: It's a pleasure to rise today in response to the minister's statement on small business. I had been, of course, serving for quite some time now as the economic development critic; I'm no longer that. The

member from Kingston and the Islands and the member from Essex have taken over those roles and responsibilities, and I have full confidence in them in that position. I do believe being the finance critic will be heightened and strengthened because of the work that I've done with businesses across this province.

I've been talking with small business owners for months, and it has been incredibly interesting and rewarding to advocate on their behalf during these trying times. These are people who have a dream and are willing to do anything they need to do to make that dream a reality, be it a restaurant, a retail store, an IT business or an owner of a gym, for instance. I think that the government needs to hear what is working and what is not, because we are not out of this pandemic by any stretch of the imagination.

The Ontario Small Businesses Support Grant, for instance, which was a long time coming in this province—one wonders why it did take so long for the government to put a grant on the table. There have been significant problems with this grant, Mr. Speaker. It's not that it's not appreciated; it's just that it is very complicated. Primarily, businesses have raised concerns with the delays in their applications, and the minister actually referenced this in his comments. Applications opened on January 18 and businesses were promised that support was coming in five to 10 business days. Well, it's now February 23, and I've heard that multiple businesses that applied on day one for support still haven't heard anything back from this ministry.

Scott, the owner of Bar Robo in Ottawa, applied for the grant on the day applications opened and he still hasn't heard back about whether he's going to receive the funding. Why is this such a big deal? The government should be very interested in this.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Order, please.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Before the pandemic, Bar Robo was doing quite well, earning \$110,000 a month in sales. During the lockdown, his sales were less than \$3,000 a month. With fixed costs of \$11,000 a month in rent that aren't covered by any existing grant programs, Scott is having to pay \$8,000 a month out of pocket just to keep the lights on, because they were shut down. Scott is frustrated. He has received very little information from the government, and each day he waits, the closer he gets to closing his doors forever.

The important part about this, Mr. Speaker, is that once these businesses close, they do not come back. We need them to be successful. We need them to stay viable so we as a province can recover, from an economic development perspective.

Matias Marin is the owner of Houndstooth on College Street right here in Toronto. They're in a similar position to Scott. They applied on the first day and now, despite it being nearly March, they have heard nothing back.

The federal government can deliver funds to businesses in five business days. Why are these delays happening at the provincial level? This is an honest question that I put

to the minister today. How long can we expect the delays to be? These are questions that we have asked the ministry over and over again, and yet we have not heard back.

We've also heard from Wanda Hoffman, a local business owner. She was able to get a response on her application. She made a few mistakes and is being allowed to correct her application, but she has now waited nearly a week for a code that will allow her to gain access to her application. These are barriers for businesses to access a grant that they desperately need. She has said the government's response is "slower than snails."

These stories matter. You can't just be dismissive of them. These are people who are literally trying to hold on and stay viable as businesses in the province of Ontario. At the very least, these owners deserve clarity and clarification around how the government is going to be moving forward.

The Ontario Small Business Support Grant also has narrow eligibility. I'm sure you've heard this. Only those businesses that were affected by the December 26 shutdown order are eligible. Well, we all know, in all of our ridings, there were businesses that missed out, that were closed in the first shutdown. I can tell you that these businesses deserve better from this government. We should all be working together to make sure that they have the access and not more debt, like the owners of Overflow Brewing Co. The Ministry of Finance has put a lien on your business because they have tax deferrals, and they're charging this business 7% interest on their deferred taxes. They're putting them out of business.

1540

Let's be more kind to the people who actually support the economy in this province of Ontario. Let's do better for them, because they've done very good by us.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: I am pleased to rise today to speak about this important issue, support for small businesses.

Just last week, the FAO released its latest report on the Ontario labour market. It was sobering. Ontario has lost 355,300 jobs in 2020, the largest decline on record. What is the government doing? Whatever it is doing is not enough to stem the tide.

While I am pleased to see the introduction of the Ontario Small Business Support Grant, we have yet to see the uptake and the effectiveness of this program because we're not reaching into those businesses that need it the most. It is not clear how businesses can learn about this program and how they can benefit. Our small businesses on main street, and in every corner of the province, need more.

Last week's FAO report highlighted a couple of other troubling trends when it comes to youth and women in this province. Youth employment dropped to its lowest level in 20 years, while their unemployment rate skyrocketed to 22%, the highest on record. Women experienced a 5.8% job loss, compared to men at 3.9%. Mothers with children under 18 suffered twice the share of work absences than fathers. The she-session continues to deepen in this province, with large numbers of job losses for women deepening in areas like culture, services, food and

beverage, recreation, and sectors that are exposed to COVID-19. We will not likely see these jobs come back this year.

Small businesses are looking for a real lifeline beyond PPE.

The Scarborough Business Association is a dynamic group which represents hundreds of small businesses. They have convened dozens of virtual meetings. I know the associate minister knows this because he joined them at one of their sessions. They will be hosting a virtual meeting to address the stark challenges facing restaurants and how they can survive. These restaurants are employers of women and young people, who make up a significant number of the job losses reported by the FAO. What is this government doing about this?

The Ontario Liberals were the first to recommend selling alcohol as part of takeout to help boost sales, but now we need to move beyond that. More is needed to help these struggling restaurants.

This month, I held pre-budget consultations in my riding to hear directly from businesses on some of the issues that they are facing and their suggestions on how to best address them as the government prepares its budget. They talked about things like paid sick days, with support from the provincial government; affordable child care, so that woman can participate fully in the labour market; an increase in funding for Black, Indigenous and other racialized groups, who are so hard hit by the pandemic, and for youth and young entrepreneurs.

We are coming out of the second wave of COVID-19, and with the variants now taking hold, we're on a collision course. We are staring down a third wave. So more needs to be done, and small businesses are asking for predictability and new measures so that they can survive this.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: It's an honour to stand up and speak out for small businesses. As a long-time small business owner myself, I understand the challenges that small businesses are facing.

One of the things they're asking for, Speaker, is a level playing field when the government makes decisions. The fact that big box stores are able to sell non-essential goods when many small businesses are closed down, the fact that Amazon warehouses, even though we've seen significant outbreaks in them, continue to operate and compete with our small businesses when they're shut down—isn't the kind of level playing field Ontario-owned small businesses need to survive.

I appreciate the fact that the Ontario Small Business Support Grant was brought in, but today I want the government to hear the feedback I am receiving from small businesses. First of all, I can't tell you how many small businesses have reached out to me, saying they put their application in and waited five days and didn't hear back, or they waited 10 days and didn't hear back. Many have waited two weeks and haven't heard back. They just need a program that's going to respond quickly. For those businesses that are in lockdown areas, particular in Toronto and Peel, which have been locked down for a long

time, they need it to be more than a one-time grant; they need it to be ongoing over time, because they're continuing to accrue costs. Small businesses are saying, "Let us participate in rapid testing"—so we can rapid-test and provide the supports that small businesses need to administer those tests.

Finally, while I appreciate the expansion of alcohol sales, let's lower the wholesale cost for restaurants so they can actually make a living doing it.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ACCELERATING ACCESS TO JUSTICE ACT, 2021 LOI DE 2021 VISANT À ACCÉLÉRER L'ACCÈS À LA JUSTICE

Resuming the debate adjourned on February 22, 2021, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 245, An Act to amend and repeal various statutes, to revoke various regulations and to enact the Ontario Land Tribunal Act, 2021 / Projet de loi 245, Loi modifiant et abrogeant diverses lois, abrogeant divers règlements et édictant la Loi de 2021 sur le Tribunal ontarien de l'aménagement du territoire.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): When this matter was last on the floor for debate, the member for Brampton East had the floor. I return now to the member from Brampton East.

Mr. Gurratan Singh: To quickly recap from where we left off yesterday: This bill is called the Accelerating Access to Justice Act. What we see in it is, the government is actually not presenting factors that are going to accelerate access to justice. We've outlined the problems within this bill.

First of all, digitization: Digitization in and of itself—there are lawyers who want to see the modernization of tribunals and of courts. But in the absence of supports for those who are marginalized, those who don't have access to a smart phone or don't have access to the Internet will be disadvantaged in their ability to access a more modern system. The solution to that is very simple, Speaker: It is to fund legal aid properly, because when you fund legal aid properly, that is your front line of service to those marginalized communities who need the support of legal aid clinics, who can provide access to the requisite resources—Internet, facilities, technology—to be able to take part in these digital or modernized forms of hearings and of tribunals.

We've discussed and outlined the issues around the JAAC—how the JAAC, our process of selecting judges, is the gold standard in the entire world, that it's something which is fantastic. Other jurisdictions look to Ontario to see how to ensure they have a non-biased, non-partisan way of selecting judges. The alteration being presented in this act, in which you're increasing the selection from two to six, is something that ultimately opens up the opportunity that there could be more of a partisan outlook in the

selection of judges, because if you have a longer list, you can go down that list and say, “Do you know what? I like this person” for the wrong reasons—not because of their ability to provide justice, but for other, potentially partisan reasons. So that is a potential risk that we see within this legislation as well.

Further to that, we talked about the schedules in which, first off, we’re seeing the amalgamation of tribunals being put together. Tribunals are at the forefront. For the majority of people who access justice in Toronto, it is through the mechanism of tribunals; it is through the variety of tribunals, be it through labour, social assistance, housing. These are the tribunals that people deal with on a day-to-day basis. These tribunals are supposed to be faster, more efficient, more accessible, with more expertise. When you amalgamate them all together, you create a variety of issues. You actually don’t have a faster system—because the government is proposing a motion to dismiss a hearing. Well, the ability to dismiss a hearing could result in a situation where a neighbour who’s curious or wants to object to a development next door can go forward to the appropriate tribunal to say, “This is something that we have problems with,” and then that developer, with the resources of lawyers and the ability to hire folks to advocate on their behalf at their disposal, can then say, “Do you know what? We’re actually going to put a motion forward to dismiss this entire claim from the get-go.” That can ultimately create a more cumbersome and also a less accessible form of tribunals. That’s something that is a very clear possibility.

You also have the ability for less expertise. Why do you have less expertise? Because you have a system in which you’re now amalgamating all the tribunals together, and that amalgamation can result in a more general tribunal addressing a specific need. That is a problem because the very nature of expertise within tribunals is actually what creates a better system.

1550

The solution—and it ultimately comes down to: What problem are we trying to fix? The problem we should be trying to fix right now is this idea of effectively making sure people have more access to justice—how do we make sure there’s more access to justice in tribunals? We do that by actually hiring more adjudicators, hiring more individuals who can fill the roles. We’ve seen a huge reduction; Tribunal Watch Ontario talks about the fact that adjudicators in tribunals have dropped from around 160 to close to 80. Obviously, if we have a system that’s so starved of adjudicators, these tribunals are going to be weaker. They’re not going to have the same ability to provide the support systems or to hold the same amount of tribunals that they did before. That’s the problem with amalgamation.

Further to that, we talk about the further schedules in which the removal to appeal a minister on a basis of fact is taken away from individuals. That is incredibly problematic, because by definition, when you’re taking away Ontarians’ ability to appeal, you’re removing their ability to access justice. That’s a problem, and that’s something that is going to ultimately negatively impact people who

have a legitimate qualm or issue with potential projects that are coming forward.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I’m sorry to interrupt.

There are four different conversations going on on the government side, and I’m having trouble hearing the member from Brampton East. If you have to have a discussion, please take it out in the lobby.

I turn back to the member from Brampton East.

Mr. Gurratan Singh: Thank you, Speaker.

Ultimately, let’s look at the opportunity that the government had on this bill. It is called the Accelerating Access to Justice Act. Right now, this issue of access to justice is at the forefront for people across the world. Within the last year, we saw movements across the globe that have been calling for greater access to justice. Last year, we saw the tragic and unjust murder of George Floyd, which resulted in a movement that, frankly, encompassed the world, in which people started to question and challenge systemic racism within their own communities and their own provinces and their own nations. It became a movement across the world.

Here, locally, you saw people take to the streets to also challenge systemic racism and challenge the ability for people to access justice in our justice systems. That was at the forefront of this discussion. And people are paying attention. They want Legislative Assemblies, they want government to be bold and address this issue of systemic racism, of inequity, of injustice within our justice systems.

The government had that opportunity with this bill, but they did not actually address this issue of accelerating access to justice. This is a bill that doesn’t even mention legal aid, doesn’t even mention the fact that legal aid was cut by one third and that legal aid clinics have been struggling since, and that that is the number one area of access to justice for marginalized communities.

Here in Ontario, we saw many, many situations in which communities were faced with systemic, institutionalized racism.

In Brampton, we had the shooting and killing of D’Andre Campbell, a Black man who was going through a mental health crisis. When he called for help, police showed up with their guns drawn, and they shot and killed him in his own home.

Months later, we saw a very similar situation with Ejaz Choudry, a racialized man going through a mental health crisis, whose family called for help. Instead of help arriving—when the police came, they arrived with their guns drawn. They shot and killed Mr. Ejaz Choudry while he was alone in his own home.

Afterwards, our system of justice is so broken that the SIU didn’t even have the ability to hold officers involved in these shootings and killings accountable. The SIU is a completely broken system.

If the government were serious about creating access to justice, then we would have looked at how to create justice in respect to addressing systemic racism in our systems, in respect to addressing our broken SIU, in respect to

addressing the fact that we need a mental health response to mental health crises, not police officers with their guns drawn.

Over the past few weeks, we've seen across Ontario, across the world, frankly, and in my riding of Brampton East and across Brampton as a whole, people come out across the board to protest unjust laws in India, because globally we're seeing a movement where people are now paying far more attention to the impact of law, the impact that laws have on people's livelihoods. There is a movement for greater access to justice. There is a movement where people are paying more attention. Almost every single weekend in my riding, we saw protests of people coming out in solidarity. Right now, there are thousands and thousands of farmers who are camped out around the capital of India, Delhi, peacefully protesting in what has been described as the largest protest in human history. On one day, 250 million people came out to peacefully protest the mass privatization of farming. What we've seen is that this peaceful protest, this movement, is becoming a movement that is not just about protesting peacefully, but also serving those in need by providing food and shelter, by opening up schools for those who are impoverished, by opening up clinics for those who never had access to a hospital. That is the nature and the spirit of this movement. What we're seeing is that unjust laws have compelled people to take a stand against this mass privatization.

Also, unjust laws have allowed for the Indian government to crack down on journalists, on activists like Nodeep Kaur, who has been in prison since January 12 for standing in solidarity with the farmers' protests—a Dalit rights activist, a workers' rights activist who was putting her life on the line in solidarity with farmers and then was picked up and arrested and has been held unjustly and detained since, while facing immense and violent actions against her. This is something that is emboldened by unjust laws.

We're seeing Disha Ravi, an environmental—
Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I apologize to the member, and I apologize to all members. I should have taken my mask off so my voice wouldn't have been muffled.

Government members, please come to order. I'm having trouble here. I've asked you once; I'm asking you again. They listened quietly. If we all listen quietly, we'll get through this without me having to stand up and raise my voice. Thank you for your consideration.

I turn back to the member from Brampton East.

Mr. Gurratan Singh: Thank you, Speaker.

To recap once again: We're talking about the fact that right now, Ontarians are hungry—they want to see a government that actually addresses this issue of access to justice. Why is this issue so at the forefront? Because right now, across the world, we're seeing global movements standing in support of access to justice, standing in support of communities' right to live life with liberty and freedom. The government had an opportunity to address this issue that's at the forefront for people across the board because

of global movements that are resulting in people, locally, being inspired to continue that kind of advocacy, to continue to hold that kind of spirit.

I was describing them; we've seen in the past year movements to address systemic racism in our justice system, which have resulted in our examining ourselves in Ontario and the systemic racism that exists here. The government had an opportunity to address that systemic racism through this bill, but instead, there's no mention of legal aid, there's no mention of systemic racism, there's no mention of these very important issues that are missing, quite frankly, from a bill that should include them, since it's named the Accelerating Access to Justice Act.

Further to that, one of the biggest issues that's missing from this piece of legislation—and I've been on calls with a variety of lawyers and people across the board—is the issue of auto insurance. Brampton is a community that has been discriminated against—and I use this language very purposely. It has been discriminated against, because the people of Brampton, by the mere fact that they live in Brampton, irrespective of how clear their driving records are, are charged extra because of their postal code. It is postal code discrimination. It is unjust and it is unfair. What is happening in Brampton and across Ontario is that billion-dollar insurance companies, despite the fact that they have made immense savings—you can look at every single stat. We know that because of the pandemic, there are fewer cars on the road. We know that because of the pandemic, there are fewer accidents happening and, because of that, billion-dollar car insurance companies are making a huge, huge amount of profit right now. They're making an immense amount of profit, they're making a huge amount of savings because they don't have to pay out, because there is a lack of accidents.

While people are sitting at home, with their cars parked in their driveway, they're seeing their rates increase.

The government could have taken an opportunity to address access to justice by looking at the fact that people are unjustly being discriminated against across Ontario. Folks in my riding are being unjustly discriminated against. Because of their postal code, they're being charged incredibly high rates. The government could have taken an opportunity to address this injustice in auto insurance rates, but they've decided not to.

1600

Let's keep this in mind—because folks often ask me, “Why are my rates going up? What's happening right now?” Whenever a billion-dollar car insurance company wants to increase their rates, they first need the approval of the Conservative government. That means, in the past year during this pandemic, when we have seen that statistically there are fewer cars on the road, and we know billion-dollar insurance companies are making a huge amount of profit because of the fact that there are fewer cars on the road and fewer accidents happening, this Conservative government has chosen to allow billion-dollar car insurance companies to increase their premiums. While people are sitting at home, with their cars parked in their driveway or parked on the road, while they are,

rightly so, doing everything they can to stay at home, this government is doing nothing to protect them from the fact that billion-dollar car insurance companies are taking advantage of them and charging them extra high rates.

That's why we in the NDP have been calling for justice to be met to individuals who are unjustly being charged higher rates. We called for a 50% reduction in car insurance rates. If the government was serious, they could have mandated the fact that car insurance rates could have been reduced, but they decided not to. We saw in BC, with the election of an NDP government, a reduction of 15% that is actually coming in for the folks of British Columbia. That's what happens when you elect an NDP government. They actually put in policy that helps folks out, and the contrary is happening here.

It boggles my mind, the fact that billion-dollar car insurance companies have been approved increases to everyday Ontarians' rates because of this Conservative government; the fact that while people are struggling economically in one of the worst economic situations that we have seen in a lifetime, almost, at this moment—when we know that people are being told to stay at home, drive less, don't leave your home. Despite the fact that people are struggling, this government has chosen to approve increases to the rates of individuals whose cars are, rightly so, parked at home and who are driving less, and when there are less accidents on the road. This is a huge injustice that could have been addressed by this government in this bill, but they made a purposeful decision to not include it, and the result is that people are struggling further and further.

Economically, if you look at Brampton, it's crazy; there are certain households in Brampton where people are paying more for their insurance than for their household mortgage. How is that sustainable? How is that something that is just? If you want to accelerate justice, then ensure that people are paying affordable rates for their car insurance, especially during a time of pandemic but, frankly, even outside of that. This has been something that people across the board in Ontario have had to deal with for years now, and it's wrong.

We are at a moment right now when people want to see government be bold. People in my riding who are looking across the world and seeing the impact of unjust laws are now looking here to say, "What can we do, what can government do here to make life more just? How can we accelerate justice here?"

I talk often about the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, a very dynamic community in my riding and across Ontario, across Canada and across the world. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community is a marginalized community that often faces injustices across the world. Currently, big tech has caved to unjust laws that are resulting in the censorship of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, specifically by Google and by Apple, which have cracked down on the ability for this community to have freedom of expression and freedom of religion on the Internet. I have called out this censorship. I've said that this is unjust, it's wrong and it needs to end immediately. What we're seeing, though,

is that this is the result of unjust laws. Laws have the ability to lift people up, and laws have the ability to bring people down.

As I described earlier, right now within India, there is an amazing movement of people who are rising, in the hundreds of thousands, in the millions, to oppose the unjust mass privatization of farming. The result of these beautiful movements that are happening across Delhi, the capital of India, where people have opened up these campsites, where they are feeding food to those who are hungry and giving education to those who never had the ability to access education, to those who are in states of poverty, is, we're seeing a huge crackdown on activists, on journalists and on free speech that is emboldened by unjust laws.

Disha Ravi is an environmental rights activist who was imprisoned for tweeting. Because of that tweet, she was in prison. She has been released since, but the very fact that she was in prison for tweeting demonstrates the immense negative impact that unjust laws can have.

Nodeep Kaur has been in prison since January 12. She's a workers' rights activist. She's a Dalit rights activist. She is an activist at the forefront of labour issues. She came to Delhi to protest in solidarity with the farmers' rights and the farmers' protest movement. She has been in prison since January 12, where she has been subjected to sexual violence, direct violence. She is still currently in jail, despite the fact that there is no real claim or case against her. That is emboldened by unjust laws.

We in Ontario need to recognize that we operate in a global context, that people are paying attention and they want to see us here, locally, address this issue of access to justice. And how do we do that? We create a system of justice that is equitable, that is fair, that is efficient, that is well-funded. Support to justice is something that people have to understand—it's a support system, and you never realize how important it is until you have to interact with it.

There is an economic savings when you properly fund supports to legal aid. There's an economic savings across the board. There is a more efficient system. If you talk to defence counsel, crown counsel, counsel across the board, they will tell you: When you have a matter before a justice or a judge, one of the most frustrating things to experience is when one side is unprepared. Often, when people don't have access to resources, they're not going to have the ability to ensure that they can prepare properly. When you have an individual who is self-represented operating within our justice system, that can be a huge cost to our system. It can be a huge cost to our system because it can result in undue delay. It can result in a system that gets locked down in appeal, potentially, because of the fact that people may not have the right to be properly tried. There are a variety of issues and savings that can happen from properly funding our justice system.

When we have an act that is called Accelerating Access to Justice, then there's a very easy way to ensure people have access to justice. It requires the government actually taking action and funding—funding legal aid, funding

tribunals, funding the front line of legal aid services, or legal services that people require to have the ability to live a just and free life.

When you put forth a bill that is named Accelerating Access to Justice but there is no mention of legal aid, there's no mention of systemic racism, there's no mention of the fact that people are in precarious situations and they're not able to access their tribunals in a fair and balanced manner, then it comes across as disingenuous. The Conservative government is putting forth a piece of legislation that—its name and its body are in contradiction with one another. That's why we need to look at what is missing in this piece of legislation and put forth a real ability to access justice.

We can't have something that allows greater support to developers at the risk of neighbours, like what is being proposed right now by the Conservative government. We can't have a system that allows for potential further partisanship in the selection of judges. We can't have a system that takes away people's right to appeal to a minister on the basis of the fact that it could be a bad idea or a bad project coming to their community. That does not increase justice; that does the opposite.

Across the world, people are looking to their Legislative Assemblies. They're looking across to their government now to act, to take a decision to help to ensure that they are actually living a life that is having government advocating for them.

That doesn't happen when you have billion-dollar car insurance companies that are allowed to—that this government approves increases to the rates of everyday folks on their car insurance premiums. That is completely unjust. It had no basis beforehand—Ontarians were paying some of the highest car insurance rates in the country—but especially now, during a pandemic, when people are driving far less and there are far fewer cars on the road, there are far fewer accidents. Car insurance companies are making billions and billions in profit on top of what they used to make because of the current situation. And instead of providing relief to Ontarians, this government is siding with billion-dollar car insurance companies over everyday people. That's wrong.

The NDP wouldn't be doing that kind of action—and we see a track record of that: The NDP in British Columbia brought in a 15% reduction to car insurance rates. That's how you help people out at a time when people are struggling.

1610

That's the kind of action that is needed in this kind of bill for accelerating access to justice—ensuring that we have a system that is upholding the values of social justice, of racial justice, of equity; ensuring that we have a system that is addressing the deep systemic racism that exists currently in our justice system; ensuring we have a system that is properly funded with respect to legal aid, one of the most important areas that actually protects justice. Instead of accelerating access to justice, this government has slowed access to justice, by gutting legal aid, by not funding tribunals, by ensuring that people now have less

rights in front of a tribunal, by ensuring that people now have less ability to appeal bad decisions in their community. That's the action that this Conservative government is taking right now, and that's something that is wrong and unjust.

Across the world, people are looking for justice. They are looking for a system in which people actually have the ability to look at their Legislatures and say, "We need justice. We need access to the very fundamental rights." And it's being inspired in a global context. We all live connected now.

When I talk to the Tamil community in my riding—a community that has faced decades of systemic racism, systemic injustice at the hands of the Sri Lankan government—they are a community that is acutely aware of the impact of laws. They are acutely aware of the fact that unjust laws can come in and disenfranchise a community, like their community has been disenfranchised. The Tamil community has been disenfranchised for decades by the Sri Lankan government. They have repressed their freedom of speech, repressed their journalists, repressed their free press. They have repressed this community across the board. There's a vibrant community here in Ontario and across Canada. Communities like that are now becoming increasingly aware of the fact that our Legislature has the ability to lift people up or bring them down.

When you have this kind of policy coming forth from the Conservative government, ultimately, you create a situation in which—it's very clear, the distinction here. Policies are being put forth that are going to help the haves and not the have-nots. That's not how you accelerate access to justice.

You accelerate access to justice by being bold, by speaking truth to power, by being like activists like Disha Ravi, who, in the face of a draconian government that was cracking down on free speech, tweeted out for justice, in solidarity with the farmers' protests. She was unjustly imprisoned and has since been released—but still, it demonstrates the strength of her spirit, to speak out against injustice.

The strength of people like Nodeep Kaur, an activist who has been imprisoned since January 12, who has been brutalized in jail, who has faced immense violence, and is still unjustly being held in jail, being unjustly detained—despite that, she is someone who partook in this protest because of the fact that she wanted to stand up for justice.

When we look at the changes being put forth in this piece of legislation, we can see very, very clearly that this government is putting forth changes that are going to ultimately help big developers. It's going to help their insider friends. It's going to help their friends and colleagues instead of actually providing access to justice.

We have seen that our gold standard, the JAAC, is something that we should not—if it's not broke, don't fix it. That's the situation with our selection of judges. We have one of the best systems in the world, and we should uphold that system, not try to weaken it. We should try to uphold that system instead of bringing in potential changes

that could result in it being created in a more partisan manner.

There are huge things that are missing from this piece of legislation. It does not accelerate justice. Instead, there are glaring gaps. Legal aid has been gutted. We know folks are struggling, and we know that we need to provide greater funding to legal aid in order to ensure that marginalized communities have the access that they need, to ensure that they have justice. Not a mention of legal aid in accelerating access to justice—the irony of that is not lost upon me; the contradiction of that is not lost upon me or anyone else here in the opposition.

If you want to create access to justice, then start looking at what the barriers are that people are facing and start working to dismantle those barriers. That means looking to address systemic racism. That means looking at the systemic underfunding of legal aid. That means looking at the fact that we have a broken SIU system that is unable to hold police officers who shoot and kill folks who are in mental health crises, unable to get to the bottom or conduct proper investigations; the fact that we have a system of justice that does not mandate a mental health response to a health care crisis instead of police officers and their guns drawn. That is how we create more justice in our system, and that's how we create more equity—by looking and understanding the place that we are in right now, the fact that people are looking across the world. We live in a globalized world, and we have communities that are wanting to see more justice here, locally, because of the injustices that they see here, locally, and internationally. That informs us. That gives us a direction towards where people are at right now.

I would say that this piece of legislation is tone-deaf. It's not properly addressing the needs of either a local community or a global community that continues to see a year's worth of global movements and protests and opposition to injustice. This language of access to justice is even more live now than it ever has been before.

When we see communities like the Ahmadiyya Muslim community being censored by big tech, which is actually caving in to unjust laws in a completely unjust manner, which is attacking free speech and freedom of expression, that is something wrong and that's something that each and every one of us needs to speak against.

When we see communities like the Tamil community, who have faced generations of injustice at the hands of the Sri Lankan government because of unjust laws—we need to now rise up and stand alongside that community and speak in support of it.

We need to stand in support of individuals like Nodeep Kaur and Disha Ravi, who had the courage to speak out against injustice, to stand alongside one of the largest protests in human history against the mass privatization of farming.

These are the kinds of movements we have available to us. I'd ask the government to reconsider these actions in their bill, to reconsider the fact that the Accelerating Access to Justice Act doesn't actually address access to justice, to start looking at issues like systemic racism, to

start looking at the funding of legal aid, and to stop these changes to tribunals which are going to make a more cumbersome system, and ultimately bring in a system that is more just and fair for Ontarians, not the opposite.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions.

The first question goes to the member with the broadest smile this week, after welcoming a baby granddaughter last week: the member for Chatham-Kent–Leamington.

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Thank you very much, Speaker. It's amazing that you can see that broad smile even behind my mask, but my eyes were squinting, I'm sure.

To the member opposite: Currently, the Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee does not publish diversity statistics. The application form provides the opportunity for self-identification regarding diversity, but we have no way of knowing whether or not we are attracting as many diverse candidates as we could or should be.

The Accelerating Access to Justice Act proposes to make it mandatory that the JAAC publish detailed diversity statistics in their annual report, using information that applicants already voluntarily provide during the application process. By collecting and reviewing these statistics, we will have a chance to analyze, improve and promote diversity on our bench.

Will the member opposite join our government and support bringing forward changes that will increase transparency surrounding the diversity of judicial candidates being considered? And if not, why not?

Mr. Gurratan Singh: The problem is that the Conservative government has chosen to include aspects of diversity along with factors that are going to be taking away people's fundamental rights and ability to access justice.

The reality is, you take the bill as a whole. You can't just cherry-pick one line without expecting the fact that if this bill comes into effect, it's going to ultimately result in people having less access to justice because of the fact that changes to the tribunal system are going to allow for a motion to dismiss motions, which could ultimately disenfranchise people who don't have the same resources as big developers. We have the right to appeal being taken away from individuals, and we have a threatening of the impartiality of the JAAC system.

So I'd say that you have to look at the entire bill and you have to see the entirety of its impact on folks.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: First of all, that a Conservative government has to call a bill Accelerating Access to Justice I just find a little bit interesting and somewhat rich, because we always know that this government, if anything, is trying to help developers and others far more than they're trying to help people who may have issues.

1620

We ended up permitting, by way of various ministerial processes, an open pit in the middle of the city of Timmins. It's in operation today. It's owned and operated by Newmont mines, the old Hollinger. Most of the people of

Timmins were okay with it, but there were families who were upset and had very good reasons, when it comes to noise, dust and other issues. They were concerned and objected to this particular development.

The government is going to remove the right to appeal for those individuals and will weaken the ability for someone to object. How is this in any way going to help families like that—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Brampton East to respond to that long question.

Mr. Gurratan Singh: I want to thank the member for that question because it outlines our concerns about this bill—the fact that when you bring in motions to dismiss without a hearing, ultimately that individual who has a problem with that mine could then appear in front of the tribunal, and the individual who's running the mine and who arguably will have more resources and funds available to them can then say, "We're going to put a motion to dismiss this without a hearing." Obviously, they're going to have the ability to hire lawyers and hire support, and that neighbour just might be someone who's concerned about dust and the impact on their neighbourhood.

But now you're seeing a lack of—you treat everyone the same, and it's not equitable. This is an issue of equity. Obviously, a developer is going to have far more access to resources than a neighbour. That's why this act is actually not providing more justice but less justice—because of the fact that this imbalance disproportionately impacts one over the other.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Ms. Donna Skelly: When the proposal to allow virtual commissioning and notarization of documents was first put forward back in Bill 161, the opposition voted against it, even though it would improve access to justice for Ontarians—something that the opposition often speak about but don't actually seem to genuinely support. Making the emergency order on virtual witnessing of wills and powers of attorney permanent through legislation would make Ontario a leader in Canada in this field, by allowing hard-working and busy Ontarians to save the time and expense of a trip to their lawyer's office.

Will the member from Brampton East oppose this, or will you finally come to your senses and support measures this time that would allow us to modernize our judicial system?

Mr. Gurratan Singh: I need to remind the member that you have to take the bill as a whole. If you just look at one aspect of it, you're disregarding the fact that there are huge issues around the fact that this piece of legislation takes away the right to appeal on a matter of fact. It removes the ability for people to access a tribunal and not have to face motions to dismiss without a hearing. This bill has aspects of it that are going to withhold access to justice.

Let's also talk about the issue of digitization. If you have a digitized system without supports for marginalized communities, then how can you tell someone who doesn't

have a smart phone or access to the Internet or, quite frankly, a home—how can they have access to a digitized system if they don't have access to legal aid funding? That's the problem with the government's approach. You can't gut legal aid on one side, bring in a digitized system and expect that that equal playing field that does not exist will allow everyone to access justice in the same manner.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question.

Mr. Kevin Yarde: Thank you to the member from Brampton East.

I want to touch a little bit more on legal aid. As we all know, legal aid is the bedrock of the justice system, and the majority of people who access legal aid are the disadvantaged and the minorities. When this government was putting forth proposals, they did not include legal aid.

My question to the member from Brampton East is—and you may not be able to answer it: Why do you think that this government did not put anything in there with regard to legal aid?

Mr. Gurratan Singh: Thank you to the member from Brampton North, an amazing advocate for the constituents of Brampton North and someone who is fighting for greater justice across the board.

This indicates, actually, a very clear pattern from this government. From the get-go, this government has had an agenda to gut legal aid, to gut the systems that people rely on the most, and we're seeing this happen once again. It's the telltale sign of Conservative governments. They will gut systems that people rely on, create a crisis, and bring in an undemocratic or unjust solution to it because of the crisis that they created in the first place. That's what we're seeing right now. It's so clear that they've gutted legal aid. They've created a system in which people are now struggling and unable to access justice in an equitable manner, and instead of actually addressing that, they are front-loading a focus on digitization, which is important, but in the absence of legal aid, you create further inequity.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Durham.

Ms. Lindsey Park: I want to thank the member opposite for his speech, although it was hard to figure out how it connected to the bill in any way.

I want to go back to the digitization of wills. You're saying someone will not be able to—because someone doesn't have access to a phone, this will be a problem for them. It's just allowing it; it's not saying you have to do your will that way. So are you in favour of that or not? Pick your side.

Mr. Gurratan Singh: What I'm not in favour of is the fact that when you digitize a system that results in an individual being evicted having to call in on a pay phone and not being able to access these systems, because you've further digitized it, and you don't have the supports of legal aid, you create inequity, you create further injustice. That's what you're seeing here. When you provide a move towards digitization and you gut legal aid, that means people who don't have homes, who don't have access to Internet, who don't have access to smart phones are going

to be disadvantaged in their ability to access justice. And that's what we in the opposition have a problem with.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I have time for a final question. Member from Brampton Centre.

Ms. Sara Singh: Thank you to the member from Brampton East for that very telling portrayal of what this bill actually does to racialized communities.

Could you expand on why gutting legal aid, as this government tries to do time and time again, is going to disproportionately impact people in our community of Brampton, who are predominantly racialized, low-income folks, who don't have access to justice where they need it?

Mr. Gurratan Singh: I also want to thank and acknowledge the member for Brampton Centre, an amazing advocate for human rights and social justice across our city.

It's true; she articulated really well the fact that racialized communities, marginalized communities are the communities interacting with our legal aid system more so than communities that obviously have access to resources. When you have a bill that's called Accelerating Access to Justice Act and there is no mention of legal aid funding, and in the context in which this government has gutted legal aid funding, what you are ultimately creating is a situation that is going to further marginalize communities that don't have access to resources and create a further divide in our justice system.

Keep in mind that legal aid initially created a system that was one of equity, one of the fact that you could have people who had not the same means as another individual still access the same kind of justice. We have seen the system being eroded over the years, and it's something we stand against.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Ms. Lindsey Park: It's a pleasure to rise in the House today for second reading of Bill 245, Accelerating Access to Justice Act, 2021. This is a bill that represents another big step towards improving access to justice by modernizing complex and outdated processes in our justice system. The reforms presented in Bill 245 offer tangible steps towards an easier, faster and more accessible justice system across all communities in Ontario. It builds on Ontario's recent modernization breakthroughs in the justice system and presents urgent reforms to address delays in the resolution of legal disputes, both inside and outside of the courtroom.

Speaker, we've seen the widespread and devastating impacts of COVID-19 in Ontario for close to a year now, and the reforms proposed in this bill offer the supports and relief Ontarians so desperately need in the justice sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed nearly every aspect of life for Ontarians. As a government—it underscored the urgent need to change and modernize systems across every sector.

Today, we're going to talk about the justice sector. In the justice system, COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated the impacts of long-standing barriers and processes in need of development. This is why the

Ministry of the Attorney General has worked tirelessly with justice partners to expand the range of court and justice services offered online and to move these services closer to communities.

Speaker, the breakthrough modernization initiatives in this bill will transform how Ontarians access justice, including in more remote communities, such as rural, northern, francophone and Indigenous communities, where you often have to travel further for legal representation. It will break down barriers in the province's courts, tribunals, estates law and family law. This bill will bring about a more equitable system.

1630

Our government has faced new and unforeseen challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We've been called to be particularly innovative, resourceful and efficient in our decision-making and efforts to help Ontarians through these unprecedented times. It's no accident, Speaker, that this is the third justice bill before this Legislature in a year.

The pandemic rapidly shed light on areas in our justice system particularly in need of change. Our government has had the opportunity to target issues quickly and effectively and propose plans of action as we enter a new frontier of delivering justice.

With this bill, our government has responded to the unique challenges presented by the pandemic with practical plans for change and a vision for an easier, less costly and faster justice system for Ontarians across the province. It drives forward continuous efforts to accelerate justice modernization with concrete actions to remove barriers to justice in the system. Yesterday, we heard the Attorney General highlight much of the work he has been doing outside of this Legislature over the last year, in addition to the three bills in the Legislature, to move that forward. He's truly driving forward continuous efforts to accelerate justice modernization.

Our communities in all corners of the province demand and depend on a system that works for people. With its mandate rooted in accelerating access to justice and reducing regulatory burdens, this legislation will furnish a renewed and stronger foundation for our justice system, as Ontarians recover from the past year.

I'm proud to support the work of the Attorney General, in co-operation with our justice sector partners, in seeing this bill through to this stage.

I'd like to take a moment to thank our justice sector partners for their support, including both courts of justice and associations and organizations across the province that have supported proposed changes. It has been a team effort amidst a uniquely challenging time in pinpointing where Ontarians require change most to maximize the accessibility of justice services.

The continued support of stakeholders will be essential as we move to implement further reforms in the coming weeks and months. So many of these stakeholders have been key partners in the development of these proposals, and their hard work and strong support for these changes reflect our government's commitment to building stronger systems to support our communities. Like the Attorney

General, I'm grateful for all the ideas they've put forward and the feedback we've received.

We have heard unwavering support for continued reform, particularly over the past few months, and I can say—as I do when a new bill is introduced, I called around to some different stakeholders as soon as this bill was tabled and, really, they're amazed. They haven't seen this kind of action from the Ministry of the Attorney General, as far as legislation, in decades. Truly, you can look back; anyone can do the research for themselves and you'll see that. Forget what partisan hat you wear; lawyers from all sides are saying, "This is much needed, and we're so happy you are doing it"—and it's not only lawyers; it's front-line staff and business owners. We often talk to business owners about how our tribunals are working. We had a family law bill within the last year through the Legislature. We had a bill to modernize legal aid through this Legislature.

We're putting forward common-sense changes to Ontario's justice system. Stakeholders have joined us in voicing their support for a more accessible, responsive and straightforward system that we'll continue to modernize after the pandemic is over. This bill is a major step in that direction.

The Accelerating Access to Justice Act proposes amendments that would continue moving us forward as a province. If passed, the proposed changes would reduce the time and expense Ontarians spend waiting for access to court and alternative justice services.

Speaker, I want to turn to one of the proposed amendments in the act that supports the first pillar in this bill's mandate, which is accelerating access to justice. The proposed amendments to the Courts of Justice Act aim to accelerate access to justice by filling judicial vacancies more efficiently, while also promoting diversity among candidates and appointees. The amendments will improve the way the Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee provides the recommended candidates to the Attorney General. In particular, the committee would be required to provide the Attorney General with a list of six recommended candidates instead of the previously required two.

The Ontario Trial Lawyers Association endorses this change. The immediate past president said, "The Ontario Trial Lawyers Association (OTLA) thanks the Attorney General for his continued commitment to consult with interested legal organizations regarding issues of common concern with the justice system. We agree with the minister that the list of judicial candidates he can consider for appointment should be expanded to a minimum of six."

Speaker, the proposal would not change the composition of the Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee, but rather would change the process for selecting and appointing the three legal organization members of the committee. There will still be three lawyer members, but each member would be appointed by the Attorney General from a list of three candidates provided by each of the Law Society of Ontario, the Ontario Bar Association and the Federation of Ontario Law Associations, three major associations in our province.

The current process to appoint provincial judges is outdated and slow. This has created obstacles in filling judicial vacancies, resulting in delays for people waiting for their court date. If passed, the bill will notably reduce the time and expense associated with awaiting one's court date, as judicial vacancies will be filled faster, meaning people can have their matters heard before a judge faster. The proposed changes maintain current legislated qualifications for judicial appointments—that won't change—as announced in February 2020, but offer greater flexibility and transparency in how judicial vacancies are filled, in order to tackle the growing backlog, further exacerbated, we all know, I think, by the pandemic. We're proposing changes that would expand access to justice and support Ontario's recovery by allowing qualified candidates to be appointed faster.

Speaker, the amendments would also introduce an expedited recruitment process in circumstances where a recommendation was provided in the past 12 months for a vacancy in the same location and with the same requirements as a current vacancy. Rather than advertising the current vacancy all over again for literally the same location and the same vacancy, the committee would recommend the candidates from the list of those who were considered and deemed qualified from the previous similar vacancy—after the committee, of course, conducts some due diligence.

The changes would also include the requirement of—and I'm really proud of this element of the bill, Speaker. It will require the publication of diversity statistics of candidates at each stage of the process. This promotes more diverse appointments, enabling appointments that are a better reflection of Ontario's population. We still need to see more women appointed to the bench. We still need to see more diverse backgrounds in who hears matters in our courts every day. It's important that those people reflect the people of Ontario. I think this transparency will help. We'll now know how many women are applying for these vacancies. We have no idea right now. Is it a lot? Is it not a lot? Hopefully, we'll find out and be able to address what is a major barrier to women being appointed to the bench.

Changes will also support broader efforts to encourage more lawyers from different backgrounds to apply by moving the application process online and using electronic meetings and interviews as well, during the process, which, frankly, just hasn't been allowed to date. If you hear about all the paper that's required for this process, you'll be shocked. I don't know where they store all the paper, frankly, after it ends.

1640

Speaker, this initiative to fill the bench with qualified candidates in a prompt, practical manner will benefit Ontarians greatly. The proposals are aligned with greater transparency in judicial appointments. As the bench increasingly diversifies, the hope is that a broader range of candidates will also put their applications forward. To me, partnership with organizations is also important in this regard. As we start to see what some of the numbers are

around what types of members are applying from different communities, organizations can then help encourage their members to apply for vacancies. But we don't know how to fix the problem if we don't know what the problem is. Our government wanted to hear from and consult with diversity legal organizations throughout the appointment process, and this will help. It's through this collaboration that we can receive recommendations and advice as we form a bench that appropriately reflects Ontario's diverse population.

These proposed changes reflect valued feedback that we received from justice partners and lawyers. We didn't just dream this up.

Craig O'Brien, president of the County of Carleton Law Association, stated, "The County of Carleton Law Association appreciates the extensive consultations undertaken by the Attorney General towards improving the provincial judicial appointment process." And throughout our consultations, we welcomed ideas from the members of the opposition, I might add. "We particularly value the candour and openness shown by the Attorney General and his staff in the collective effort to improve the efficiency and transparency of the process, while ensuring that the independence of the Ontario judiciary is maintained. The CCLA notes that many aspects of our feedback have been incorporated into the Attorney General's proposals and are confident that the modernized provincial judicial appointment process will help to maintain the public's trust in the Ontario judiciary." And we know how valuable that trust is, as we look to examples around the world.

Speaker, I'd like to turn now to the modernization efforts in the area of estates presented in this bill. I want to speak specifically about the changes that will benefit seniors who may enter predatory marriages and often without realizing they are. It will also benefit separated spouses who may forget to change their will to reflect their new family arrangement.

Under the current law—and I always find people are surprised by this rule. Before I was elected and while elected, I've heard this frequently. Currently, if you have a will and get married, your will is automatically revoked upon marriage. Whatever you paid for it, it doesn't matter. It's not an effective document anymore. So if a couple walks into a lawyer's office to make a will because they plan to get married, you actually have to draft up a special version of a will. It's known as a will in the contemplation of marriage. I know; no one has heard of it until they come into the lawyer's office. But that's the way the law is written now. That's so that the will will still be in effect the day after your marriage and while you're on your honeymoon. We're fixing this confusing rule. Bill 245 would repeal section 16 of the Succession Law Reform Act, which is where this rule comes from, which automatically revokes a will upon marriage. This will help to address the issue of predatory marriages, among other positive effects. With this change—and I think this is important—it will be an intentional choice, when you're in a serious relationship, when and how you change your

will, perhaps before marriage, or if you are deciding not to get married but you're purchasing major assets together; if you're purchasing a car, your first home, or another major asset with your significant other. Maybe both your names are on the title of the new asset.

Under these proposed reforms, inheritance to married spouses who are separated would also be eliminated in the same way that divorced spouses do not inherit. It's a bit of another strange rule, but if you officially get divorced, then it's understood that you probably didn't mean for your will that you made while you were married to apply, and so your will automatically doesn't apply. But if you separate and never actually get divorced or you never were married and separate, there's no way that the will changes. I often had people come into my office years after they had separated from a significant other—and had something terrible happened in that intervening period, they would be in trouble and their children would be in trouble, and have someone in the way of what they really deserve and what the person who has passed away intended to provide for them. This is why we're extending section 17 of the Succession Law Reform Act.

Another major change to help the courts respond to the changing circumstances in which people are doing wills: The bill proposes granting courts the authority to validate wills that do not precisely meet the legislated formalities of a will. Currently, there is a very strict—it's called a strict compliance regime, very technical requirements when you do your will. It's deemed invalid if you did not meet those requirements. This is why we had people running around, sticking wills through car windows in the middle of the pandemic—so they could be together, but still properly meet these formal requirements. With the proposed change, we're building in a new power for the courts to be able to validate wills that were not properly executed. Of course, a judge will do his due diligence and ask for evidence of what the person intended and make sure that it was, in fact, the intention of the person. But this is a new power that the courts don't currently have.

These are practical changes that will arm Ontarians with tools to deal with their estate matters in a flexible way that aligns with common sense. This builds on some of the things we did in our Smarter and Stronger Justice Act to simplify small estates.

Speaker, in the interests of time, I'm just going to wrap up. But I did want to mention another change we're making: renaming "case management masters" as "associate judges." We think this keeps up with the times. It's actually something that came right from case management masters. They wanted the change. They recognized that it was no longer appropriate, really, to be called a "master" in the courtroom in the 21st century. So I think that's another important part of the bill.

I focused on the areas in the bill that I think are most important, but there are lots of really good things in this bill.

I look forward to the Q&A and answering the questions of the opposition and my colleagues.

I just want to say that our government will continue to show commitment to innovation and collaboration in achieving increased access to justice. We'll continue on that path. So I urge all members to join me in supporting a modernized, more accessible justice system for Ontario.

I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: First of all, I'd like to thank the member for what I thought was a very interesting and informative part of her debate. I listened to pretty well all of it.

I don't agree, as a lot of our colleagues on this side don't agree, with some of the sections of the bill, one in particular—and this is going to be my question.

Tribunals, we'll both agree, are important. Tribunals are where people go in order to be able to deal with the legalities of allowing something to go forward or not to go forward. You're giving a combination of the right for the proponent to move to dismiss a particular request by somebody to go to the tribunal, then you're removing the right to appeal from the individual who is trying to appeal. As we know, the right to appeal—you have to have a judicial review, which is a pretty high threshold, to even get one of those to be successful. Why would you do that in light of taking away the right of individuals to be able to appeal a decision to get in front of a tribunal to deal with issues that probably need to be dealt with?

Ms. Lindsey Park: Yes, we're consolidating our land tribunals in the province of Ontario, but that will not reduce or eliminate any existing rights to hearings or to appeals. If you look in the bill, section 24 talks about appeals specifically. I think that's important to clarify. We are not taking away anyone's rights to hearings. If they had, under another piece of legislation, that right as of today, this day we're standing here, that right to a hearing continues and that right to appeal continues.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question?

Mr. Dave Smith: I was listening intently. One thing really jumped out at me: In Canada, the statistic is that 40% of marriages end in divorce. Many of those divorced people have children, and many of those divorced people remarry. Effectively, what you're saying then is, under the current legislation, when someone remarries, they disinherit their children.

1650

Why would we ever have something that would punish children because people remarry, and why would there be any objection to us fixing that so children don't have that kind of a disadvantage?

Ms. Lindsey Park: I want to clarify that the scenario I was speaking about is when someone does not actually get a divorce, perhaps because they were never married or because they separated and never actually go and get that final document. That's the scenario we're talking about. In that intervening period, when people have separated but they've not actually gotten a divorce, there's this will that hangs out there, probably that they did just after they were

first married or when they bought a house, that now really doesn't seem to apply to their circumstances, but they've forgotten to get it updated. This will add common sense to the system that Ontarians can understand.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question?

Mr. Kevin Yarde: I want to thank the member for her speech on the Accelerating Access to Justice Act, Bill 245.

My question is one that I keep bringing up, and I really would like to get an answer. I don't seem to be getting an answer from the government—talking about legal aid. I'm sure you must have had recommendations and spoken to different stakeholders prior to putting forward this bill. Why is it that in terms of legal aid, which is very important in Ontario, which is very important in my riding, where a lot of disadvantaged minorities and underprivileged people use legal aid—I want to know why, in this bill, there's nothing in there with regard to access to justice for legal aid. Can you finally maybe give us an answer as to why—after, I assume, like I said, you spoke to some stakeholders and they may have made recommendations to you—it was not put in the bill?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Let's see if we can get an answer.

Ms. Lindsey Park: I want to be clear: We have been working, since we formed the government, to modernize legal aid. We brought a full bill on that topic through the Legislature. We're committed to increasing access to justice in the province of Ontario, and that will continue with every bill we bring through this Legislature.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Perth–Wellington.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: I listened intently to the member from Durham's speech. I was certainly interested, too, in the wills—she talked about wills; I don't know this. I'm glad I only have one significant other. As of February 3, we were together for 48 years. So it has been quite a while.

Anyway, our government has pushed forward to modernize the justice system and update many statutes that haven't been updated for decades. This is especially true in the estates sector, which almost all Ontarians interact with in some way when seeking to create a will or settle the affairs of a relative.

Can the member speak to some of these proposed changes to the estates sector in this legislation, and especially how the proposed changes to the Succession Law Reform Act will enhance protections for Ontarians and end discriminatory practices?

Ms. Lindsey Park: I spent a good amount of my speech going through—there's a lot there, but I'll try to give the high level.

The proposed legislation will make several changes that will end discriminatory and outdated provisions in the Succession Law Reform Act. One of those changes being proposed is to address what's commonly called "predatory marriages" by revoking statutory sections that will automatically make wills invalid when someone gets married. This will help protect those who get married by

allowing their existing will, if they have one, to remain valid upon marriage. I think the member for Peterborough–Kawartha was perhaps talking about that aspect of it. I think it's important that when you get remarried later in life, it's an intentional choice to change your will. We're just making sure that, with these changes, people have that opportunity.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Waterloo.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Of course, I also listened to the member from Durham.

When the Attorney General first raised this bill back in November, a number of legal experts, including Peter Russell, said that there were legitimate concerns that this would open up the process to political inference. He told the Globe at the time, "They want a bunch of names so they can look down and find a nice soulmate Tory."

We have raised very legitimate concerns that this process further politicizes the appointment of judges and creates a system that is built on patronage. When there is a perception of political interference, this actually undermines the very base of confidence in our judicial system. Do you not share any of those concerns?

Ms. Lindsey Park: I think the Attorney General is to be commended. He has consulted for, I think, almost an entire year. There was an early proposal that was slightly different from this one; it has been modified, taking into consideration the very concerns that were raised by some.

We're committed to an impartial and independent judiciary in this province. We remain committed to that and to appointing qualified candidates as quickly as we can to enhance access to justice.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for a final question.

Mr. Lorne Coe: I'm pleased to be able to ask a question of my colleague from Durham, one of the adjoining ridings.

The MPP for Durham spoke about case management masters. Currently, some of the provincially appointed judicial officers hold that title, "case management master," which has been used for decades by the legal community. In the proposed legislation, as you heard earlier, we changed that.

Can my colleague from Durham provide some more information on the reasons behind this long-overdue change?

Ms. Lindsey Park: We were just speaking about how it's important that Ontarians have confidence in an impartial and an independent judiciary. Part of that is being responsive when communities highlight, as they did in this case, that the word "master" is no longer appropriate and, some have said, is racially insensitive. Our government has listened to these stakeholders, and we're proposing to remove this title. We think a more appropriate title is "associate judge." People will understand that they still have the power to make the decisions that they have, but it will be more appropriate and reflective of the 21st century.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We don't have time for further questions at this point, but we do have time for further debate.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I am very pleased to stand on behalf of the fine folks from Oshawa and bring their voice and my own to this debate. We're debating government bill 245, named the Accelerating Access to Justice Act. We've had some interesting conversations so far in this space. I am going to raise a few flags and concerns brought to my office from the folks who might avail themselves of legal aid, who have found themselves actually quite challenged because of either the cuts or challenges because of the pandemic, which we know and have heard have challenged many folks to be able to access the services and justice that they deserve.

First, I'd like to commend my colleague from Brampton East, who serves the official opposition as the critic for the Attorney General. I want to read one of his quotes that he eloquently offered yesterday in the House. I said it would set off the debate nicely. He said, "These halls have an opportunity to either create laws that are regressive, create laws that lack equity, that lack justice, or create laws that create justice. We can either make a decision to bring in different forms of legislation that will create more liberty and more freedom, or less liberty. We can create legislation that can liberate or create legislation that can keep people within either economic or social repression or bondage or other forms of states that are not ideal for living their ideal lives." I liked that. It resonated, and it made me think of a lot of my neighbours in Oshawa. There are a lot of folks in Oshawa, and across many of our communities, who are living on the margins, who are doing their darndest—pandemic aside, which has exacerbated their needs—but who do deserve many things, including fair and unencumbered access to justice.

One of the things that I'd like to start talking about is a big part of this government legislation, which is a big piece of legislation. It's 75 pages. It's 11 schedules. Most of those schedules I don't have flags or comments on—but there are some pieces in there.

1700

One of the big pushes from this government, and we see it across the board, is digitization. Many of us are appreciating the new and glorious ways of communicating. It is remarkable that I can play virtual board games with my family who lives across the province. There are all sorts of cool things we've discovered during the pandemic that technology has afforded us the opportunity to do. However, there are many people who live on the margins and many people we know and who are our neighbours and many the official opposition members serve in their community offices—or virtually, right now, or on the phone—who do not have access to the tools that they would need to avail themselves of these new justice tools.

While we're putting technology at the forefront, I want to share something that comes to me from the Durham Community Legal Clinic. I had reached out to them and, man, do I ever appreciate the work that they do. Our office has them on speed dial. Like many of us, the agencies in

our communities do unbelievable heavy lifting and caring—very remarkable work. This is Access to Justice Doesn't End Online: "In 2019, the Durham Community Legal Clinic (DCLC), whose head office is in Oshawa, launched the Durham Access to Justice Hub, an interagency and innovative initiative to promote access to justice. However, soon after this, the province of Ontario imposed cuts of \$133 million to Legal Aid Ontario, which sent the entire clinic system into a tailspin. Although DCLC effectively observed only about 1% of a cut on their total budget, the effects were devastating given the thin budgets that clinics operate on, and the interdependence of clinics on others in the system who had far deeper cuts imposed on them.

"Despite these challenges, DCLC was well-prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic, given that it was already looking into improved workplace processes and use of technology. Within days, the clinic was serving clients remotely, and able to appear at hearings virtually. However, there were some significant limitations to the services that the clinic could provide.

"Although we assume that all Ontarians have easy access to the Internet, we know for some low-income residents that's simply not the case," said Omar Ha-Redeye, executive director of DCLC. "Remote-based access to legal services to some of those most vulnerable members of our society is still elusive, even with improvements to process to our legal system."

"Given the widespread health concerns during the pandemic, DCLC supported the creation of changes for small estates in Ontario, which was announced on Feb. 12, 2021. These changes make it easier for low-income Ontarians to access small estates in their families. The changes that were introduced in Bill 161 to allow for remote notarizations and commissioning also meant that these services could be provided over a broader geographic area. Further amendments in Bill 245 enhance the remote provision of services.

"DCLC implemented two significant technological changes during this period ... an automated will-creation system to reduce the administrative burden in creating wills, and ... a blockchain-based identity verification system useful in preventing fraud and abuse. However, for many low-income Ontarians with limited Internet access, this simply isn't enough.

"Community legal clinics are strategically situated across the province, and already provide effective and efficient legal services to their communities," said Ha-Redeye. "The province could improve service delivery further by improving stable and increased funding to clinics, and allowing them to play a large role in our justice system."

"Ha-Redeye points out that for many low-income Ontarians, these remote-based services and virtual hearings still create a significant barrier for accessing the justice system. Many of them would be willing to attend a clinic in order to participate in their legal proceedings, but the clinics require greater provincial support for them to do so."

Basically, Speaker, all of that is to say that Bill 245 is not taking particular note of the needs of low-income Ontarians. There are barriers that are being created here. I will admit that there's some streamlining happening. There are some different opportunities. However, if you're letting folks fall further through those gaps and not taking that into consideration, you are doing them a disservice and you are accelerating their fall away from the justice system, not allowing them to access.

Also, this is on the heels of the fact that the changes to the Residential Tenancies Act in 2020 allow for expedited evictions without a hearing, in certain circumstances. The resulting flood of evictions have not only increased the risk of homelessness in Ontario, but they've also strained even further the resources of these community-based legal clinics. This government hears it all the time—and then some of the members on the other side say that we're reaching. We're reaching out to our community. That's where we're reaching. I would recommend that all folks do the same thing, to hear about what these decisions will actually do and how they will affect people in their communities.

Speaker, we've talked about the Judicial Appointments Advisory Committee. We've talked about the fact that while this is a modified—I'm going to use the term "modified"—proposal to what had originally come before us, there are still questions around that. That is something that different stakeholders have different opinions on, so we'll watch. I hope that it does lead to the diversity that the government has talked about. I hope that we do not see that there is the potential for partisanship or politicization.

That's schedule 3.

While I listened to the member from Durham and was actually quite interested to learn a bit about the rules around marriage and wills and whatnot, I'm not going to go further into that. I found that interesting enough. But I will speak a little bit about schedules 8 and 9.

I think the general understanding, like I said before—and this speaks, again, to the digitization. The broader world will appreciate different technological tools. However, while it may benefit many, it is a reality that many low-income Ontarians don't have that same access to Internet or remote technology. They may effectively be prevented from accessing those legal tools. So unless there is that help from local community legal clinics, they're on their own. Those community legal clinics have to be funded; they have to be prioritized, especially if you're going to download all of this stuff onto them. The legal clinics that currently have video conference technology or capability are going to bear the brunt of this. They're going to have everyone turning to them, and I'll get to that in a second.

Speaker, I want to share—the names have been changed, so her name is not really Emily, but for all intents and purposes, I will use the name Emily. Emily is a 72-year-old woman who was recently widowed. Her spouse died in 2019, not long before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. She had a working life and has had health concerns and is now on the ODSP benefit program. At the end of the month, there is not too much left over.

However, during the pandemic, Emily was concerned that her three grandkids may not receive her inheritance if anything were to happen to her. She had not made a will. She had a bit of money saved and she thought it might be helpful to her grandkids down the road. She does not know how to make a will and cannot afford a lawyer based on her limited means. She's also very concerned that if she sees a lawyer, the amount of money that she has saved would be spent on the lawyer instead.

So back in December, she reached out to our local Durham Community Legal Clinic to see if she could get some help. They were able to, despite the funding cuts that had been imposed by the provincial government—and they had originally had to stop providing wills. They had resumed some of the services with help from some of these technological tools. For Emily, these are tools that actually would have been awesome. They would have been very helpful for her. They could have assisted her, but she didn't have any Internet at home. Rather than trying to do the will herself, she was able to come into the clinic in person, she could receive assistance—totally socially distanced—and was served by the clinic staff. Fortunately, she was able to get a will. She was able to leave the money for her three grandchildren and also put into place a power of attorney.

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However, the point is that the changes in Bill 245 would not be enough for Emily, because Emily still needed more personalized services in order to arrange her affairs and we have to ensure that folks like Emily—and there are so many folks out there who don't have access to reliable Internet, can't afford a lawyer or what have you—are still going to be able to access the services and supports of a community legal clinic. Again, as we've heard over and over, in this bill called the Accelerating Access to Justice Act, there is no mention of legal clinics—certainly no funding. There isn't support in this bill.

Speaker, I'm going to delve a bit into schedule 6, because I have the opportunity to serve the official opposition—really, I have the opportunity to serve the province—as the official opposition critic for infrastructure, transportation and highways. I found Bill 245, schedule 6, quite interesting because it fits with what we've seen from the Conservative agenda of “developers first,” and I wanted to raise some issues around the amalgamation and the tribunals.

First of all, the Canadian Environmental Law Association has said that a better name for schedule 6 would be the “denial of access to justice act,” which tells you where I'm going with this. It enacts the Ontario Land Tribunal Act, which merges five tribunals within the current Ontario Land Tribunals cluster into a single tribunal called the Ontario Land Tribunal. The ones being merged are the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal, the Environmental Review Tribunal, the Mining and Lands Tribunal, the Conservation Review Board and the Board of Negotiation.

I tell you that to tell you this: You have a lot of experts. You've got a lot of folks who have different realms of expertise. The folks who deal with local planning and land

transfer know what they're doing, and that is their area of expertise. The folks who deal with environmental review issues are experts in that area. So I worry that if you're going to have this big amalgamated tribunal, we're going to lose some of that expertise. Might makes right, so to speak. If you're going to have that many cooks in the kitchen, how long will it be before the environmental voices are no longer in that kitchen? It's a real question, and it's a very real concern.

By the way, as of February 19—and I would love the government to stand and say, “Don't worry. We've got this covered,” but as of February 19, this hadn't been reported to the—what am I trying to say? It hadn't yet gone before the Environmental Bill of Rights—

Ms. Catherine Fife: The EBR.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you. It hadn't been reported yet, so that's a shame. Hopefully that'll be remedied.

Speaker, I have a couple of concerns that are really nitty-gritty here, but I'm going to get them on the record, and again, I'd love for someone to explain.

This amalgamated tribunal—and we know how important tribunals are. They're supposed to be faster, more efficient. They're oftentimes where people interface with the legal system and they go to specific tribunals with very specific issues.

But in this case, the tribunal may dismiss a proceeding without a hearing if the tribunal believes the proceeding has no reasonable prospect of success. So, does that mean the person with the most money in the game wins? If you've got a big corporate body and you've got some neighbour who says, “Hey, I don't want this developer to get away with this,” or “I have a concern with this,” and the developer's got the bigger pockets, does that mean that they win, since now it's based on “no reasonable prospect of success”? Because my understanding is that currently it only allows these kinds of dismissals for proceedings outside the tribunal's jurisdiction or that are frivolous, vexatious or commenced in bad faith.

Also, Bill 245—and I want to know where the accountability is here—removes the right to a judicial review or an appeal when the tribunal breaks its own rules or misuses its discretion—gosh, I hope it wouldn't do that, Speaker—unless someone can show that the non-compliance caused a substantial wrong. It removes the right to a judicial review or an appeal when the tribunal breaks its own rules or misuses its discretion. So accountability would be where, under the couch cushions? I don't like that; I don't trust that.

Some housekeeping points—okay, so this one I read as “no more due diligence,” but Speaker, you're welcome, if you'd like, to tell me what you think: It also repeals certain statutory duties and requirements that currently apply to the Board of Negotiation or the LPAT under sections 27 to 29, including the mandatory inspection of land being expropriated. So no longer do we need a mandatory inspection of land being expropriated. No longer do we need timelines for the service of appraisal reports. No longer do we require a written record of oral

proceedings—could you imagine if they pulled that in this House, that we don't really need Hansard anymore?—the requirement of written reasons for decisions and the authority to publish reports of significant decisions.

Am I reading that correctly? No more due diligence and no more written record required? No more transparency and accountability? Man, there's so much to say, and I'm watching the clock and realizing that I'm out of time. But again, you've got a whole agenda that we have seen puts developers at the centre of the decision-making in this province, with limited consultation and participation, politicized land use decisions, violations of the Environmental Bill of Rights. All of this is what we have seen to this point, and this is something that is just tucked in this bill. Yes, sure, there is stuff in here that's not the worst; some things seem to be good. However, we do have things I don't know how we overcome—unless you take them out and fix them, so let me know if you're planning to do that.

Again, what we need, Speaker, is a real improvement to accessing justice. We need to make sure that people are at the centre of this. It is people who deserve access to justice. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions.

Ms. Donna Skelly: When the proposal to allow virtual commissioning and notarization of documents was first put forward back in Bill 161, the opposition voted against it, even though it would improve access to justice for Ontarians. This is something the opposition often speaks about, but rarely do they ever actually support it.

Making the emergency order on virtual witnessing of wills and powers of attorney permanent through legislation would make Ontario a leader in Canada in this field by allowing hard-working Ontarians to save the time and expense of a trip to the lawyer's office. Will the member support increasing access to justice for Ontarians, particularly those living outside of urban centres, who have access to fewer law offices?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: As I had read from the Durham Community Legal Clinic, I spoke about Bill 161. I'm grateful that the member was paying close attention to that. However, I will say that what I've said clearly is that while many people are going to applaud and be grateful for and utilize the technology and the technological tools, you're leaving folks out. There are gaps that are being created, and the legal clinics are saying this. If we don't put the funding in to support the legal clinics—who are going to be at the front lines of this; they're going to bear the brunt of this. Are you increasing the money that will go towards the staffing costs of those clinics? Are you helping them to pay for the computers? Where's the money coming from to support the legal clinics to do this work, to make this system work for everyone?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question?

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Mr. Peter Tabuns: Speaker, it's a pleasure to have chance to ask this question.

To the member from Oshawa: You talked about people who are going to have difficulty with a new digitized or a more digitized justice system. You talked about their lack of access to the technology, the equipment and perhaps even the knowledge. Could you expand on why you see this as such a substantial problem and what in fact the government could do to address it, if it was serious about making sure that everyone had adequate access to the justice system?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Oshawa to respond.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I appreciate that a lot because I think that as the government is downloading this responsibility on to the front lines, in this case, the legal clinics, some things to factor in may be dehumanizing for clients. It's easier for adjudicators to dismiss clients without meeting with them face to face. It may become more difficult to get those in-person hearings if the default is video or telephone hearings. There's going to be an increased need for staffing because more people will turn to this. I think that the requirements for folks in terms of computer, access to technology—is this going to happen at libraries if it can't happen at clinics? What about bad weather or a holiday when the clinic is closed? What are people to do and what do those structures and supports look like?

I think the positive about more people perhaps with disabilities who wouldn't be able to access a clinic—there are some positive things, but if you don't fund it—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Answer, please.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: —if the government doesn't structure it properly, we're going to have people further marginalized and left to do this on their own without the supports if they cannot work with the legal clinics. That wasn't mentioned. Clinics weren't mentioned in the bill—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. The next question?

Mr. David Piccini: Thank you, Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for her speech.

My question is specifically on a transparency piece. Currently, the JAAC doesn't publish diversity statistics. I know that the application form does allow the applicant to self-identify, which we know is already in that application form, and under the Accelerating Access to Justice Act it proposes making the JAAC mandatory, that they publish detailed diversity statistics. I think that by collecting and reviewing these statistics, we'll have a chance to analyze, improve and promote diversity on our bench.

My question to the member opposite is, will the member opposite support this measure in the bill, this added transparency and this important step forward for increased diversity on our bench?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Back to the member from Oshawa.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Thank you very much. We have talked about this back and forth around the room. I acknowledge that there was an earlier proposal that, as the members across have said, the Attorney General has

brought back a different version. My fingers crossed that it does indeed what this government has said, because when we look around the community, we do recognize that we need more folks on the bench, we need more folks in the justice system who reflect the realities of the communities they serve.

So, if more diversity comes from this change, we will be appreciative of that. However, if more partisan or politicization comes from this, we've got a problem. We've heard from different stakeholders the concern of where we started versus where we are now. We still have a lot of people watching and waiting and hoping that it does indeed lead to diversity and not to increased politicization, which I wouldn't put past this government, frankly.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. The next question?

Mr. Kevin Yarde: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was going to ask a question about land tribunals, but I want to stick with regard to legal aid because I'm still not getting an answer from the government. I asked them questions about legal aid and they would give me an answer which would be surrounded in legalese or they just wouldn't answer the question. So I'm not sure what they have against legal aid and legal aid clinics.

But my question to my colleague the member: As we know, the legal aid system in Ontario is the bedrock of the justice system. Many low-income people—even people in my riding of Brampton North—access the legal aid clinic. So I'm certain that this government, when they were putting forth proposals, they must have received recommendations and advice from stakeholders.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): What is your question, please?

Mr. Kevin Yarde: So my question to the member is, why do you think that this bill doesn't address anything with regard to legal aid?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I don't know. I don't, and this is the thing: We've talked in this room about legal aid and the legal clinics, and splitting hairs about where it's being cut, where the cuts are being felt. The cuts are being felt across communities, and that's the bottom line. The Durham Community Legal Clinic, as they said in their own statement, only suffered about 1%, but because they deal with other clinics that lost more—I mean, everybody is feeling the pressure.

So every opportunity—I mean, the member across said that this is the third justice bill that has come before this House. Well, I want to see legal aid. I want to see funding. If we're going to download all of this responsibility to them, where is the support for them? Because you have to appreciate what they do. Everybody's office, including mine, including yours, including theirs, uses legal aid on a regular basis to support the constituents who we all say we care so much about, and I hope do.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Ms. Lindsey Park: I just want to understand what the member opposite is referring to when she says we're

downloading responsibility on legal aid clinics. There's nothing in the bill that does that. We're simply allowing those who want to have someone who can attend virtually witness the execution of their will—to allow for that, if they want. If they want the person there in person, that's allowed too. So are you in favour of the proposal, or are you against the proposal?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: When you've got folks who are in the margins, who we've already talked about at length on this side, who will not be able to avail themselves of technological tools, you're not giving them an additional opportunity.

The member opposite has said that there is a choice for other people. When I'm talking about downloading the workload onto the legal clinics, that's also their perception. If we're asking the legal clinics how they feel about this, there is an additional amount of work that's going to come to them, because more people are probably going to make this choice. If the legal clinics who have access to the virtual conferencing software or whatnot, the tools that they have—they're going to be doing a lot of this work, and there isn't money that goes with it to staff them, for the costs for setting up computer systems, or cleaning, or responding to questions, or the legal staff that will go with this.

You're bringing in a bill that has a truckload of changes. Specifically, if it's schedules 8 and 9, who's going to answer the phone when everybody wants to know more? Give them more resources. Talk to them. Find out what they need.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We don't have time for another question on this one, so we have further debate.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I just want to give forewarning that a portion of my remarks is going to be in French, even though I tried to balance it out, in case anyone is interested in either learning a bit of French or listening to what I have to say.

Je suis heureuse de discuter du projet de loi 245 aujourd'hui, car il contient une mesure positive qui, je l'espère, indique une volonté du gouvernement et un intérêt de poursuivre dans cette lancée. Je pense que nous sommes tous d'accord que promouvoir l'accès à la justice est extrêmement important pour tous les Ontariens et les Ontariennes, et qu'apporter des réformes législatives peut en effet nous permettre d'accélérer l'accès à la justice, ce qui améliorerait en même temps l'expérience des justiciables.

Our justice system in Ontario compares very well to others in many respects. However, the significant costs of retaining legal counsel, reduced legal aid funding and the lack of French-language services for Franco-Ontarians have continued to present significant barriers. For a large number of ordinary Ontarians, the justice system is still too expensive and too slow to provide them with the relief that they are seeking. Many people decide in advance that the costs, delays and complexities of a lawsuit, or even just getting legal advice, are so overwhelming that they should not even bother to seek recourse in the court system. So

they simply walk away from their rights. This is bad for the integrity of the justice system and bad for Ontarians, who in many instances are discouraged from seeking recourse against bad actors. That's why we need to continue to improve access to justice for all Ontarians, and Bill 245 is a step in the right direction.

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Je suis donc très encouragée par la proposition contenue à l'annexe 3 de ce projet de loi qui élargit le droit des demandeurs de déposer des documents en français dans tous les tribunaux partout en Ontario. Avec l'ajout de pouvoir demander la traduction des documents déposés ainsi que des décisions judiciaires, cette modification constitue une avancée appréciable, et appréciée des francophones. Comme ce changement donne aux Franco-Ontariens la possibilité d'exercer leurs droits dans leur langue dès le début des poursuites judiciaires, l'amélioration est bienvenue puisqu'elle rend l'accès au système de justice plus simple et plus inclusif.

Améliorer l'accès à la justice en français est une de mes priorités depuis très longtemps. Je suis donc en faveur de ces changements, mais encore faut-il que ça ne s'arrête pas là. Car pour que ces changements aient un impact positif concret sur l'accès à la justice pour les francophones, il est nécessaire de se donner les moyens de les mettre véritablement en oeuvre. Les justiciables ont déjà la possibilité de demander que leur cause soit entendue par un juge bilingue. Cependant, en pratique, les délais pour être entendu en français sont si long que le justiciable soit décide de procéder en anglais, soit le délai équivaut à un déni de justice. Il en va de même pour la traduction des décisions. Si les ressources adéquates pour le service de traduction ne sont pas allouées, l'offre ne vaut pas grand-chose.

Il sera donc important de s'assurer que l'effort pour recruter des membres bilingues soit une priorité soutenue du gouvernement et que les ressources nécessaires soient déployées. Faute de quoi, les changements proposés n'auront pas l'impact positif souhaité.

I am very encouraged by the proposal contained in schedule 3 of this bill which broadens the rights of applicants to file documents in French in all courts throughout Ontario. With the addition of being able to request a translation of documents filed as well as judicial decisions, this modification constitutes a significant step forward. As this change gives Franco-Ontarians the opportunity to exercise their rights in their language from the outset of legal proceedings, this is a welcome improvement since it makes access to the justice system simpler and more inclusive.

Improving access to justice in French has been one of my priorities for a long time, so I am in favour of these changes. But it can't stop there, because for these changes to have a concrete, positive impact on the access to justice for francophones, it is necessary to equip ourselves with the means to truly implement them.

The litigants already have the possibility to request that their case be heard by a bilingual judge. However, in practice, the deadlines to be heard in French can be so long

that the litigant either decides to proceed in English, or the delay is equivalent to a denial of justice.

The same goes for translation of decisions. If adequate resources are not allocated for the translation services, the offer will be meaningless. It will therefore be important to ensure that the effort to recruit bilingual members is a sustained government priority. Otherwise, the proposed changes will not have the desired positive impact. I would also ask that we broaden schedule 3 to improve the French-language services available at tribunal proceedings in Ontario, to ensure consistency in our improvement of francophone access to justice.

De plus, comme l'a souligné Anne Levesque, professeure adjointe de droit à l'Université d'Ottawa, ce changement est un gain marginal pour les francophones les plus vulnérables de l'Ontario, notamment pour ceux qui se heurtent à un risque d'être expulsés de leur logement, qui demandent des avantages sociaux ou qui sont victimes de discrimination.

Les francophones font face à des délais sérieux devant les tribunaux administratifs, comme le Tribunal des droits de la personne, en raison du manque de nomination de membres francophones.

Sans des normes plus élevées pour l'inclusion et l'accessibilité du français à tous les points du système, l'annexe 3 n'est qu'un petit pas. En juin de l'année dernière, la Cour suprême du Canada a rendu une décision importante qui affirme que l'éducation en français est un droit protégé par la Charte canadienne des droits et libertés. La Cour suprême a décrit le droit à l'éducation comme la clé qui ouvre la voûte de tous les autres droits linguistiques, ce qui veut dire à toute fin pratique que les droits fondamentaux comme l'accès à la justice et aux soins de santé sont également visés. Il s'agissait d'une validation extrêmement importante des droits des francophones partout au Canada.

Bien que l'annexe 3 de ce projet de loi soit un gain pour les francophones, je ne peux m'empêcher de rappeler à cette Chambre que ce gouvernement a également pris du recul dans la défense des droits des francophones dans le domaine de l'accès à la justice.

Également en juin de l'année dernière, plusieurs personnes de partout en Ontario, incluant moi-même, ont exprimé nos préoccupations concernant le projet de loi 161, qui a réduit l'accès à l'aide juridique pour les francophones et les personnes vulnérables. Bien qu'il ait été prétendu qu'il était un gain pour les francophones, en réalité, l'affaiblissement du rôle des conseils d'administration des cliniques d'aide juridique à déterminer les besoins juridiques des communautés a enlevé des mécanismes aux cliniques qui leur permettent d'être redevables envers les communautés francophones. De plus, en réduisant le champ de pratique des cliniques d'aide juridique, on ignore l'importance du droit à l'éducation pour les minorités francophones.

L'article 125 de la Loi sur les tribunaux judiciaires indique : « Les langues officielles des tribunaux de l'Ontario sont le français et l'anglais. »

Si ce gouvernement cherche vraiment à améliorer la norme d'accessibilité linguistique dans notre système de justice, il doit avoir une vue d'ensemble.

If this government truly seeks to improve the standard of language accessibility in our justice system, it needs to look at the whole picture.

I will conclude by saying that overall, I am glad that this government is proposing some thoughtful changes to improve access to justice for Ontarians. I do, however, believe that it's important that we begin a conversation about where we can be doing more to ensure that accessing justice is attainable and convenient for all Ontarians, working together to ensure that this bill can realize its full potential. I look forward to continuing the work we will do on this.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We'll start off our round of questions with the member from Whitby.

Mr. Lorne Coe: The member from Ottawa–Vanier spent part of her presentation talking about access to justice en français. I would like to share a quote with you, and then it will lead to my question, Speaker.

The quote is from Éliane Lachaine from the Ontario Trial Lawyers Association. She had this to say:

“The Ontario Trial Lawyers Association ... welcomes the expansion of French-language services to all court-houses and for all judicial matters in Ontario. French-speaking accident victims will have greater access to justice as they are no longer required to pay for translation services.

“This is an important step for all francophones in Ontario.”

Will the member from Ottawa–Vanier, through you, Speaker, stand with our government and support long-overdue changes for the francophone community and justice here in Ontario?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I do appreciate the question. I think I have indicated very clearly that I'm in support of those changes. Anything we can do to improve access to justice for francophones needs to be applauded. I'm glad the government is moving forward in that direction.

What I've said, though, is that we need to make sure that whatever policy we put forward, whatever legislative change we bring, we need to ensure that we put the resources forward to be able to implement these measures in an efficient manner. It's not sufficient to say in the bill that will become law, “We support the francophones; we'll give you the services” if, in fact, the services are not available. This requires meaningful and sustained effort to make sure that the francophones who will deliver those services are there.

Thank you for the question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Waterloo.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thanks to the member from Ottawa–Vanier. For us, schedule 6 is very problematic in this piece of legislation. This schedule provides the tribunal with expanded powers to dismiss a matter without hearing. Schedule 6 is potentially very harmful to accessing justice for Ontarians. The bedrock justification

for having tribunals is that they are meant to be faster, cheaper and more expert than courts. This schedule is a major step backwards on all three of these grounds for 100,000-plus Ontarians who appear before tribunals every year.

I ask the member from Ottawa–Vanier, is this not a significant enough measure in this piece of legislation that causes enough concern for you and your members to not support it going forward?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you for the question. I think you raised a very important point. I'd be very interested in hearing from the stakeholders who were consulted about the practical effects of this provision that is proposed. You know that there has been a significant backlog in access to justice, and speeding up the process to access to justice is also a good way of improving access to justice.

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I don't pretend to know all the answers, but I would like to know the real impact that this will have on access to justice and whether it will reduce the time for access to justice without denying the rights of people to have access to the tribunals.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Ms. Donna Skelly: It's always a pleasure to hear from the member from Ottawa–Vanier, who is so interested with working with the government on this side of the House on issues such as this. I was pleased to hear that you do support the proposed changes that would expand and guarantee the ability of francophones to file documents in French, regardless of what jurisdiction they are in Ontario.

But I would like to hear from the member from Ottawa–Vanier: We've also proposed an amendment to the Children's Law Reform Act, which, together with a regulatory change, would increase the monetary threshold and reduce the number of court appearances families need to make regarding guardianship of their children's property, saving families time and money. So just your comments on those changes regarding the Children's Law Reform Act.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I'll be very brief on that answer, because I'm in agreement with the change. I think it was something that was overdue and will facilitate the lives of families with less impact on the children. I'm in agreement with that change.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Brampton Centre.

M^{me} Sara Singh: Je remercie beaucoup la membre d'Ottawa–Vanier. Je vais essayer de poser la question en français.

C'est très important que les gens qui sont francophones dans notre province aient leur accès à la justice, comme vous avez dit. Si tu peux nous expliquer pourquoi ce projet de loi ne donne pas des ressources pour des communautés qui sont francophones, même pour des immigrants qui viennent ici qui parlent français aussi, comme dans ma communauté, pourquoi on a besoin d'investir dans ces ressources et assurer que les gens qui parlent français ont l'accès à la justice.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Bravo. J'apprécie vraiment l'effort, puis je vais répondre dans la même langue étant donné que c'est plus facile pour moi aussi. Puis ça, c'est justement une raison pourquoi c'est si important de donner l'accès à la justice dans la langue de la personne. Moi, je m'exprime beaucoup mieux en français et je comprends beaucoup mieux en français aussi. Puis il y a beaucoup de nuance dans le système de justice qui fait que si on ne l'entend pas dans notre langue, on peut totalement donner une mauvaise interprétation. Alors, c'est très important.

En plus, pour les francophones, quand on doit aller devant un système de justice, devant une cour, devant un juge, c'est déjà très intimidant et très difficile. Alors, d'être obligé de faire l'effort de comprendre dans une langue qui n'est pas la nôtre, comme l'anglais, parce que le français n'est pas disponible, ça ajoute au stress et ça diminue, dans le fond, l'accès à la justice, parce que les gens vont être intimidés au point de ne pas chercher à faire valoir leurs droits. Alors, c'est un aspect très important de l'accès à la justice. Merci pour la question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

M. Jeremy Roberts: Je veux remercier ma collègue et voisine d'Ottawa–Vanier pour son discours à propos de ce projet de loi.

Je veux vous demander—moi, je suis tellement excitée de voir l'innovation, d'avoir la chance pour le peuple de faire un témoignage virtuel. Je pense que cela est quelque chose qui est très, très bon pour tous les résidents d'Ottawa, d'avoir accès à ce témoignage virtuel. Est-ce que tu peux parler un petit peu à propos de cette mesure dans ce projet de loi et si c'est une mesure que, toi, tu vas supporter et donner ton soutien?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Merci à mon collègue et voisin également. Merci également de faire l'effort de parler en français. Je sais que ce n'est pas évident pour tout le monde, mais le fait qu'on fasse un effort, ça démontre un intérêt. Je l'apprécie énormément.

Pour ce qui est de l'avancement de la technologie pour l'accès à la justice, je pense que—puis je vais utiliser un terme en anglais—c'est un « no-brainer ». Je pense que c'est la voie à suivre. On l'a très bien vu avec cette pandémie, que l'accès à la technologie devient vraiment crucial et que ça peut permettre d'accélérer, de faciliter l'accès à la justice, mais l'accès à d'autres services aussi.

Je vais quand même y mettre un bémol, parce que la technologie, comme l'ont souligné les collègues de l'opposition également, n'est pas nécessairement quelque chose qui est accessible à tout le monde. Puis j'ai entendu la réponse du gouvernement que ça ne sera pas une obligation, donc, oui, ça doit demeurer une option, parce qu'il y a des gens qui ne peuvent pas y avoir accès de façon facile.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Oshawa.

M^{me} Jennifer K. French: Merci beaucoup, et aussi, j'ai une question, mais I'm going to pose it en anglais aujourd'hui.

Laughter.

M^{me} Jennifer K. French: Sorry. Well, I'll try a little bit. J'habite à Oshawa, et notre région—les personnes veulent une désignation parce que c'est très difficile pour accéder les services, tous les services, particulièrement—I don't know if that's a word—de justice.

Alors—back en anglais—how important is it for francophone and immigrant populations, for students who are studying, to be able to access legal aid services in French, or just in their communities? And can you please expand on how challenging that may be for people who do not have the English required to access the legal aid services?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): You left her 17 seconds to respond.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Merci. J'adore le « frenglish », et je suis prête à donner des leçons de français à tout le monde qui est intéressé ici dans la Chambre.

Merci pour la question. Je pense que l'accès en français à la justice, à l'éducation, à la santé, c'est crucial. La Cour suprême l'a dit. Ça doit être important. C'est un droit des francophones et ça doit être accessible à tous les niveaux d'âge—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you.

Are we doing further debate? I guess we are. Then I turn to the member from Ottawa West–Nepean.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: Thank you so much, Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to speak on the second reading debate of Bill 245, the Accelerating Access to Justice Act. I would like to begin by commending and congratulating both the Attorney General and the parliamentary assistant to the Attorney General, the member for Durham, for their hard work and efforts in pulling this bill together. I know it is both the result of consultation and hard work to make sure that we can bring these important measures forward today, so thank you.

During my remarks this afternoon, Speaker, I will be focusing primarily on three areas impacted by this bill. Those areas are estate planning, including virtual witnessing of estates documents; enhancements to French-language legal services; and, finally, additional measures to protect vulnerable persons.

When it comes to estate planning, families require a system that is clear and consistent, yet flexible enough to address their unique circumstances. Our government, through this bill, is proposing a number of changes to estates laws to reflect current realities for families and provide increased flexibility for people to address their legal needs. If passed, the Accelerating Access to Justice Act would permanently allow virtual witnessing of wills and powers of attorney, so long as at least one witness is an Ontario paralegal or lawyer. This would help to relieve the stress on those who want to get their affairs in order as quickly as possible, and addresses barriers to justice that may stem from challenges with delivering documents in person, both during COVID-19 and beyond.

Our government previously made an emergency order temporarily allowing virtual witnessing of wills and powers of attorney as long as at least one witness is an

Ontario paralegal or lawyer. The emergency order was originally a temporary measure designed to relieve the stress on those who wanted to get their end-of-life affairs in order while maintaining physical distancing and complying with other COVID-19 measures.

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Bill 245 proposes to make this practice permanent, along with other estates amendments, and this addresses feedback our government received during consultation with the legal profession, including members of the estates bar. Members of the estates bar overwhelmingly told us that this temporary change has provided peace of mind to their clients who want to safely get their affairs in order during this time of uncertainty. We want to continue to provide this increased flexibility and ease of access through COVID-19 and beyond.

Now, of course, Speaker, we want to make sure that this is done safely and reflects all the modern privacy and safety concerns that we need to take care of. So requiring two witnesses to watch as wills and powers of attorney are signed will help us to prevent fraud and undue influence. Permanently allowing virtual witnessing would not change the requirement of two witnesses. In order to ensure the integrity of the virtual witnessing mechanism, one witness must be a lawyer or a paralegal who is licensed by the Law Society of Ontario. The requirement of at least one witness to be a Law Society of Ontario licensee is to ensure the credibility of the virtual witnessing even with the virtual witnesses signing separate, identical copies instead of the same document.

Speaker, I will make a short note to say that I had the chance recently to meet with representatives of Willful, an innovative company here in Ontario that is pushing us towards a system where we will be able to do our wills online. As a young Ontarian and as a millennial, this is exactly the sort of measure that I want to see us moving towards. I believe that in an age of the 21st century we should be able to access these services at home in a digital manner, and I believe that this measure in Bill 245 is helping us get towards that eventual goal of a more innovative, interconnected and digital society.

Speaker, I would now like to take a few minutes to focus on the variety of ways that Bill 245 would accelerate access to justice for the francophone community of Ontario. As a representative from a riding in Ottawa with a diverse francophone community, I think this measure is so important to make sure that access to justice is available for residents of Ontario in either of our official national languages.

The Ministry of the Attorney General is committed to providing quality French-language services to its clients in accordance with the French Language Services Act and the principle of active offer of service. These services shall be consistently offered at the earliest opportunity, clearly visible and available, easily accessible and publicized and equivalent in quality to services offered in English. The ministry is working to ensure that every person in Ontario has fair and appropriate access to the justice system in the official language of their choice.

I would like to take a moment to read a quote here from l'Association des juristes d'expression française de l'Ontario:

« L'Association des juristes d'expression française de l'Ontario [AJEFO] demande depuis longtemps que des changements soient apportés à la Loi sur les tribunaux judiciaires portant sur les instances bilingues. L'AJEFO est donc ravie d'apprendre que le gouvernement provincial propose des changements à cette loi, notamment afin de permettre à toute personne de déposer des documents rédigés en français à tout moment, et ce, à l'échelle de la province et non seulement dans certaines régions. » Et cela, c'est de Marc Sauv , le pr sident de l'AJEFO.

As part of the Accelerating Access to Justice Act, 2021, our government is proposing to expand and guarantee the ability of francophones to file documents in French at all Ontario courthouses and for all matters, including civil and family law.

The ministry has also launched a number of access to justice in French initiatives, including projects in partnership with Ontario's chief justices that aim to provide seamless and timely access to services in French at the Ottawa, Sudbury and North Bay courthouses.

Ottawa, of course, has a strong connection to this issue, as a lot of good work has been done in this area. In 2015, the Seamless Access to Justice in French Pilot Project was launched at the Ottawa courthouse. This pilot project saw French services delivered with an even stronger emphasis on the active offer and providing service in French in a proactive manner.

The project ended on November 30, 2016. Most of the initiatives put in place for the pilot in Ottawa have now been made permanent. The results of this pilot project in Ottawa, including many recommended best practices, are also included in the final report which was made public in October 2017. Again, I am just so happy to see our government has taken these positive steps for French-language services even further in Bill 245.

Speaker, one of the most important roles of any government is of course to consider the needs of our most vulnerable citizens. Our government's quick action to make certain legal services and processes available virtually is not the only thing that we have done to help expand services to vulnerable populations. As the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, I am pleased to see efforts that are being taken in this bill to ensure that the voice of the child is taken into account in legal proceedings.

The government is proposing changes that would allow the Office of the Children's Lawyer to produce reports on specific issues, set out the views of children, or produce a report following a more comprehensive investigation. This change would help resolve family law cases that deal with very specific issues such as decision-making authority, parenting time and contact with children.

We are making changes to build a more accessible, responsive and resilient justice system. The Children's Law Reform Act says that a court shall consider all of the child's needs and circumstances including the child's views and preferences when making a best-interests

determination. The Office of the Children's Lawyer began preparing voice of the child reports at the request of the courts through a successful pilot program in 2016 and 2017, and the courts continue to request them. There are also times when the courts ask the Office of the Children's Lawyer to provide assistance on specific issues like this.

However, there is no legislative mechanism to make it clear that they are admissible in family law cases. We are making changes through Bill 245 to clarify that these services will be provided by the Office of the Children's Lawyer and that all of these reports are admissible as evidence.

These reports are completed more quickly and are less expensive than the broader children's lawyer reports and help to make family law hearings quicker and more efficient. Empowering the Office of the Children's Lawyer will expand access to justice for children who rely on their services to protect their rights, and codify the place of the voice of the child reports which will give children a stronger, more prominent voice in the courts process.

Expanding the role of children and those who amplify their voices in the courts will help by clarifying that additional reports are available and admissible. This proposal could save families time and money as the reports can be prepared in a shorter time frame and can help

reduce delays in high-conflict family law proceedings. The proposed amendments will also clarify that these reports can be filed as evidence in court. So again, Speaker, I think this is an incredibly positive measure that is being taken that will help ensure that the voice of the child is best taken into account in some of our family law proceedings.

Again, Speaker, I could go on at length talking about other pieces of this bill and the ways in which we are streamlining the judicial appointments system to make sure that we have as many justices available as possible to keep the wheels of justice turning. I could speak about our efforts to reform the land tribunal consolidation, which of course will help make that process more efficient and easier to navigate. But I see, Mr. Speaker, that my time is coming to a close so I would like to thank the House's indulgence—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. Yes, it is my unfortunate duty to interrupt the member from Ottawa West–Nepean, as the time for debate on this matter today has come to a close. According to our agenda, it is now time for us to move into private members' public business.

*Second reading debate deemed adjourned.
Report continues in volume B.*

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Amarjot Sandhu, Mike Schreiner
Daisy Wai
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

**Standing Committee on Government Agencies / Comité
permanent des organismes gouvernementaux**

Chair / Président: Gilles Bisson
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Aris Babikian
Aris Babikian, Gilles Bisson
Will Bouma, Lorne Coe
Wayne Gates, Robin Martin
Norman Miller, Rick Nicholls
Billy Pang, Amanda Simard
Marit Stiles
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Julia Douglas

**Standing Committee on Justice Policy / Comité permanent de
la justice**

Chair / Président: Daryl Kramp
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Lucille Collard
Will Bouma, Lucille Collard
Parm Gill, Daryl Kramp
Natalia Kusendova, Suze Morrison
Lindsey Park, Gurratan Singh
Nina Tangri, Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Kevin Yarde
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Thushitha Kobikrishna

**Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly / Comité
permanent de l'Assemblée législative**

Chair / Président: Kaleed Rasheed
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Vijay Thanigasalam
Rima Berns-McGown, Michael Coteau
Faisal Hassan, Logan Kanapathi
Michael Mantha, Jim McDonell
Christina Maria Mitas, Sam Oosterhoff
Kaleed Rasheed, Donna Skelly
Vijay Thanigasalam
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tonia Grannum

**Standing Committee on Public Accounts / Comité permanent
des comptes publics**

Chair / Président: Taras Natyshak
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: France Gélinas
Deepak Anand, Toby Barrett
Jessica Bell, Stephen Blais
Stephen Crawford, Rudy Cuzzetto
France Gélinas, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Taras Natyshak
Michael Parsa
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell

**Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills / Comité
permanent des règlements et des projets de loi d'intérêt privé**

Chair / Président: Logan Kanapathi
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: John Fraser
Will Bouma, John Fraser
Logan Kanapathi, Vincent Ke
Laura Mae Lindo, Paul Miller
Billy Pang, Jeremy Roberts
Dave Smith, Daisy Wai
Jamie West
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

**Standing Committee on Social Policy / Comité permanent de
la politique sociale**

Chair / Présidente: Natalia Kusendova
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Aris Babikian
Deepak Anand, Aris Babikian
Jeff Burch, Amy Fee
Michael Gravelle, Joel Harden
Mike Harris, Christine Hogarth
Belinda C. Karahalios, Bhutilla Karpoche
Natalia Kusendova
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tanzima Khan

**Select Committee on Emergency Management Oversight /
Comité spécial de la surveillance de la gestion des situations
d'urgence**

Chair / Président: Daryl Kramp
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Tom Rakocevic
Robert Bailey, Gilles Bisson
John Fraser, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Robin Martin
Sam Oosterhoff, Lindsey Park
Tom Rakocevic, Sara Singh
Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell