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Mercredi
24 février 2021

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

Wednesday 24 February 2021

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

Mercredi 24 février 2021

The House met at 0900.

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

Prayers.

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 23, 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 Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: It is a pleasure to rise this morning to participate in the debate on Bill 245, the short title of which is the Accelerating Access to Justice Act. I rise today not just on behalf of the people of London West, the people that I have the privilege to represent, but also as the democratic reform critic for the Ontario NDP caucus.

Speaker, when we talk about access to justice, it really has to be contextualized or framed in the context of recognition of access to justice as fundamental to a healthy and vibrant democracy. I did some reading last night about access to justice—this is a bill that purports to accelerate access to justice—and was really struck by remarks that were given by the Right Honourable Richard Wagner, Chief Justice of Canada. When he was first appointed to the Supreme Court in 2012, he gave an interview to the *Globe and Mail*, where he stated, “If you don’t make sure there is access to justice, it can create serious problems for democracy.” The reason is that democracy relies on every citizen, every person in this province having trust in public institutions, having trust that the laws apply equally to all of us, regardless of our income, regardless of our race, regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. This is fundamental to a strong and flourishing democracy: faith that if one needs to challenge the laws that exist in this province, then one will be able to do that and not be disadvantaged, as I said, by income or other factors.

It is absolutely critical that every person in Ontario feels that they are able to access the same kinds of processes in

the legal system that every other citizen is able to access. That really is the nub of our concern about the bill that we are debating here this morning, Bill 245, the Accelerating Access to Justice Act.

As our critic, the member for Brampton East, had pointed out, this bill actually does nothing to accelerate access to justice. In fact, it may further entrench the marginalization of people who have the least access to justice in our society. Those are people with disabilities, people living with low income, people who have been marginalized already. This bill does nothing to ensure that the justice system will be expanded and that their access to judicial processes will be enhanced.

In fact, one could argue that it further advantages people in Ontario who already enjoy significant advantages. A focus on digitization: Certainly, Speaker, in the midst of this pandemic, the number of Zoom calls that we have all participated in has really, really highlighted the importance of access to technology, of being able to go online, being able to rely on WiFi to work at home, because that has been the public health advice. If you are able to work at home, every worker in Ontario is directed to do that. Employers are directed to allow their employees to work at home if the work can be done there. I think all of us have recognized, if we didn’t before, how critical access to technology, access to the Internet is for us to be able to do our work.

This bill makes some changes that are going to enable further digitization of some legal processes. In schedules 8 and 9, it allows the remote witnessing of powers of attorney through the means of audio-visual communication technology for powers of attorney entered into on or after April 7, 2020. It also allows virtual witnessing and counterpart signing of wills retroactive to the date of the emergency order that allowed for this to happen.

These are positive changes, Speaker. We live in a wired world, and so enabling people to use the Internet to complete some of these legal processes makes sense for people who have access to Internet. Unfortunately, that is not the reality for a lot of people in Ontario, and in particular, it is not the reality for people who are living with low income.

0910

I can tell you, just in the last couple of weeks, in London West, as I was returning phone calls from constituents who had questions about their rights as a tenant and the processes to go to the Landlord and Tenant Board—I was going to email them some information from CLEO, which is a fabulous resource, I have to say, Speaker. I was going to email them some information about their rights as

tenants, and two constituents, just in a matter of days, told me they don't actually have access to the Internet. They have a cellphone that they have to go to the library in order to use. They have a special card at the library so they can take incoming calls from their cellphone, but they can't make outgoing calls, and they certainly don't have data on their phone because that is far too expensive. So I had to go to my office, print out the information that I wanted to share with them, fold it up, put it in an envelope and send it through the mail because these two constituents live in different parts of London West and neither of them have access to technology.

When you digitize these legal processes, you have to think about who's going to benefit the most from being able to quickly complete these forms, complete these requirements. It's the people who already have access to technology, who have the household income to be able to pay for reliable Internet in their homes. It really does nothing for people who don't have that same kind of access.

We have to think about that when we look at the decisions that have been made by this government to this date. One of those major decisions was to drastically reduce funding to legal aid services. We know that the people I've just been talking about, who don't have access to online tools, who don't have the same kind of social capital, the same kind of ability to find information that's going to be helpful—those folks rely on community legal aid clinics when they have a legal issue they need to deal with. And the community legal aid clinics' funding has been drastically reduced by this government.

So you can't, on the one hand, say, in a bill that's entitled Accelerating Access to Justice Act, that we're going to make it so much faster and better and easier for people who have means, who rely on Internet and know how to use online processes—we're going to make it easier for them—but we're not also going to enhance the systems and the services and the supports and the resources for people who don't have that same kind of access.

Speaker, we didn't hear a word from this government, from the Attorney General, about any kind of parallel investment in those legal aid services that are so fundamental for people who are living in poverty in our communities—actually, not even living in poverty. Access to Internet and broadband is an issue that affects many, many people in Ontario, regardless of their level of income. But we acknowledge that people who are living in poverty face multiple barriers, and that is compounded by that lack of access to reliable Internet to be able to participate in these kinds of legal processes.

I want to turn to another major provision of this act which also raises serious concerns on this side of the House, and that is schedule 6, which enacts the Ontario Land Tribunal Act, which, in fact, is a merger of five tribunals that used to exist within the Ontario Land Tribunals cluster. It merges those five tribunals, the Board of Negotiation, the Conservation Review Board, the Environmental Review Tribunal, the Local Planning

Appeal Tribunal and the Mining and Lands Tribunal. It takes those five tribunals and it makes a single tribunal called the Ontario Land Tribunal Act.

I have to say, it is kind of ironic that this is schedule 6 of this bill, because many of us were here in December in a very heated debate about a different schedule 6 of a different bill, the government's budget bill, that did a very similar thing in terms of undermining environmental protection in this province. That was the changes to the mandate of conservation authorities.

You know, Speaker, if this government wanted to cement its reputation as the most anti-environment government in Ontario's history, I think it has helped that cause with this new schedule 6 in Bill 245, the Accelerating Access to Justice Act.

There are very serious concerns that this government's decision to merge the Conservation Review Board and the environmental review board into this single Ontario Land Tribunal could actually be yet another contravention of the Environmental Bill of Rights. This government has shown complete disregard, actually, for the Environmental Bill of Rights. They've been called out in the past for their neglect, for their failure to consult as is required by the Ontario Environmental Bill of Rights act. And this is just another example of their disdain for environmental protection in Ontario.

The other thing it demonstrates is their interest in ensuring that developers and well-connected insiders have even a greater voice in decisions that affect people in this province, because I have to say that one of the most important characteristics of our system of administrative tribunals in Ontario is the fact that they enable a body of expertise to exist within those tribunals. There are subject matter experts within those tribunals who understand the policy implications of the issues that are brought to the tribunal. They understand emerging trends in law. They understand past precedent and how that should be applied.

By removing that kind of expertise that existed on the Conservation Review Board, the environmental review board, the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal, by merging all of those into a single tribunal that is going to have a mix of environmental experts, planning experts, development experts, it's going to water down the ability of those previous tribunals to be able to really look specifically at the environmental impacts of the issues that are brought before the adjudicators.

That is a problem, Speaker. That is a problem because developers in Ontario don't need a bigger voice in decisions that are being made in this province. We saw that with Highway 413. We saw that with the foundry building here in Toronto. We have seen that with all of the decisions that have been made in past bills that have been brought forward by this government that enable developers to pave over farmland, to disregard heritage and conservation goals. This is a pattern that this government has displayed in past legislation that they have brought forward.

Now, in this bill, we see that they want to give developers an even stronger voice in Ontario by participating in this single Ontario Land Tribunal. I

suspect that the government will defend this decision by saying, “Well, the tribunals were a mess anyway. The tribunals were not capable of dealing with the matters that were brought before it, because there were backlogs in tribunal decisions.” On the one hand, this government might make that defence, but on the other hand they are the source of the problem. They are the source of the problem, Speaker.

0920

If you look at an initiative that has emerged in Ontario over the last couple of years called Tribunal Watch Ontario, they have tracked very, very carefully what this government has done to undermine the tribunal process in this province. They have done that. They have done that by failing to appoint people to serve on these tribunals. They have done that by limiting the terms of the people who are appointed on those tribunals. They’ve done that by cross-appointing people to multiple tribunals. None of that serves the justice process well in this province.

Speaker, if the government was concerned about access to justice through the tribunal process, they should have taken a look at the social assistance review tribunal. They should have taken a look at the Human Rights Tribunal. We have heard very urgent calls from people in this province who are being denied social assistance. They are being forced to live on inhumane amounts of ODSP while they are waiting two years for a tribunal process to proceed so that they can file an appeal. This government has shown no interest in the people in Ontario who are the most vulnerable, the most disadvantaged and who most need support to be able to access—to truly access—justice processes.

I have to say that this bill, Bill 245, is just another example of how on the one hand this government says that they care about access to justice, but on the other hand they are failing to do the most important things that would actually enhance access to justice in Ontario. Just to recap, that is to properly fund legal aid clinics to make sure that those services that the most marginalized people have to use to access the justice system are there for them, and also to create a more robust system of tribunals so that people can actually use those processes to take their legal issues forward.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): It’s now time for questions and responses.

Ms. Lindsey Park: Well, I have enjoyed listening to this presentation. There are lots of things made up in it, but I’ll clarify a few of them here. The reason why there’s no posting on the environmental—

Mr. Chris Glover: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): I recognize the member from Spadina–Fort York on a point of order.

Mr. Chris Glover: The language of the member opposite is unparliamentary.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Sorry, I couldn’t hear that.

Mr. Chris Glover: The language from the member opposite is unparliamentary.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): I do not recognize that as being unparliamentary.

I will refer back to the member from Durham to continue with your question.

Ms. Lindsey Park: Thank you, Speaker.

What we have in this bill is a proposal that will actually enable environmental concerns to be brought before the tribunal quicker. There’s no impact on the environment. Every right for a hearing and for an appeal remains that exists today. There’s no significant effect on the environment, so I think you’ve got to make your case a bit better. What specifically in this bill are you saying impacts the environment?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: As I indicated in my remarks, one of the most important benefits of the tribunal system in Ontario is the fact that it brings together adjudicators who have deep subject matter expertise, who have deep knowledge of the issues that would be brought to the tribunal. The Conservation Review Board, the environmental review board—those boards were created to allow subject matter experts to hear challenges or hear cases about environmental or conservation changes that are being proposed by the government.

By merging five boards into a single Ontario Land Tribunal that is going to involve not just environmental experts but also people with a development background is going to seriously—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you very much. Further questions?

Mr. Gurratan Singh: I want to thank the member for her really amazing presentation, where she correctly articulates the fact that this bill will actually weaken protections to the environment through schedule 10, which really clearly takes away everyday individuals’, everyday Ontarians’ ability to appeal decisions that impact the environment to the minister directly on a basis of fact. It’s very clearly written into schedule 10.

I’m shocked, quite frankly, that it sounds like members from the government don’t themselves know the details of their own bill, since they continue to question this factor: the fact that it’s so clearly laid out that, yes, you’re taking a fundamental right of appeal away from Ontarians with respect to matters of the environment.

I’m going to ask the member from London West one more time if she can further expand on how this bill impacts London and her thoughts on this bill and the environment.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to thank my colleague for pointing out schedule 10, which is a schedule I didn’t get to during my 20-minute debate on this bill. Of course, schedule 10, as my colleague has said, is also a serious concern for us on this side of the House, but also for people who care about the environment in Ontario. It removes the ability to appeal a decision to the minister from seven environmental or natural resource statutes, including the Environmental Protection Act, the Mining Act, the Nutrient Management Act, the Ontario Water Resources Act, the Pesticides Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the Toxics Reduction Act.

Certainly removing the right to appeal these statutes is going to have a potentially very, very harmful impact on environmental protection in this province.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Will Bouma: It's a pleasure to rise in the House today and have a conversation with the member from London West. As always, I appreciate her deep concern for the marginalized and how they can have access to justice.

I was curious: The most recent data that I found—this is from StatsCan from October 29, 2019, which is almost a year and a half old—stated that only 6% of Canadians did not have access to home Internet. If that's the case, and we've only seen that exponentially rise, it seems to me that by increasing digitization, making it easier for 94%-plus of Canadians—there's only 6% who aren't—don't you think that moving that into increased digitization would enable people who don't have that access to have more access to justice because of the freeing up of resources?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: While this member may be concerned about the 94% of Ontarians who are already well set up with WiFi at home and have access to the Internet, we can't forget the people who don't have those same kinds of resources. They are often the people who are most likely to require assistance through the justice process because they are facing multiple barriers. They may be looking at eviction.

We have 8,000 families in the London area who are behind on their rent as a result of this pandemic. They're going to have to go through the Landlord and Tenant Board to be able to prevent eviction. Many of those people, if they are behind on their rent, they're also behind on their Internet, they're behind on their groceries. How are they supposed to access the justice process?

0930

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Ms. Catherine Fife: I want to thank the member from London West for pointing out the inequity that exists in this piece of legislation. The government has essentially baked privilege right into this law, particularly around schedule 6. This schedule is potentially very harmful around accessing justice for Ontarians. The bedrock justification for having tribunals is that they are meant to be faster, cheaper and more expert than the courts. This schedule is a major step backwards on all three of these grounds for the 100,000-plus Ontarians who appear before tribunals every year. This schedule provides the tribunal expanded powers to dismiss a matter without a hearing.

To the member for London West: How does that actually increase access to justice for Ontarians in this province?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to thank my colleague for her question. I'd like to direct the attention of members of this House to a blog by Ron Ellis. He really is one of the champions and one of the architects of our system of administrative justice here in the province. He has written a series of blogs, entitled "Ford's Impact on Tribunal Justice: A Tornado in a Trailer Park Comes to Mind," because that is really what this government is doing in terms of tribunal justice. They have taken a wrecking ball

to the tribunal system that exists and have completely undermined it. As my colleague points out, tribunal justice is good for this province, because when people can use the tribunal system, it relieves pressure on the courts. It's cheaper; it's faster. It's better for all Ontarians.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Mike Harris: It's great to be part of debate here this morning. I just wanted to build a little bit off of something my colleague from Brantford–Brant just said. What I heard from the opposition, it didn't really make sense. We're talking about trying to allow that 94% to have faster access to justice, and then that 6% will have faster access to justice via those in-person appointments, meetings, whatever might happen at the courthouse, being able to meet with court officials in person just like they have for years.

I don't know why the member from London West wouldn't support something like that, and I'd like to hear from her why she wouldn't.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Listen, enhancing access to justice through technology is not a problem. It is a good idea. It enables people to participate in justice processes easier and faster. But it can't be done without also beefing up the services that people who don't have Internet, who don't have the same resources are going to be forced to rely on. We did not hear anything from this government when it brought this bill forward, that it's going to digitize services but at the same time it's going to restore funding to legal aid and it's going to make sure that resources and supports are available for people who don't have the same kind of ability to use digital processes to pursue legal justice.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further debate?

Mr. Jim McDonell: I'm honoured to stand today on behalf of Attorney General Downey in support of this bill, Bill 245, the Accelerating Access to Justice Act. The recovery of Ontario's communities from COVID-19 requires a strong justice system that works as well as it can to help people resolve their legal matters, with fewer obstacles and delays. This bill, introduced on February 16 of this year, is centred on two key pillars: accelerating access to justice and reducing regulatory burdens.

Mr. Speaker, unreasonable delays in courts have been a growing concern for years. The legislation we are debating today is another step in our government and Attorney General Downey's commitment in addressing the justice system delays in the busiest court system in Canada. As members may recall, one of our government's first steps in addressing delays was increasing maximum Small Claims Court claims from \$25,000 to \$35,000. Prior to that change, claims over \$25,000 had to go to Superior Court, where litigation could take years and be very costly. Bill 245, if passed, is taking us along the same path towards a less expensive, easier, fairer, faster and more efficient justice system.

A major initiative contained in Bill 245 is the provision to fill judicial vacancies faster, recognizing that one of the most important resources in our justice system are the

judges themselves. Failure to fill vacancies in a timely way can negatively impact the administration of courthouses and effective case flow management. The end result are delays in court proceedings, hitting victims particularly hard, having to relive their trauma, sometimes putting their lives on hold for years. Many victims feel re-victimized by the unintended consequences of court delays, and when the victims are children, the impact of frequent adjournments and other delays can result in even more serious consequences.

The legislation also ensures that all judges are properly trained in best practices for achieving reasonably prompt justice. This initiative is critically important for the effective management of the many proceedings in courtrooms and that cases are dealt with without lengthy and unreasonable delays. Many of the positive changes embodied in Bill 245 are focused on building on the modernization of the justice system. Attorney General Downey is working with justice partners to move justice system services online and closer to communities through breakthrough modern technologies and processes.

As many if not all of us know, working through the COVID-19 pandemic, technology has made the work we are doing very different but still possible. Technologies, such as the growing use of video remand, can eliminate the need for many routine in-person court appearances and allow easier communication among courts, legal counsel, accused persons, victims and witnesses.

There are a large number of remand prisoners awaiting court dates and resulting in associated costs to the taxpayers and to the mental health of the inmates. Since 2004-05, the number of persons held in remand has been larger than the number of offenders serving time in a provincial facility. This is of significant concern to the Aboriginal community, who are disproportionately impacted.

Two of the proposed changes in the bill relate to the land tribunal reform and estates law. If passed, the bill would accelerate access to justice in estate law by allowing the virtual witnessing of wills and powers of attorney, to make it easier for people to get the end-of-life affairs in order, among other things. If passed, the bill would also accelerate access to justice in land tribunal reform by consolidating land tribunals to resolve land-related disputes more efficiently.

Both of these changes just make sense. For an individual to sign a will, or for that matter to commission any document in Ontario, the person had to be physically present in front of a lawyer or a commissioner. When the COVID-19 pandemic happened, our government, with the co-operation of the Law Society of Ontario, changed the rule that you could do the above process over video conferencing. So if Bill 245 should pass, the change becomes permanent.

I want to acknowledge the Attorney General for incorporating motion 121, moved by the member from Thornhill, to modernize and digitize our legal system by making temporary emergency measures, put in place for COVID-19, for the witnessing of wills and powers of

attorney permanent in Ontario. The way to think about the proposed change is this: A person can now get their affairs in order by having their wills looked after by a lawyer while they're in their hospital bed.

As we continue to support Ontario's COVID-19 response and recovery, we are taking action to make it faster and easier to resolve land-related disputes to help increase the housing supply across Ontario, while balancing the needs of environmental protection and conservation.

If passed, Bill 245 is proposing to merge five land tribunals—the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal, the Environmental Review Tribunal, the Board of Negotiation, the Conservation Review Board and the Mining and Lands Tribunal—into a new single tribunal called the Ontario Land Tribunal. The new Ontario Land Tribunal would be able to help reduce delays by making the land dispute resolution much more efficient by creating a single forum to resolve disputes faster and by eliminating unnecessary overlap between cases.

0940

The proposed consolidation would not reduce or eliminate hearing or appeal rights before the tribunal. The creation of the Ontario Land Tribunal builds on our government's commitment to create a more accessible, responsive and resilient justice system that resolves disputes quickly and fairly. We are determined to make it faster to resolve land-related disputes that are contributing to Ontario's housing crisis while balancing the needs of environmental protection and conservation.

In July 2020, the government created the Ontario Land Tribunals cluster to bring the five land tribunals under the leadership of a dedicated executive chair. However, these five land tribunals in the cluster remain separate entities with separate legislative mandates. Some parties currently need to appear before multiple land tribunals to resolve a single dispute.

In order to make the process more efficient and effective, our government is proposing to consolidate these five tribunals into a single tribunal called the Ontario Land Tribunal. The single tribunal would have a single intake process and a case management system, which would help to reduce bureaucratic red tape and simplify Ontario law. The new tribunal would help reduce delays and make the land dispute resolution process more efficient by creating a single forum to resolve disputes faster and eliminating unnecessary overlap between cases.

Realities for families have changed in the past year since the legislation was last updated and in the months since COVID-19 came to our province. Today's families require a system that is clear, consistent, yet flexible enough to address their unique circumstances.

If passed, Bill 245 is proposing a number of changes to estate laws to reflect current realities of families and provide increased flexibility for people to address their legal needs. These changes include allowing virtual witnessing as long as at least one witness is an Ontario paralegal or a lawyer. This will help to relieve the stress for 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 during COVID-19 and beyond.

Proposed changes include:

- permanently allowing virtual witnessing and counterpart signing of wills and powers of attorney, which were temporarily permitted in an emergency order in April 2020;

- repealing section 16 of the Succession Law Reform Act, which automatically revokes existing wills on marriage;

- extending section 17 of the SLRA to revoke a bequest made to married spouses who have separated or where a court order or an arrangement to finalize dissolution of the marriage is in place;

- granting courts authority to validate wills by adding a validation provision;

- clarifying that the Public Guardian and Trustee may access information from the municipal police to help inform its decision about taking on the administration of an estate;

- amending the regulation-making power in the Substitute Decisions Act, 1992, to authorize rules around the PGT to require information from “entities,” in addition to “persons,” as currently set out.

Prior to the introduction of this temporary regulation at the outset of COVID-19, lawyers and witnesses were taking extraordinary measures to ensure that wills and powers of attorney could continue to be processed. We heard stories of lawyers and witnesses standing in the yards of testators, watching through windows as wills were signed. We even heard of lawyers and witnesses who were meeting grantors in driveways and parking lots, observing signatures on powers of attorney through car windows. That is not a sustainable or a realistic way to settle these important matters.

This proposed change and other stated amendments address feedback we 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.

Our government wants to continue to provide increased flexibility and ease of access through COVID-19 and beyond.

We are making a number of proposed changes to estates laws to reflect current realities for families and provide increased flexibility for people to address their legal needs. These include allowing virtual witnessing so long as at least one witness is an Ontario paralegal. This will help relieve the stress to those who want to get their affairs in order. These changes will also help people with any barriers that might exist for Ontarians who have difficulties travelling to deliver documents in person.

Other proposed amendments to the estate laws included in Bill 245, if passed, are allowing existing laws to stand if someone gets married and revoking a bequest on separation of married spouses or the dissolution of a marriage. These changes address gaps brought forward by

estate lawyers advocating on behalf of their clients, who are concerned about predatory marriages and about bequests going to a long-separated spouse.

Mr. Speaker, to quote Elaine Blades, chair of the Society of Trust and Estate Practitioners Toronto, and Paul Taylor, chair of STEP Ottawa, “The Society of Trust and Estate Practitioners looks forward to being part of the important work that will be done to educate lawyers and other professionals on the opportunities these proposed changes present along with the obligations that are inherent in them to ensure the protection of vulnerable individuals in circumstances where they cannot be met in person.”

Bill 245, if passed, will make these changes to public accounting, which are supported by those in the profession. The proposed changes include amendments to the Public Accounting Act to transfer the authority of the Public Accountants Council for the Province of Ontario to the Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario, the CPA. These amendments, in effect, would lead to the dissolution of the Public Accountants Council and have the Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario assume full responsibility for public accounting regulation. The ministry would work closely with PAC and CPA Ontario to ensure a smooth transition by March 31, 2021. The dissolution of the Public Accountants Council would have no fiscal impact on the province since its operations are fully funded by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario.

The Public Accountants Council of Ontario fully supports the Attorney General’s decision to transfer the responsibilities of PAC to CPA. Discussions on the future of PAC have been under way since the process of unifying the accounting profession began in 2014, when the three predecessor accounting bodies functionally unified into one body, as CPA Ontario. PAC’s oversight and review of the CPA education, experience and examination programs has assisted in ensuring high post-unification standards for the Ontario CPAs through this transitional period.

The changes proposed by the Attorney General through Bill 245 will align Ontario’s regulatory framework for public accountants with all other jurisdictions across the country, generating efficiencies and savings that CPA Ontario can reinvest into the profession. CPA Ontario has an established reputation for protecting the public interest, and the changes proposed will ensure the ongoing delivery of superior quality public accounting services to the province of Ontario.

The Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario is pleased to see Attorney General Downey propose changes that would streamline the regulatory framework for the accounting profession while maintaining the high standards of public accounting. Transferring oversight responsibilities of the Public Accountants Council of Ontario will align Ontario’s regulatory framework for public accounting with all other jurisdictions across the country. This move will also generate significant savings for CPA Ontario and their members that will be reinvested into the profession.

Mr. Speaker, don't just take my word for it. Carol Wilding, the president and chief executive officer of the Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario, had this to say about the initiatives of this bill: "The Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario ... is pleased to see Attorney General Downey propose changes that would streamline the regulatory framework for the accounting profession while maintaining the high standards of public accounting.

"Transferring oversight responsibilities to the Public Accountants Council to CPA Ontario will align Ontario's regulatory framework for public accounting with all other jurisdictions" in this country.

"This move will also generate significant savings for" the council "and our members that will be reinvested into the profession.

"CPA Ontario looks forward to continuing to work with the provincial government to maintain the high standards of public accounting and ensure strong governance and oversight of the profession."

Mr. Speaker, my friend and colleague Attorney General Downey made it clear in his introduction of Bill 245 when he stated, "The recovery of Ontario's communities from COVID-19 requires a strong justice system that works as well as it can to help people resolve their legal matters with fewer obstacles and delays." That's just fair.

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The Accelerating Access to Justice Act, 2021, would, if passed, improve access to justice for Ontarians across the system, notably by modernizing processes and breaking down barriers in the province's courts, tribunals, estate law, family and child protection sectors.

The legislation, which builds on Ontario's recent justice modernization breakthroughs, proposes urgent reforms to address delays for Ontarians waiting to resolve legal issues in front of a judge or beyond the courtroom, including in rural, northern, francophone and Indigenous communities. The Accelerating Access to Justice Act, 2021, if passed, would reduce the time and money Ontarians spend waiting for their day in court.

Mr. Speaker, I cannot stress enough to this House that justice accelerated is justice delivered. No matter where you live in our province, the growth and well-being of our communities demands easier and faster access to a justice system that works for people. The legislation that our Attorney General has introduced builds on our government's commitment towards ongoing efforts to accelerate justice modernization in Ontario with concrete actions to break down barriers across the justice system. It is a privilege for me, as the proud MPP for Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry, to stand before you in this House to support our Attorney General's Bill 245.

I would like to just take a second to acknowledge and thank two people who contributed to the words I had to say: Thank you, Sam Goldstein and former member Bob Runciman, for the feedback on this legislation.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): It's now time for questions.

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: Thanks to the member from Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry for his comments this morning.

Speaker, we've heard this before from this government where we're going to be improving access to justice. We heard that with the Landlord and Tenant Board, and I can tell you that in my riding, I have countless complaints about the system that has been put in place: It's not geographical. People do not have access. They do not have access to Internet. So I am a bit dubious about another act that is apparently going to improve access to justice.

We already, under the Consolidated Hearings Act, have the ability to consolidate tribunals. Under schedule 6, we want to make another sort of amalgamation. Why are we restructuring a tribunal system when we can already do this in a way that is far less disruptive and allows for that expertise when required?

Mr. Jim McDonell: I think it's clear that when this government took power, it really looked upon trying to reduce the excess regulation and the burdens that are facing the population of this province. This was a great opportunity to take five similar tribunals and combine them.

You can imagine the cost for the average citizen trying to work against the system, where you've got to now hire lawyers and all the expertise to take it to two or more tribunals. That creates lots of delays, lots of problems. Now these problems can be brought, can be heard through a one-window process. I mean, it just makes sense.

It's something that we're proud of doing and something we'll work harder on to make sure that when people want access to justice in this province, it's easier and faster. I think that's what they're expecting from this government.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you very much. Further questions?

Mr. Will Bouma: I just wanted to say to the member for Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry how appreciative I was of the common-sense way that he spoke about the common-sense changes we're making in this bill.

I wanted to ask him a question about the consolidated lands tribunal, because when I was on council, this was something that I ran into. We hear all the time that justice delayed is justice denied. I would see constituents, people who really cared about the environment, have to go from tribunal to tribunal and have no clarity and everything else. So I was wondering if I could ask my friend how consolidating the five land tribunals into one, hopefully by July 2021, if this bill is passed, will help my constituents to seek justice.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Back to the member from Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry.

Mr. Jim McDonell: Thank you, Speaker. It's a mouthful.

We're determined to make it faster to resolve land-related disputes that are contributing to Ontario's housing crisis, while balancing the needs of environmental protection and conservation.

Despite creating a new cluster in July, the five land tribunals remain separate entities in separate legislation.

So imagine you're a private citizen or somebody who is trying to come before a board, trying to prepare a case, and now having to do it multiple times. It just makes sense that we have one tribunal, for staffing—there's a whole wealth of reasons why we would want to bring it down and make it simpler. When you make things simpler, they're easier to access; easier and faster.

We came in and we saw this; before the LPAT board we had 100,000 cases, there were 100,000 residential units being held up at the board because of the lack of access. These are changes that are holding up and creating more and more homeless people, as we look through the system, and—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you. Further questions?

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Speaker, I've heard from a number of constituents that, for example, had no luck getting peace bonds; from landlords and tenants alike who have said that they can't get a fair time in court. Instead, they're locked in impossible situations in which they're both losing time and money and patience. I've heard from families stuck at a standstill because of Family Court delays.

The benchmark for access to justice should be equity, and I'm struggling to see how this bill, which says it's about accelerating access to justice, impacts the lives of those in my riding who are seniors, lower-income and often from racialized and marginalized communities. Those who have been really excluded from accessing justice are no better off in this bill.

So I'd like to ask the member: Financial barriers often affect access to justice. How does this bill address access to legal aid so that people can get justice?

Mr. Jim McDonell: Actually, it's interesting that you ask that question because I had the opportunity to talk to a lawyer who was working with legal aid, and he talked about some of the changes that came in during COVID-19 and how it allowed him to see many more clients, because it sped up the process. He said it was a marked difference. He was seeing many more clients in the same amount of time, so you can imagine, from a government point of view, the extra access we're providing. It was a bit of a surprise to him, but looking back, he just reflected on that and he wanted to actually add some comments into this debate today.

So yes, making things faster and simpler allows our legal aid system to see many more people. Isn't that the goal of everybody here?

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Next

Mr. Lorne Coe: Good morning, Speaker. Thank you.

I've heard from many of my constituents in Whitby who have taken advantage of the ability to virtually witness and sign in counterpart wills and powers of attorney, which was temporarily permitted as an emergency order, you will know, Speaker, beginning in April 2020. Can the member from Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry provide more information on the feedback that the Attorney General received from Ontarians across the province with

regard to this change and why the proposed legislation seeks to make this emergency order permanent?

Mr. Jim McDonell: I want to thank the member from Whitby for that question. It brings me, I guess, to the final days of my dad, when he was trying to get his will in order. He had a will that had been witnessed by three different people, but all three people had passed away, so he had to redo his will, and he made multiple trips to the lawyer to get it done. The lawyer had a bit of a reputation for liking to sit down and talk about the older days. But he never got it done, and he was unable to do it; he passed away before having his will finalized. It created some issues for my mother, who was trying to bring the estate together—not that there were any disputes, but all the issues that go with having a will that can't be witnessed. It just creates problems. I think of how this would have solved that problem. In his final days in the hospital he could have had that done, but in those days you couldn't.

I want to thank the Attorney General for putting that in place and making that happen.

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The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Guratan Singh: There are certain things that we know indisputably, various facts with regard to our legal system. We know that our legal aid system is the front line to providing access to justice to those who are most marginalized.

The Conservative government has put forward their bill, the Accelerating Access to Justice Act, that has no mention of legal aid, a system that was gutted by this Conservative government—up to one third of the budget for legal aid. How can this Conservative government justify calling this bill Accelerating Access to Justice without a single word about legal aid, without a single dime for legal aid institutions and facilities that are struggling right now? How can the government in good conscience call this accelerating access to justice without funding the fundamental means for access to justice in our province?

Mr. Jim McDonell: There are many components to access to justice. You would have to be living under a rock not to see an article about how justice has been delayed. We've had challenges in the Supreme Court because justice has been delayed so long that cases are thrown out. It's time that we update our legal system. Faster access to justice has been ruled a Canadian right, and this bill certainly accomplishes that.

To go back, we talked about legal aid, and the 95% of the people who have access to the Internet. This allows people to do many more things themselves. It allows our legal aid system to do many more cases, which is, I think, in the end, what you're looking for. You're looking for more access to all of our services, which includes legal aid. This bill here actually accomplishes that. Again, I thank Minister Downey for this bill.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further debate?

Mr. Chris Glover: When I was in high school, we read a book called 1984. There was a term in that book called “doublespeak.” It’s about the way the government in that fictional world used propaganda to convince people of something that wasn’t actually true.

I didn’t really understand this concept of doublespeak until I got into this Legislature. The title of this bill, the Accelerating Access to Justice Act, is an example of doublespeak. It has nothing to do with accelerating access to justice. It actually has to do with further eroding people’s property rights through enhancing the expropriation powers of this government.

It also has to do with further reducing community voice in local planning decisions by combining LPAT with a bunch of other tribunals so that the balance of power at the LPAT will be even greater for the developers.

It also has to do with the removal of appeal rights in schedule 10. I will just give a couple of current examples in my riding that are relevant to this. On January 22, the city of Toronto got a notice from the government of Ontario through Metrolinx that they wanted to expropriate the first Parliament site. This is down at Front and Parliament. It’s a full city block. It is the site of Upper Canada’s first Parliament in 1792. It was burned down by the Americans in the War of 1812. Nearby is the site of Upper Canada’s second Parliament. So it’s an historically important site.

For the last decade, the city of Toronto has been developing plans for that site. They’re going to build a library. There’s a bunch of community amenities. There are going to be some developments and high-rises. By issuing this expropriation notification, the province has said, “Well, all that local planning that’s been done is going out the window.” That is an abuse of power by this government. They should be respecting the local planning process that’s been initiated.

I recognize that the Ontario Line needs to have a site there. The station should be called the first Parliament station, and I would put in a plug for that. But when this site is developed, it should respect the rights of the municipality of Toronto. It should also respect the planning that’s been done by the community on that site. There is no need to expropriate that site.

I’ll just read from a newspaper article that came out a few weeks ago, when this was announced. Kristyn Wong-Tam, who is the local city councillor, says, “Years of city planning and public consultation have already gone into developing a comprehensive master plan for the site, which includes proposals for a library and park. And she has a message for the province.

“The community doesn’t want to sell these lands to you. We want to work with you to build transit, to build out the master plan. And we believe that we can do that without conveying the lands to you.”

That’s the message from the local councillor to this government about the first Parliament site. So, yes, build the station for the Ontario Line, but respect the local planning that’s already been done.

The other action that this government has taken around expropriations is that they have removed the right of

people to a hearing of necessity. This was done last year with Bill 197, under something called the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act. Why stripping individuals and communities in Ontario of their rights of property has anything to do with the COVID recovery act, I don’t know. That’s another example of this doublespeak that I was speaking of.

Bill 197 had significant reforms on the expropriations process for a large subset of future takings of property rights in Ontario of infrastructure projects. So what the government did was that it gave itself greater powers to expropriate property, without having to rationalize or justify that expropriation through a hearing of necessity.

On Bill 197, the report said, “If passed, the bill may greatly reduce landowners’ ability to challenge expropriations proposed for provincial public roads and certain transit projects. This follows shortly after the Building Transit Faster Act, 2020, which eliminated hearings of necessity for expropriations related to the construction of specified priority transit projects. This bill demonstrates a continued erosion of property owners’ rights to challenge proposed expropriations.” That’s just one example. That’s schedule 5 of the bill.

The other schedule that’s very relevant to my riding right now is schedule 6, which combines five tribunals into one. The five tribunals are the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal, the Environmental Review Tribunal, the Mining and Lands Tribunal, the Conservation Review Board and the Board of Negotiation. The bedrock of justification for having these tribunals is that they are meant to be faster, cheaper and more expert than the courts. The schedule is a major step backwards on all three of these grounds.

Most people don’t know about these tribunals until they have to go to one, but there are 100,000 Ontarians who appear before these tribunals every year. What this government is doing is combining those five tribunals into one, so an adjudicator at the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal could be adjudicating over a mining decision, and a mining adjudicator could be an adjudicator over something that they have no expertise in. It’s actually going to reduce the very purpose of having these tribunals, which is to have an expert adjudicator adjudicating on these issues.

The reason that this is so important right now is that on January 18, not in my riding but in MPP Suze Morrison’s riding, Toronto Centre, demolition equipment rolled onto the heritage foundry site. The heritage foundry site is a series of factories that were built in the 1920s. They’re some beautiful old factory buildings. The government rolled this demolition equipment onto this site without any notification. It was done completely in secret. The only reason that the community found out about it was that a local person was walking by, saw this equipment roll in and asked one of the construction workers, “What are you doing?” He was told that they were going to demolish the buildings by the end of March, and what was revealed this week was that, in September, the government started negotiating a deal with the developer for that site. The demolition of these heritage buildings was apparently part

of that plan and part of that deal for that developer. This is a further erosion of the rights of the community over protecting things like that heritage property.

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And I'll say one other thing about my riding, Mr. Speaker. I live in the most densely populated riding in the province. If you drive along the Gardiner, you're driving by all those high-rise condos that are in the area, that's my riding. The people in my riding are not NIMBYs. They actually like development, but they like development that is smart development. We don't want to just live in a forest of high-rise condos; we want to live in communities that have parks, libraries, schools and other community recreation centres.

For the most part, the city of Toronto has done a pretty good job of doing that, building that kind of community along the waterfront. But when the government strips away the powers of the community, the municipality and the local residents from these planning decisions, when they roll demolition equipment onto a site, like the foundry, without any notification, then they strip away our power to build the kind of communities that we want to live in.

I would ask that this government reconsider this bill, particularly schedule 5 and schedule 6. Schedule 6—I'll just go on a little bit longer about it—is the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal. In 2018, there were some changes made to the Ontario Municipal Board, which was the appeal board for local planning decisions. If a community or municipality disagreed or a developer disagreed with what the municipality was asking to be built on a particular piece of property, they could appeal to the LPAT, and the LPAT gave the community a real voice at that point. They were given some funding to hire planners and lawyers to represent themselves, and they were given access to documents that they needed to make their case.

But this government stripped LPAT of the local planning powers and basically reverted it back to the OMB. That's where this government has stripped communities and municipalities of the power to represent themselves and to put their case forward before tribunals. Combining LPAT with the Mining and Lands Tribunal and these other tribunals will further erode the powers of communities to represent themselves and to fight for the kinds of communities that we want to live in, the kinds of communities that include high-rises. I live in one of the high-rises along the waterfront. I'm happy to be living there, but I'm also happy because right across the street, there's a park. Just up the street, there's a library. There's a brand new school that just opened a couple of years ago in CityPlace. That's the kind of planning that we want and that this government is stripping communities and municipalities of the power to build. So I'd ask the government to reconsider these schedules.

The final schedule that I want to talk about is schedule 10, and this is the removal of appeal rights. Again, this is where it removes the ability to appeal a decision to the minister from seven environmental—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Excuse me. I know that we're waiting with bated breath to hear

more about schedule 10, but unfortunately your time for debate at this point has expired. But you will have an opportunity when debate resumes to continue with your debate. So I thank you for that, and I apologize for the interruption.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: I'm proud to rise as the new official opposition critic for transit. Whether they use it to get to work or come home to their loved ones, Ontarians deserve a safe, accessible, reliable and affordable public transit system. I recognize the hard work of the countless transit operators who make these millions of daily trips possible.

As critic, I will hold the government accountable to protect and expand public transit across our great province, but it must be said here that current and future transit projects must be envisioned based on needs and under the advice of transit experts, not based on the desire of developer insiders looking to maximize the profits on the value of their land holdings. And when such projects become a reality, communities and municipalities must be thoroughly consulted and respected.

Transit systems throughout our province rely heavily upon fares to keep their services running. As such, this pandemic has hit them hard. But despite an overall decline in ridership, there are still many packed routes during this pandemic, putting passengers and operators at risk. This must be resolved.

Government assistance is set to end by the end of next month, but needs will continue in the time ahead. That's why the government must work closely with transit operators across the province to ensure that help continues beyond the end of March.

Finally, I will continue to stand up for my community in calling on this government to immediately transfer Metrolinx lands so a community hub can be built, as promised, at Jane and Finch. Don't make the same mistake as the Liberal government before you in stringing along our community. We demand better than that.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. Norman Miller: I rise today to give voice to the frustrations I'm hearing from business owners, residents and municipal officials across the district of Parry Sound over the lack of local communication over remaining in the stay-at-home order.

I've been proud to see the Premier, ministers and Ontario's top health professionals prioritize communication throughout the pandemic with almost daily press conferences. I'm asking that our local health unit follow this lead and communicate transparently with the residents.

While it is disappointing news that the region remains under the stay-at-home order for now, it's important to remember that these decisions are made in consultation with the expert advice of Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health and local medical officers of health.

We've made some headway in our fight against COVID-19, but we must not take that progress for granted. I encourage the residents of North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit region to continue following public health advice so we can stop the spread and safely transition to a lower level in the framework.

I do want to thank the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit for opening up outdoor activities like snowmobiling, skating and tobogganing. I'm pleased to see the health unit listen to the community and reconsider the order to shut down those activities. I ask that they once again listen to the community and respond to their calls for more information.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. Taras Natyshak: I haven't had an opportunity to do a member's statement in this House for quite some time. I gave thought to what topic I would talk about and dedicate the minute and half that we have here to, and I can't imagine standing up in this House as a member without recognizing, acknowledging and thanking our essential workers back in our home communities, each and every one of them—every one of them. To go through a list of the folks and the people and the organizations who have brought us all together as communities to keep each other safe—I am certain we would all miss folks in that list, but undoubtedly our front-line workers in our health care system, our nurses, our doctors, our hospital administration staff and our public health officials, who, under an enormous amount of pressure, have gone above and beyond to protect our communities.

Our Windsor and Essex public health unit just recently supported our member for London West's motion and bill on paid sick leave. They understand that paid sick leave saves lives and makes our communities safer.

The teachers, the small business owners, the fitness club owners who have struggled to provide so much—I mean, the list goes on and on. Rest assured, Speaker, we think about every one of them each and every day in this House. All members are giving all of our effort to those back home who are putting their best effort forward to keep us safe, and we thank them very much.

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COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Robert Bailey: It's a privilege to rise today and announce another critical milestone in the fight against the spread of COVID-19 in Sarnia–Lambton. Yesterday, Bluewater Health opened its first COVID-19 vaccination clinic for high-risk, front-line hospital health care workers.

The first front-line hero at Bluewater Health to receive the vaccine was Mr. Fred Osmon, an emergency department nurse who works at both the Sarnia and Petrolia campuses.

With over 2,000 team members, including staff, physicians, midwives, specialists and more, Bluewater Health's vaccination clinics are expected to run for the next four to five days. Non-patient-facing employees are not scheduled to receive the vaccine at this time.

To date, over 600,000 people in Ontario have received their very first dose of the vaccine, including every resident of long-term-care homes. Ontario is leading the nation with its vaccination program. That is something we should be proud of.

Mr. Speaker, it goes without saying that the last 11 months have been challenging. Vaccines getting to our front-line workers is great news for the Sarnia–Lambton community and a step forward.

To quote Mr. Osmon upon hearing the news that he would be the very first health care worker to receive the vaccine at Bluewater Health, "There is light at the end of the tunnel."

TAXATION

Mr. Gurratan Singh: There's a question that each and every one of us needs to ask ourselves right now: Who is going to pay for this pandemic? Who is going to pay for the COVID-19 recovery that we're all hoping for right now?

Over the past year, we've seen an unprecedented amount of challenges that people are facing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Front-line workers have to risk their lives every day going to work to move our economy. Small business owners are struggling to keep their doors open. People have to balance between child care and working from home. And there are countless others who have lost their jobs altogether.

At the same time, the super-rich in Canada have increased their wealth by \$63 billion on the backs of working people, who have to bear the brunt of this pandemic. That's why we need a wealth tax on the super-rich, on multi-millionaires and multi-billionaires—so they can pay their fair share on the public services that we all rely on, so we can expand health care, so we can strengthen our public schools, so we can make sure that housing is a right that everyone can access. We can do this, but we need to have the courage to ask those who can to give a little bit more.

Working people should not have to pay for this pandemic, and a wealth tax is how we make sure that they don't.

ENGINEERS

Mr. Stan Cho: Next Monday, March 1, marks Professional Engineers Day here in Ontario. There are some 85,000 professional engineers in Ontario, and March 1 has been designated by this Legislature as the day each year

that we mark the invaluable contributions engineers make to our communities and our economy.

Engineers help build our cities. They design bridges and highways. They develop computer programs and life-saving medical equipment. They can turn garbage into fuel. And last week, they helped land a rover on Mars.

You'll know an engineer when you see one by the distinct iron ring they wear. It's worn by professional engineers across Canada as a reminder of the obligations and ethics of their profession. The iron ring is both a symbol of pride and a reminder to act with the highest standards of professional conduct.

My riding is the home of engineering in Ontario, as both the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers and Professional Engineers Ontario are headquartered in Willowdale. Over the last three years, I have had the opportunity to learn first-hand about the incredible work engineers do in my community and across the province. It's always amazing to see an engineer in action, solving the most complex problems or developing exciting, innovative products.

This Professional Engineers Day, I want to give special recognition to the many engineering students, future innovators and change-makers who are continuing to work hard this year, with the added challenges of learning during a pandemic. The world needs you now, more than ever.

Please join me today and on March 1 to celebrate Professional Engineers Day and all the engineers in our communities.

ADDICTION SERVICES

Miss Monique Taylor: Earlier this month, I was proud to be named our party's critic for mental health and addiction. Over the past few weeks I've been meeting with advocates and service providers to hear more about the situation on the ground. Everyone I've spoken with agrees: Ontario is in an overdose crisis and it is only getting worse.

Public Health Ontario says opioid overdose deaths have grown by 50% during the pandemic. Overdose deaths are at the highest they have ever been, yet the people I've been speaking with say that there's been little action from this government.

There are actions that this government must take when it comes to harm reduction, like providing safe supply programs, supervised consumption, and outreach programs, as well as actions that will provide aid in recovery from addiction, like rehab programs and investing in supportive housing.

The quickest and easiest first step they could do would be to simply resume the Opioid Emergency Task Force, which this government shuttered in 2018, and they need to commit to following its advice.

This government's indifference will only lead to a larger crisis and a greater number of overdose deaths. People in Ontario deserve better. Families are begging for help and support. You have an obligation to meet these families' needs and to provide the services to save people's lives.

COLDEST NIGHT OF THE YEAR

Mr. Will Bouma: What if we could help prevent homelessness before people are actually on the streets? Well, good news. That was our goal as we participated in Brantford's annual Coldest Night of the Year fundraiser last Saturday in my home riding of Brantford-Brant. The walkers raised over \$53,000 for the Why Not Youth Centre in Brantford. That is 151% of the goal that was set, a true testament to the generous, caring community that I am proudly a part of.

Why Not Youth Centre is a grassroots not-for-profit that sees 750 to 1,000 visits every month from local teens in need. At Why Not Youth Centre, they believe that every young person is important and deserves all the help they can get to overcome their challenges and achieve their goals. Every teen who comes through their door is struggling in some way, be it with homelessness, mobility, bullying or unsafe living conditions. When they are doing their job right, they are safe, get the help that they need and move forward with their lives.

This was a fun, COVID-19-safe and engaging event. I am particularly happy to be on the same virtual team as a former legislator that sat in this House many years ago, my good friend Phil Gillies. I want to thank him personally for always being there for our community in so many ways.

Some people see things and say, "Why?" At Why Not Youth Centre in Brantford, they dream things that never were, and say, "Why not?"

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Daryl Kramp: There has been a lot of misinformation spread about vaccines. We all know that. But some has been intentional, and some has come from people who feel it's ethical to mislead others about their health prospects. I find that to be incredibly disappointing.

On December 4, our provincial vaccine task force, led by General Rick Hillier, laid out Ontario's vaccine distribution plan. Its phases are clear and have been available on government websites for many weeks now. It can be found at ontario.ca/covidvaccine. We encourage everyone to go there to learn more.

But we know that the plan requires vaccine supply controlled by the federal government. Regrettably, Mr. Speaker, the federal government dropped the ball early on. But now, as we receive more vaccine supply from the federal government, we are planning for the expansion to other priority groups, including over-80s, who can expect to begin to receive their shots in the coming weeks—in mid-March—as we finish vaccinating our front-line health care workers. Ontarians will have more information on how over-80s can book their appointments in the coming days, well in advance of the shot being available to them.

We know everyone is anxious to get their shots and we're anxious to get them to you. As vaccines start to arrive again, our public health professionals are organized and ready to COVID-vaccinate our communities. They vaccinated six million in six weeks against the flu just a few months back.

This is a team effort and we will continue to work collaboratively with vaccination sites and other health care partners to ensure we have the most successful vaccine rollout in the country. That's the Ontario spirit.

1030

BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB
OF EAST SCARBOROUGH

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: I am honoured today to rise in the House and to acknowledge the outstanding efforts of the Boys and Girls Club of East Scarborough in my riding of Scarborough–Guildwood. For more than 60 years, the Boys and Girls Club of East Scarborough has been an integral part of the local community. Over the course of this long history they have grown to offer a diverse range of programs, focusing on accessibility.

The significance of the programs and services that this group provides to the children, youth and families of Scarborough are many. Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic the East Scarborough Boys and Girls Club has shown courage, compassion and perseverance in their community-oriented response, all while continuing to provide their core supports for families.

People throughout Scarborough know the Boys and Girls Club to be a group of core community members who go above and beyond in the work that they do to help others. This has never been more evident than over the last 11 months, during COVID-19, where they have worked tirelessly to ensure that in the face of unprecedented adversity families receive the support they need through programs like the back-to-school backpack program and the Holiday Help program. Additionally, they have worked to combat food insecurity by providing emergency food services, including delivering meal hampers with essential items to families each and every week.

To the executive director, Utcha Sawyer, the team members and volunteers at the East Scarborough Boys and Girls Club, I say thank you and a job well done.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. That concludes our members' statements this morning.

I understand the member for Davenport may have a point of order.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I seek unanimous consent to immediately pass private member's motion 137, calling on the Ford government to implement a back-to-school plan with improved funding for classroom caps, better ventilation and a safety committee made up of experts, parents, students, education worker unions and boards.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Davenport is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to immediately pass private member's motion 137, calling on the government to implement a back-to-school plan with improved funding for classroom caps, better ventilation and a safety committee made up of experts, parents, students, education worker unions and boards. Agreed? I heard a no.

It is now time for oral questions.

QUESTION PERIOD

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My first question is to the Premier. We know that Alberta is actually taking appointments right now, as of today, online and through a 1-800 number, to get people vaccinated. We know that Quebec has announced their 1-800 number and launched their portal, and appointments begin tomorrow. Last week, General Hillier told Ontarians that within the next week and a half or so, we would have both of these things in Ontario as well. Here we are today, and General Hillier has said that in fact we are not going to have anything until perhaps March 15.

What is going on with the government of Ontario that they can't get their act together and provide seniors with the vaccines they need to protect themselves from COVID-19 in a timely manner?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I recognize the Premier to reply.

Hon. Doug Ford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'll tell you what Ontario is doing. Yes, we're coming out with a 1-800 number. We're going to be reaching out to seniors through their family physicians, through mail and through the media. We'll have a strong campaign.

But I'll tell you what we are doing: We're leading the country with rapid tests. We're leading the country with PCR tests. We have the lowest active cases anywhere in North America for a jurisdiction of our size, with the exception of the Atlantic provinces. We called on the feds to expand sick day pay from two weeks to four weeks. We advocated to the federal government to increase transfers up to \$4 billion on the restart agreement. We're leading the country, and in a lot of cases North America, in every single category. Vaccinations, too: We're leading the country with vaccinations.

Mr. Speaker, when 444 municipalities work together, when the federal government works together with the province, that's what happens. We lead the country on every single aspect of this pandemic.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: This government is on a campaign all right, and maybe that's the problem: They're campaigning instead of protecting people from COVID-19.

Doctors were not even brought into the loop when it comes to the government's COVID-19 vaccination plan, yet here we are. Our province seems to be going backward while other provinces are moving ahead. People deserve to know. Seniors with anxiety and worry, who are wondering about when they're going to be protected, deserve to have basic information. They need to know when and where, and they need to know that now.

It is shameful that we're in this situation. Why is this government, notwithstanding the fact that they've had months and months and months on end to plan, not in a position to give seniors the peace of mind that they deserve

and the urgency, the swiftness, to get the vaccines that they need?

Hon. Doug Ford: Again, Mr. Speaker, we've been in full communication with all the hospitals, with all the PH units. We take advice from the science table. There must be 200 doctors altogether who we are listening to, who helped put this plan together—and it's a great plan.

As you know, Ontario is a massive, massive jurisdiction. We have one standard plan, but we're going to make sure that it suits every single area, because we know for people up in Kenora, it's not the same as vaccinating close to three million people here in Toronto or in the GTA—another three million people. But we have a solid plan; we're rolling it out.

Mr. Speaker, I'm standing here to tell you: We will lead the country once again as we get the vaccines. Go to the root cause: We need more vaccines. That's the bottom line. If we had the vaccines, we would get them into people's arms.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Well, Speaker, as of yesterday, there were 100,000 vaccines waiting to go into people's arms. The problem is, the government doesn't have a vaccination plan at this late date, and people are going to suffer as a result.

Yet the government is reopening the province when their vaccine plan has been delayed. We were expecting it for March 1; now it's March 15. We were expecting something swift; in fact, this is very, very slow. That's troubling, because without the investments needed for public health measures to be boosted, without the money being spent to ensure these things occur, without having a vaccine rolling out, this government is guaranteeing that we're heading into a third wave that could be devastating.

Why do the people of Ontario have to accept this government's slow response, lack of urgency and inability to protect us from this virus?

Hon. Doug Ford: Mr. Speaker, to the contrary—I'll repeat what I said—in every category, no matter if it's a rapid test that we're doing, we're leading the country, not by a little bit but by huge, huge margins. No one even comes close to us on rapid tests, on PCR tests and the lowest active cases anywhere in North America. We move like lightning and we're going to continue to move like lightning.

We have an incredible plan put together by doctors, by health professionals, by experts within their fields, and we're going to listen to them. As we listen to them, we're going to continue moving forward with the support of the hospitals and the PHUs.

By the way, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank all the front-line health care workers, the hospitals and PHUs for working together. That's how we're going to get through this—not being the party of, “No, it can't be done. The world is coming to an end.” We're the party of, “Yes, it can be done.” We're the party of the people. We're there for the working-class people, and that's what people see in Ontario.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, this next question is also for the Premier. Thunder Bay is literally in a COVID-19 crisis, and yet here's how the Minister of Health said this government was dealing with it yesterday: “Information will come in this evening with respect to the actual data.... That will be something that Dr. David Williams and his team will then be reviewing and will” then “be making” preliminary “recommendations to us in cabinet... that will” then “be reviewed following the next block of data that comes in on Thursday, and then a determination is made as to whether there should be a change.”

Speaker, two cabinet meetings, three studies, three days of delay: Is this what an emergency brake looks like to this government? Is this what the people of Thunder Bay deserve when they're in crisis?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The government House leader to reply.

Hon. Paul Calandra: The member will know that, obviously, as the Premier has said and the Minister of Health has said, and as we've done throughout the entire pandemic, we do listen to the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health. That advice is informed by the local medical officers of health and the public health units across the province.

I'm surprised and frankly shocked to learn that the Leader of the Opposition now is suggesting that we not listen to these people. It's the same advice that the critic for education has been giving the people of Ontario, suggesting that we not listen to our educators. By not listening to the NDP, we've been able to come out with a safe restart program for our schools.

We will continue to work very closely with the Chief Medical Officer of Health and with public health officials across the province, including Thunder Bay, to ensure that all the people of this province remain safe. As the Premier said, we are a leading jurisdiction in North America, and we intend to keep it that way.

1040

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: The government has to keep telling themselves that because nobody believes it.

But look, this is serious stuff. In Thunder Bay, there are 273 active cases of COVID-19, 216 of which have occurred in the last seven days alone, more than through the first wave of this virus—the most they've ever had, in fact.

So the question that I have is, why is this government ignoring the pleas of Thunder Bay? They're asking for help with more isolation units, they're asking for help with contact tracing and testing, and yet the government is doing nothing. They're telling them that they have to wait for more endless studies. They're having to wait for long, drawn-out processes before the people of Thunder Bay get a sense of whether or not their government is going to step up and protect them from COVID-19 and stop the spread in their community.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, the Leader of the Opposition, it should surprise nobody, is wrong. We have, of

course, been working very closely with the Chief Medical Officer of Health of the province and the medical officers of health across the province, including those in Thunder Bay. That is why we have a safe restart and a move back into the framework. Local medical officers of health help inform the decisions that we make as a cabinet with respect to where a region falls in that framework. We have an emergency brake. Local medical officers of health have additional powers and tools at their disposal to act even quicker.

On every measure, this government has given the tools to the Chief Medical Officer of Health. We have the tools and we have been doing what needs to be done and the results speak for themselves. We lead the nation in terms of active cases. We've done an extraordinary job, as the Premier has said, on testing. We've done a great job on rapid testing. We have isolation; we've expanded the availability of isolation units across the province. When there's more to do, we act very quickly, and that includes in all areas of the province. But it will always be informed by working with the local medical officers of health and the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: This government should be moving heaven and earth to help the people of Thunder Bay, but they are getting crickets from this government.

We are headed for disaster. Everybody has said, all of the experts have said, that if you open too fast and you don't provide the extra measures and you don't have a vaccine plan that's actually going to roll out in the appropriate time frames and you have an emergency brake that takes two cabinet ministers, three sets of studies and then who knows what else, then the bottom line is, you're driving us into a disaster.

My question for the government is, when are they going to admit that their lack of action, their lack of urgency, their lack of ability to get ahead of this virus and the decisions they're making this very day are heading us into a devastating third wave?

Hon. Paul Calandra: The Leader of the Opposition has been incorrect on every single aspect of this pandemic. This is the same Leader of the Opposition who wanted to fire the Chief Medical Officer of Health of the province of Ontario. We have decided to take a different approach: working with the Chief Medical Officer of Health, looking at the data, being informed and leveraging the public health units across this province to ensure that we can react and have reacted quickly. That is why, as the Premier said, we are leading in terms of testing. That is why we are leading in terms of rapid testing. That is why our schools have returned safely. That is why we have more vaccines in the arms of the people of Ontario than across anywhere else in this country. We are doing the job, and we're getting it done.

I would suggest to the Leader of the Opposition that she continue to try at least to work with us, Mr. Speaker. She has been wrong on every single thing. It's the same type of hysteria that we heard when it came to the flu shots.

They said it couldn't be done. Six million Ontarians got a flu shot—a record. And we will continue to lead this nation by working hard but not by working—

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

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Marit Stiles: This question is for the Premier. Families and students are very anxious right now, watching the daily case counts in schools tick up once again. They're wondering if this government is applying any of the lessons learned over the past year. We know students need to be able to safely distance, but we're still seeing class sizes balloon. We know improved ventilation systems are key, yet the only tool many schools have right now is an open window. We know that comprehensive in-school testing is vital to identifying asymptomatic spread, but we're being given a patchwork approach of weekend testing that tells parents and staff to travel far from school and home.

Speaker, can the Premier tell us why he's risking more school closures, instead of implementing the common-sense proposals that experts and we in the opposition have put forward?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Education to reply.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: The commitment of the government and the Premier is to keep kids safe. We have demonstrated to the population that by following public expert advice, we have done so in the full. When we conducted asymptomatic testing in the hotspot regions, where thousands of tests were conducted, we saw low rates of COVID transmission, which demonstrates quite obviously the collaboration of parents to reduce congregation of their children after school and on weekends, and then, quite obviously, the effectiveness of the infection prevention measures put in place to ensure schools are safe.

There are 3,400 more temporary teachers working in our schools. There are 1,400 more custodians working in our schools. There is an improvement to air ventilation for 95% of schools, as reported by the school boards themselves. The Premier and the government are totally committed to ensuring kids remain safe and, most especially, that their schools remain open, which I know is the position contrarily held by the members opposite.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Back to the Premier—but can I just say that we are hurtling toward a third lockdown, and this minister chooses to blame families and students? It's outrageous.

In Thunder Bay, nearly 600 students are in isolation today following outbreaks—112 new cases. Last night, Lakehead Public Schools passed a motion calling on the district health unit to move all students back to remote learning. Province-wide, we have over 8% of schools with at least one case and 16 schools closed entirely. If this seems like déjà vu to the minister, it's because it feels like

nothing has changed since last fall, except we now have variants.

Speaker, we all want to see kids where they learn best, in school, but right now that return to school is at risk again because this government is still relying on a wing and a prayer. Will the Premier pass our motion today and take action to keep our schools safely open?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Well, the government has followed the best advice by the Chief Medical Officer of Health, because we are the party that is standing up to ensure schools can remain open.

It's not lost on us that the members opposite do not want us to re-open schools, but we listen to public health advice. We ensured community rates came down by strengthening our infection prevention measures. We can confidently do so, recognizing the challenges globally within our education and congregate settings. In every jurisdiction on earth, there are challenges with the variants of concern, but that's precisely why we have stepped up our testing capacity in the Ministry of Education alone. In fact, in York region there are 18 schools being identified this week for targeted asymptomatic testing, 75 in the member's city of Toronto, seven in Hamilton and more well across the province.

We recognize the challenge, the unprecedented difficulty we face in 2021, and we are absolutely determined to continue to increase investment and strengthen our protocol to keep schools open and safe in Ontario.

LIFE SCIENCES SECTOR

Ms. Jane McKenna: My question is to the Premier. Premier, Ontario has always been a leader when it comes to the life sciences sector, but to see what has been accomplished is truly remarkable. Ontario is one of the largest life sciences sectors anywhere in the world, which includes MaRS, North America's largest urban innovation hub.

MaRS Centre, housed with the University Health Network, is doing incredible work. For example, the second COVID-19 vaccination site for staff working in Toronto's long-term care facilities and staff of acute care hospitals. The locations include 18 vaccine stations in the MaRS Centre's auditorium. The location is intended to vaccinate staff working in Toronto's long-term-care facilities, as well as staff working in acute care hospitals that are run by UHN and within walking distance of the site.

Speaker, can the Premier please share with the Legislature more about the great work being done at MaRS and UHN and in the life sciences sector?

Hon. Doug Ford: That's great. I want to thank the incredible member from Burlington for the question. Yes, it was great to go down to MaRS yesterday with the members from Flamborough-Glanbrook and Mississauga-Streetsville, two leaders in economic development within our team. I also want to thank Yung Wu for inviting us. Talk about a true entrepreneur. What an incredible leader.

To see the incredible work being done in our fight against COVID-19—Ontario is a world leader in the life sciences sector, and MaRS is one of North America's largest urban innovation hubs. We have some of the sharpest scientific minds right here in Ontario, and there's nothing that we can't do right here in Ontario. But our battle against COVID-19 requires all hands on deck, and they have stepped in to join the fight. I want to thank them for joining the fight. These world-class scientists are now using their incredible talents to help us beat this deadly pandemic.

1050

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

Ms. Jane McKenna: Premier, the life sciences sector is a major driver in Ontario, as you know. About 51% of Canadian life sciences research and development spending occurs in Ontario. Some 51% of Canada's total research and development personnel in life sciences are located in Ontario. The world's top 10 pharmaceutical companies by revenue, and others, conduct clinical trials in Ontario.

Part of the success story of MaRS includes the great work being accomplished at the Ontario Institute for Cancer Research and the work they are doing in the fight against COVID-19. Everyone from our top scientists to our heroic front-line workers are all working together to help protect us during this dark period.

Can the Premier please share with the Legislature more about the great work being done at MaRS with the Ontario Institute for Cancer Research?

Hon. Doug Ford: I want to thank the member from Burlington. The member is right about the incredible innovation that I saw and our other members saw when we went by there the other day.

We have some of the sharpest scientific minds right here in Ontario. Ontario's 24 academic research hospitals have invested as much as \$1.4 billion into research and development, and they employ 18,000 researchers and research staff across the province. Those are incredible numbers.

And we see that in the work of the Ontario Institute for Cancer Research—we're so fortunate; it's literally a stone's throw from here—not to mention the partnership with UHN, the largest research hospital in all of Canada. Under the leadership of Dr. Radvanyi, the institute is a world leader, on the absolute cutting edge of research and development. The Ontario Institute for Cancer Research has stepped in to join the fight against COVID-19.

EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS

Mr. Gurratan Singh: There are two indisputable facts we know: When people are sick and can stay at home, we are able to reduce the amount of COVID-19 spread across the province; and that workplaces are one of the leading areas of spread for COVID-19.

Despite these indisputable facts, backed by health care experts, the Premier not only refuses to bring in paid sick days, but he has also called them a waste of taxpayer

money. A waste of taxpayer money? Let's be clear: Working people not having to choose between going to work sick or paying the bills is not a waste of taxpayer money; it is the bare minimum that workers in Ontario deserve.

My question is to the Premier. Will he apologize for these reckless comments, and will he commit to bringing in paid sick days for workers across Ontario?

Hon. Doug Ford: Mr. Speaker, the difference between ourselves and the NDP: After companies are struggling, holding on by their fingernails, their solution was to start charging employers to pay for the two weeks' sick days. We advocated—I advocated—hard for an additional \$4 billion. I advocated hard to make sure we changed it from two weeks to four weeks—and I want to thank the federal government for stepping up and making it four weeks.

The people out there understand, number one, that you can't talk out of both sides of your mouth when we —

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

Hon. Doug Ford: Sorry about that. I withdraw.

You can't say one thing and then mean something different. One second they're complaining about small business, then they want to tax small business and put more of a burden on them—we went down that avenue before we got elected, and we lost 90,000 jobs—that they can't afford.

We're going to be there to support small business. We're going to support the front-line, hard-working people. Because of us being strong advocates now, the people of Ontario are getting—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. Supplementary question.

Mr. Gurratan Singh: Back to the Premier: Brampton is a city full of essential workers, front-line workers who literally cannot work from home. Because they go to work, others can work from home, because they move our economy. And yet there will be hundreds of workers in Brampton and across Ontario who woke up this morning having to make that terrible, impossible decision between going to work sick and having to worry about paying their bills.

Why is this Conservative government okay with putting essential workers at risk? Does the Premier still think that it is a waste of taxpayer dollars to protect essential workers in Brampton and across Ontario and their families? And will he commit to implementing paid sick days for all workers?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To reply, the member for Burlington and parliamentary assistant.

Ms. Jane McKenna: I would first like to say, Speaker, that 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 recognized the importance of supporting a health and safety culture in every workplace. That's number one.

Number two, Premier Ford has demonstrated that he is leading a collaborative approach to supporting workers in Ontario by partnering on initiatives with the federal Liberal government. I'd invite the NDP to drop their partisan

language and begin working with us for the betterment of working Ontarians.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. John Fraser: My question is for the Premier. Yesterday, Quebec announced that they have launched an online booking portal for those 85 years and older to start making their vaccine appointments tomorrow morning. Alberta is already booking appointments for 75-year-olds. In Ontario, our portal is not going to be ready until March 15—the ides of March. Doctors who are supposed to be calling the over-80-year-olds are still waiting for the government's call.

The Premier said last December that when vaccines got here, we'd be ready. It's almost March and clearly we are not ready. Speaker, through you, can the Premier tell us why Ontario is always behind the other provinces when it comes to a COVID-19 response?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The government House leader to reply.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, Mr. Speaker, I'll say this: The member knows full well that there is a plan. We've leveraged the 34 public health units across this province to feed into that plan. We are leading the nation in terms of vaccinations. We are leading the nation in terms of testing. We are leading the nation in terms of rapid testing. We are leading the nation, with the exception of the Atlantic bubble, as the Premier has already mentioned, in terms of infections per 100,000. We are doing an incredible job, all of the people of the province of Ontario, and we'll continue to do that.

The one thing that we're missing right now—the one thing that we're missing—is the vaccines. As soon as we get those vaccines from the federal government, we will be able to implement the second phase of our plan with respect to vaccinating the people of the province of Ontario and continuing to lead all provinces in getting that done.

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

Mr. John Fraser: Well, I would like to remind the member—I thank him for his answer, but it took almost half a million vaccines and 60 days to get to the 70,000 residents of long-term care who we all said we had to get to first. So supply wasn't the problem. It was the plan. That's what the problem was.

Today, in response to the question about why March 15, and why that was okay, the head of the task force said, "Well, we don't need it"—that is absolutely shocking, "we don't need it"—and then in another breath said, "I wish we'd had it earlier." You can't have it both ways.

Quebec is booking online appointments tomorrow morning for 85 years old and older. Alberta is already doing 75-year-olds. The city of Ottawa is ready to do 80-year-olds, except they don't have your online booking tool. It's like, how long have we had to prepare for this?

Speaker, back to the Premier again: Can he explain why Ontario is weeks behind other provinces in being ready for phase 2 of the vaccine rollout?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely, completely wrong, and what we're hearing today from both opposition parties is absolutely shameful. The member will absolutely know that shipments of both vaccines were severely reduced to the province of Ontario. That is why we made the prudent decision to make sure that everybody who got a first dose could get the second dose, because it is important that everybody who gets the first dose actually gets the second dose so that they are protected.

1100

What the opposition and what this member are suggesting is that we forget about those protocols and roll the dice with seniors, with hundreds of thousands of people. We chose not to do that, Mr. Speaker, and the results are clear: We lead the nation in terms of vaccinations.

We have a plan that has leveraged 34 public health units across this province, Mr. Speaker, and we will continue to lead the nation in terms of protecting our people. If the member opposite can do anything, he can help us to make sure that his federal Liberal cousins live up to the obligations and to the things that they told the people of the province of Ontario, and get those vaccinations here for the people of Ontario.

ANTI-BULLYING INITIATIVES

Ms. Jane McKenna: Today is Pink Shirt Day, a day we stand together against bullying in all of its forms.

Ontario is unfortunately not immune to the plight of bullying. It is more important than ever to make sure our kids can receive the skills, confidence and mental health support that they need to succeed and that they can feel safe at school.

Could the Minister of Education please share how we are combating bullying, and supporting our most vulnerable students in the classroom and beyond?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you to the member from Burlington for the question. As CAMH has reported, over one in five children in this province has faced one form of bullying. We believe it is unacceptable. There is no tolerance in this province and country for any form of bullying that targets students with disabilities, racialized students, LGBTQ students, students from faith communities and so many others who have been afflicted by this type of impact.

That's why the government decided, in the health and physical education curriculum, to ensure that there's mandatory learning—mandatory, compulsory education—that deals with bullying from grades 1 to 8, specifically both cyberbullying, given the prevalence of young people online, as well as traditional forms of bullying. We've doubled the investment in mental health—more than doubled it, Speaker—to support victims, to ensure they have access to care and, of course, provided training to educators in de-escalation and in other tactics and tools to help reduce these pervasive forms of impact on young people.

We'll continue to stand with them, a whole-of-government approach, to support young people, to improve respect in our schools and the culture that we seek for all young people to be included in Ontario.

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

Ms. Jane McKenna: Speaker, we know that bullying happens in many forms. It can be physical, it can be verbal, it can be in person, it can be online. But no matter what form, bullying is very intentional. There is a deliberate effort to hurt someone when bullying occurs.

But just because someone deliberately bullies another, doesn't mean we have to let them. We can be just as intentional in our actions to stand up to bullying, to stand against those who are purposely hurting others, Speaker. We can and we must stand against bullying and continue to fight bullying, discrimination and hatred in all forms. Because, Speaker, if we don't stop bullying at a young age, it turns into abuse at an older age.

Can the Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues please inform the House why it is so important to stop bullying early and why we also need to call it out when we see it in adults as well?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues to reply.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member from Burlington for that question. She is absolutely correct: Bullying happens in many forms and can happen to anyone. If left unchecked, bullying can turn into more serious abuses as we get older. Things like intimate partner violence, abuse online and assaults are intentional efforts to harm others, and cannot be tolerated.

Speaker, this past Monday was Human Trafficking Awareness Day, which is another form of bullying and abuse that happens. If we do not speak out against these things, if we do not call them out, if we do not stop them, they cause incredible harm and trauma, and in extreme cases, death.

Putting a stop to bullying, whether in our schools, over the Internet or in our communities, takes all Ontarians being deliberate and doing something. We need to speak with one voice and act with one purpose. On Pink Shirt Day, I encourage everyone in this Legislature to be extra vigilant with our words and our actions, and to call out bullying when we see it. Thank you to everyone who is wearing pink today to support this.

EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS

Mr. Percy Hatfield: My question is to the Premier—and good morning, everyone.

The Premier has said numerous times that he respects and listens to the medical experts, including those who run our public health units. Well, my health unit in Windsor and Essex county has joined 16 others already on record in support of paid sick leave during this COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, a letter to the Premier this week calls on the Premier to support Bill 239, the Stay Home If You Are

Sick Act. That bill, Speaker, as you know, was introduced by my colleague from London West.

Will the Premier listen to the medical experts and accept their modelling projections that Ontario will not be able to control the virus without the safety of paid sick days?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The parliamentary assistant and member for Burlington.

Ms. Jane McKenna: I thank the member for his question. My daughter is also a nurse in Windsor as well. But here's what I'm so proud of, I can tell you this: Our government, led by our Premier, has worked relentlessly in the last year to make sure that everybody—every worker, every employer and every employee—has paid sick days. On February 19, the government of Canada announced a proposal to double the number of paid sick days, from two weeks to four weeks. This will provide workers up to 20 paid sick days. I am very proud of that.

I also want to say this again: Premier Ford has demonstrated that he's leading a collaborative approach to supporting workers in Ontario by partnering on initiatives with the federal Liberal government. I'd invite the NDP, again, to drop the partisan language and begin working with us for the betterment of the workers of Ontario.

Interjections.

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

Mr. Percy Hatfield: Speaker, we all know the federal program is flawed. It's cumbersome.

Earlier in an answer, the government said that they listened to the experts in Thunder Bay, the public health experts. The Premier said that we can't say one thing and mean something different. In a letter to the Premier, the health unit says more than half of Canadian workers do not have access to paid sick leave through their employers, and 70% of those earning less than \$25,000 don't have paid time off when they're ill. Those earning less than \$30,000 are twice as likely to contract COVID and nearly three times more likely to end up in the hospital with it.

We all want an end to this pandemic. Bill 239 helps us to do that. Speaker, why can't the Premier see the need to augment any federal contribution with a made-in-Ontario solution for paid sick leave during this global pandemic?

Ms. Jane McKenna: I first want to say that the NDP continues to provide inaccurate information to Ontarians by purposely failing to mention the federal paid sick days. The reason I say that is, we've said it over and over again—

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

Ms. Jane McKenna: Withdraw.

I want to reiterate again what I've already said: that my minister, the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development, has done a phenomenal job working with his federal counterpart. People were complaining that it was taking far too long for them to be able to get the monies that they needed to receive for paid sick days. They're now getting it within three days into their account. People are

very excited, and I'm very thoughtful that that was able to happen.

I also want to say, again, that it's our responsibility in this House to make sure that the people out there know of the monies that they're able to get. I will reiterate what I said last time: There have been 110,000 Ontarians that have applied. To date, only \$271 million has been accessed nationwide, meaning that there is still \$800 million waiting to be spent. Why would we duplicate something when the program has 73% that's unspent?

1110

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Mike Schreiner: My question is for the Premier. The federal government asked the provinces to have a vaccine rollout plan ready in December. It's now the end of February, and the government announced a plan this morning. But essential workers in vulnerable workplaces, where most of the outbreaks are currently happening, still don't know when and how they will get vaccinated. This morning, General Hillier said that that would be figured out in May.

Earlier today in question period, the Premier said, "I'm standing up for workers." If that is the case, can he please tell essential workers in vulnerable workplaces when and how they will be vaccinated?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The government House leader to respond.

Hon. Paul Calandra: As the member knows, in fact the initial thrust, phase 1 of the plan, which was introduced weeks ago, was to ensure that congregate care settings, long-term-care homes, retirement homes, hospital workers and those working in high-risk areas were vaccinated. As you know as well, Speaker, that program was a success.

There were some setbacks when the federal government was unable to provide the vaccines that it had guaranteed not only to the province of Ontario but other provinces as well. As you know, for weeks, shipments were either delayed or stopped entirely.

Having said that, the member is incorrect in one sense: We have focused on those settings and the results have been encouraging. That has been phase 1. Phase 2, as we mentioned, will start to move to those who are 80 years and older. There is a plan in place, leveraged by 34 public health units, and we are just missing the vaccines right now. But I'm optimistic that the federal government will live up to those obligations in the future—

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

Mr. Mike Schreiner: It's not just essential workers, it's all Ontarians who are still a bit confused about the plan.

It is true that the federal government has been delayed in making vaccines available to all provinces. But with all due respect, the bottom line is that right now, Ontario is behind other provinces in launching the online booking portal. We are behind other provinces in vaccinating elderly residents in the community. We are also behind

other provinces in the percentage of overall population that is currently vaccinated.

I'm just asking, with all due respect, can the government explain to us why Ontario is behind other provinces in vaccinations and what our plan is for catching up?

Hon. Paul Calandra: First and foremost, the first part of the plan is to receive vaccines. Once a significant and consistent delivery of vaccines is made available to the province of Ontario and to other jurisdictions, those parts of the plan will be implemented.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, many months ago, the plan was brought forward. It leveraged the 34 public health units across the province of Ontario; I'm confident that the member opposite would expect that. I know that the member opposite can appreciate how different every part of the province is. We focused the initial thrust on congregate care settings in high-risk areas, be it retirement homes, long-term-care homes, our medical professionals, those working in those environments. We made sure that everybody who received a first dose could get a second dose, which was very important given the fact that we did see a massive delay in deliveries through the federal government's inability to give—

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

STUDENT SAFETY

Ms. Jane McKenna: First, before I start my question, I want to thank the Minister of Education for his kindness and compassion to my constituents in Burlington.

We know that the vast majority of educators do incredible work each and every day. This has proven to be true time and time again, with the pandemic amplifying their importance. What is also true is that this government's number one priority is the safety and well-being of our students. That includes protecting students from sexual abuse and mistreatment from our schools to their homes.

Can the minister outline the reforms he drove this fall to protect Ontario's students, as well as how we will provide support for students who have, heartbreakingly, been victims of sexual abuse?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I want to thank the member for the question and the commitment, as I think we all have, as we know all educators have in this province, to keep students safe. Their safety is the paramount priority of this government.

We did take action to ensure that no educator with a history of sexual misconduct or racist behaviour can work within our schools by keeping those individuals out of our schools. Those individuals will not be able to work in schools in this province under this government through the changes, the sweeping reforms we made to the Ontario College of Teachers Act and the Early Childhood Educators Act.

Importantly, the move we made is retroactive. It will ensure individuals who were found with past misconduct are removed from our school system permanently. All

disciplinary decisions will now, under this government, be publicly posted, because we believe parents have a right to know.

We're mandating a sexual abuse prevention program for both the Ontario College of Teachers and the College of Early Childhood Educators to reinforce the importance of child protection and are, of course, extending supports, therapy and counselling to the victims themselves. This government is fully committed to protecting our kids every step of the way.

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

Ms. Jane McKenna: Thank you for that response, Minister. It's hard to understand why information like this would not have been made public before, but as a parent I'm glad that it is now being made public. If this was occurring when my children were in school, I would definitely want to know.

We know that children and youth are impressionable, and the close relationships teachers have with their students can encourage a child to succeed or can cause trauma. This conversation is all the more important as we talk about issues like human trafficking, gender-based violence and even bullying. These conversations are hard but are necessary to have. Children and youth need to know that this behaviour is not okay and that there are supports if this is happening to them.

Can the Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues please share with the House why it is so important for us to take these steps, especially for children and youth?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member from Burlington for that question. I couldn't agree more with the member. I would be mortified if any of these teachers taught any of my daughters in school. I am proud to be part of a government and have a Premier that takes strong, meaningful action against sexual misconduct and racism.

We all know it but it needs to be said: Abuse of any kind, especially sexual abuse of children, is completely abhorrent and will not be tolerated.

The reality is that exploitation, especially among children and youth, occurs most often by someone they know, like a teacher. Again, I want to state that our teachers do absolutely incredible work, and the vast majority are upstanding in their care of our students. But we all need to take these actions against those who are harming children and ensure that they are not able to teach ever again in the province of Ontario. We must do everything we can to protect our children and youth. These changes are a step in the right direction.

HEALTH CARE FUNDING

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: My question is to the Premier. The Middlesex-London Health Unit estimates their budget will grow by \$7 million more this year than in 2020 as a result of the pandemic. The budget increase is

due to the payroll nearly doubling since last year to more than \$1 million biweekly and added expenses for vaccine rollout and more.

The Middlesex-London Health Unit is not alone. Cities and public health units have stepped up to bear the brunt of controlling this pandemic. The Association of Local Public Health Agencies is calling for the province to step up its funding to all public health units.

Will this government commit to financially supporting our hard-working public health units in protecting our communities?

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

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's an important question and I appreciate the member for raising that. It's important for a number of reasons. We have, since the start of the pandemic, been very clear that we will ensure that our health care and those supporting COVID-19 have all the funds that they need in order to battle that. That is a commitment that the Premier made. There have been significant funds made available throughout health care, in partnership with our municipal governments, whether it was for transit or transportation.

Really, it goes to the heart of what we've been talking about, and what the opposition does not seem to get. One of the reasons we are working so closely with the federal government is that a commitment was made early on that the provincial government would be able to put massive amounts of resources, like we have, into health care, so that the federal government could handle those payments to people, whether it was CERB or other payments like sick pay. That's what working together does, Mr. Speaker.

1120

It is because of that co-operation that we have been able, whether it was expanding resources to our health care system, pay for PSWs or a safe restart in schools, to get that done. So the member is absolutely correct: Work has to be done, and we will make sure it—

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

The supplementary question.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Details released a couple of weeks ago showed that the Middlesex-London Health Unit used credit to cover the costs. The unit took out a short-term loan of just over \$1 million to cover overtime costs and more. They were able to repay it only after receiving the province's one-time funding for COVID-19-related expenses. But fighting COVID-19 is not a one-time expense. It's not a one-time thing.

Our public health units deserve to know that they will have all the resources they'll need to keep our communities safe. Will this government commit to timely, consistent and full financial support for our local public health units, so they are not forced to take out loans to do the public work that they're meant to do to keep our communities safe?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, Mr. Speaker, I think we've been very clear on that. The Premier was crystal clear that we would spare no resources to fight COVID-19, and actions have followed. We have provided significant

transfers to our health care partners to ensure that they have the ability—whether it's the hospital sector, whether it's the long-term-care sector, we have put that funding in place.

But again, it speaks to the heart of the importance of being able to work with our partners at all levels. That is why the federal government has taken up certain challenges, transfers to people and individuals, and that's why we have put billions of dollars into health care to fight the pandemic. Despite the fact that the opposition is opposed to that, that has given us the resources to pay and to help our public health units, to build that capacity, to expand health care, to look at the surgeries and make sure that we get caught up. We will continue to do that, Mr. Speaker, and I'm very confident that by working together, we'll get the job done for many—

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

The next question.

MUNICIPAL FINANCES

Mr. Stephen Blais: Last week, after being criticized for his absence on the affordable housing file, the member for Peterborough-Kawartha wrote the mayor and council in what appears to be a threat to withdraw provincial funding from his community. To many, this is seen as an attempt to silence criticism with funding cuts.

Yesterday, the government House leader didn't know anything about it, so I hope he has had a chance to look into it. Mr. Speaker, my question: Is it the government's policy that only communities whose elected officials praise the government will receive provincial funding?

Hon. Paul Calandra: At least on this side of the House, it is our commitment that we will work every single day and advocate for the things that are important to our community, and time to time, there will be disagreements.

I'm shocked to hear now that the members opposite are suggesting that they, in fact, don't fight for their communities, that they take their marching orders from different levels of government and whatever they say, they just do. It really stands to reason. What's the point of sitting in this Legislature if you take your marching orders from somebody else?

The member for Peterborough has fought day and night for that community—day and night. He has brought significant, significant resources into that community—more than we have seen in generations, in fact, Mr. Speaker. He will continue to fight hard, but I expect him to continue to do what he does, to fight for the people and the things that he believes in, even when that means disagreeing with an official at a different level of government.

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

Mr. Stephen Blais: So if I heard the government House leader correctly, he expects the member from Peterborough to continue to threaten the mayor and council

with additional funding cuts if they don't give praise to the government.

Some might consider the letter from the member from Peterborough as an attempt at bullying and intimidation, Mr. Speaker. On Pink Shirt Day, will the government stand up to the bullying tactics of their own backbench and commit that provincial funding isn't contingent on praising the government or its members?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, this is coming from a member who, when in charge of the light rail system in the city of Ottawa, built a light rail system that was over budget, late and didn't work.

Look, I will expect the member for Peterborough to continue doing what he does. He is an excellent member of provincial Parliament. He has brought significant resources into Peterborough, and he fights very hard for that community. I'll let the opposition take their marching orders from the mayors of their communities.

I work very closely with the mayors of my community, but it shouldn't surprise you, Mr. Speaker, that on occasion we disagree and we advocate for our own positions. I'm elected to do the work on behalf of the people of the province of Ontario, and I fight for them—so does the member for Peterborough, every single day, and the results have been stunning for the people of Peterborough. And it's not just the member for Peterborough: The member for Northumberland, all of the members that surround and advocate for that city—I think they appreciate everything that that community has because of the members of provincial Parliament from this side of the House.

UNIVERSITY FUNDING

Mr. Jamie West: My question is for the Premier. Laurentian University is a cornerstone of northern Ontario in my community of Sudbury. While everyone in Sudbury was shocked by Laurentian's administration's decision to seek CCAA creditor protection, the province and the ministry clearly knew everything about Laurentian's financial difficulties more than six months ago, and they chose to do nothing. Maybe it's because they knew the \$700 million that they cut from colleges and universities across Ontario only had made things worse for Laurentian.

So Speaker, my question, through you to the Premier: The Minister of Colleges and Universities said he knew six months ago about the financial problems of Laurentian. Why did you stand by and do nothing?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Northumberland–Peterborough South and parliamentary assistant.

Mr. David Piccini: First and foremost, it's important that all members of this Legislature work together to ensure and to communicate to students that their academic journey will not be affected by this decision. It's deeply disturbing to learn that Laurentian has found themselves in this situation. We share in the concerns of students and their families. That's why, immediately, the minister appointed a special adviser, Alan Harrison, to provide

advice and recommendations to our government to support in working with Laurentian University. The government will be exploring all options. As this matter is currently before the courts, it would be inappropriate to comment any further.

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

Mr. Jamie West: The member opposite said that the minister stepped in immediately, but six months ago was not three weeks ago.

Back to the Premier: Since the province is choosing to do nothing to support Laurentian, my community is now at risk of losing hundreds of jobs in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic impact will be devastating to Sudbury and to all of northern Ontario, and this is on top of the potential loss of critical infrastructure and programs that serve all those in northern Ontario. Experts are concerned that this CCAA process will recommend Laurentian cut one third of all programs, one third of faculty and staff.

Speaker, again to the Premier: If this happens, our university will be gutted, our city will be devastated. Are you okay with this scenario, and why won't you fund Laurentian properly?

Mr. David Piccini: We'll work collaboratively with anyone. I would suggest to that member opposite, if he knew something six months ago—we have no letters from him indicating as such.

We continue to consult with all universities, and I'm glad he brought that up. Let's talk about funding to Laurentian University: Laurentian University consistently has received operating grants of over \$80 million a year. That accounts for more than 40% of Laurentian's total revenue. Proportionately, we provide more money to that university than many others in this province.

While I'm at it, let's talk about the northern Ontario special purpose grant, \$6 million that went annually; the teacher education stabilization program grant of over \$2 million; the graduate expansion program for over \$7.9 million—

Interjection.

Mr. David Piccini: They're trying to heckle me because they don't want to hear this—the Northern Tuition Sustainability Fund of over \$4.3 million.

And I'm glad we talked about the tuition cut, because after decades of propping up the Liberal government that this member's party did, we put students first in delivering a historic tuition reduction, instead of on the backs of students who received an over 100% tuition increase over the legacy of the previous government. We put students first, and we're not going to apologize for that.

LAND USE PLANNING

Mr. Mike Schreiner: My question is for the Premier. Opposition to paving over parts of the greenbelt and prime farmland by wasting \$10 billion on a highway to save commuters 30 seconds is growing. Orangeville and Halton Hills have passed resolutions against Highway 413. The

Halton Region Federation of Agriculture is opposed to it, and now the president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture is calling on the government for an agricultural impact assessment to determine how Highway 413 will affect farmers in the agri-food sector.

1130

Speaker, given how important farming is to our economy and food security, will the Premier listen to the OFA and conduct an agricultural impact assessment before wasting any money on Highway 413?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The government House leader to reply.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, as I said yesterday, there's still a tremendous amount of work that needs to be done: an environmental assessment and some consultations with our partners in the area.

Obviously, agriculture remains one of the most important economic drivers not only in that region but across the province of Ontario, and we're going to do everything we can to ensure that that remains the case, including in that area.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Speaker, given that it's clear the government still has a lot of homework to do on this highway, I'm now confused about why they're fast-tracking it.

Just four years ago, an expert panel determined that the costs of the highway far, far exceed the benefits. And the pandemic has raised even more questions about the need for this highway.

Why is the government prepared to spend \$10 billion on a highway to save people 30 seconds when we desperately need more money to hire staff in long-term care and pay them properly, when municipalities are desperate for money to support their public transit systems, when the wait times for mental health services are 18 months and longer, when small businesses need direct financial support to survive?

Will the government do the right thing and shelve this highway?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, we made a commitment before we were elected that we were going to do our best to ensure that the people of the province of Ontario could get around. We saw over a decade and a half's worth of stagnation by the previous Liberal government, and we said that we were going to invest in transit, transportation, roads and infrastructure.

The greenbelt plan always envisioned that there would be important infrastructure made available to be built in the greenbelt. We have tremendous growth happening in that area of the province, so it is important that we take a look at ways of getting people around.

It is ironic to hear the member of the Green Party—I said this yesterday: When I was a federal member of Parliament and we were talking about the Rouge National Urban Park, class 1 farmland, do you know what the Green Party's position was in Ottawa? Reforest it, because class 1 farmland wasn't important.

The only party in this place to take away land from farmers was the Liberal Party, who took away hundreds of acres from a generational farmer in my riding to build Bob

Hunter Memorial Park. When everybody was saying to stand up for farmers—

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

LAND USE PLANNING

Mr. Jeff Burch: Speaker, through you to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing: Throughout the pandemic, this government has accelerated the use of ministerial zoning orders, issuing more over the past year than in the previous 10 years.

This week, the minister told this House that “all MZOs that were done on non-provincial land all came at the request of the local council.”

Previously, the Premier told this House that all MZOs were requested by local councils, but he was called out by several mayors who were forced to take to Twitter to correct the record.

So I'm going to give the minister a chance to set the record straight: Isn't it true that MZOs are being imposed on communities without the support of local municipal governments? Yes or no?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The parliamentary assistant.

Mr. Parm Gill: I want to thank the member opposite for the question.

Mr. Speaker, our government has been crystal clear that every single MZO issued on non-provincially owned lands has been at the request of the local municipality, full stop.

MZOs are a tool that 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 Sunnybrook hospital, all made-in-Ontario PPE facilities. I can go on and on with this list.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Question period is concluded.

There being no further business this morning, this House stands in recess until 3 p.m.

The House recessed from 1135 to 1500.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

CASTLEFORM DEVELOPMENTS INC. ACT, 2021

Mr. Stan Cho moved first reading of the following bill:
Bill Pr40, An Act to revive Castleform Developments Inc.

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): Pursuant to standing order 89, this bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills.

1825821 ONTARIO LTD.
ACT, 2021

Mr. Stan Cho moved first reading of the following bill: Bill Pr45, An Act to revive 1825821 Ontario Ltd.

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): Pursuant to standing order 89, this bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills.

PETITIONS

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to say thank you to Nick Larochelle, president of USW Local 6500 in Sudbury, for these petitions.

“MS Specialized Clinic in Sudbury....”

“Whereas northeastern Ontario has one of the highest rates of multiple sclerosis (MS) in Ontario; and

“Whereas specialized MS clinics provide essential health care services to those living with multiple sclerosis, their caregiver and their family; and

“Whereas the city of Greater Sudbury is recognized as a hub for health care in northeastern Ontario;”

They petition the Legislative Assembly as follows:

“Immediately set up a specialized MS clinic in the Sudbury area that is staffed by a neurologist who specializes in the treatment of multiple sclerosis, a physiotherapist and a social worker at a minimum.”

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

EDUCATION FUNDING

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, I’m pleased to present this petition on behalf of Amelia MacKinnon.

“Petition to the Ontario Legislative Assembly:

“Do Not Cut Education Funding. Fully Fund the Equitable Education System Children, Families, and Education Workers Deserve.

“Whereas since July 2018 the Ontario provincial government has cut millions of dollars from public education funding including: \$100 million in funding allocated for school repairs; cancelled curriculum writing sessions to incorporate Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into school curriculum; removed the 2015 health and physical education curriculum from kindergarten to grade 8, reverting to the 2010 version; launched a web-based ‘snitch line’ for parents to report on teachers they suspect are not following the outdated curriculum; cut education programs by (EPO) for at-risk

youth, including Indigenous and racialized students by \$25 million; cut funding for autistic children and students; and

“Whereas the Ontario provincial government has announced a hiring freeze and significant class size increases from grades 4 to 12, mandatory e-learning and other detrimental changes to our public education system;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to oppose these damaging cuts and implement:

“—a fully funded public education system that includes low class caps, excellent needs support, no mandatory e-learning and well-maintained buildings;

“—funding that provides equitable enrichment opportunities across the system and reduces the burden on school-based fundraising;

“—an inclusive curriculum and respect for the diversity of our students and educators.”

I fully support this petition. I’m going to affix my signature and pass it to the Clerk.

OPTOMETRY SERVICES

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Dr. Kusnierczyk and Dr. Leroux from Chelmsford Eyecare for these petitions.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“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;”

They petition the Legislative Assembly 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, Speaker. I will affix my name to it and send it to the Clerk.

ANIMAL PROTECTION

Ms. Marit Stiles: I am pleased to be presenting this petition on behalf of Tyler Hamilton of Burlington. This petition reads as follows:

“Ontario, let’s stop de-clawing now!

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to immediately enact legislation that bans de-clawing of cats in the province of Ontario.”

I’m very pleased to affix my signature—it supports my private member’s bill—and I’ll pass it on to the Clerk.

SMALL BUSINESS

Mr. Mike Harris: I'd like to take an opportunity today to introduce a petition that says, "Support 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;

"—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 have affixed my signature to this petition and will pass it to the usher.

PUBLIC SECTOR COMPENSATION

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Krista Charlebois from Chelmsford in my riding for these petitions.

"Pandemic Pay...."

"Whereas the pandemic pay eligibility needs to be expanded as well as made retroactive to the beginning of the state of emergency; and

"Whereas Premier Ford stated repeatedly that the workers on the front lines have his full support but this is hard to believe given that so many do not qualify; and

"Whereas the list of eligible workers and workplaces should be expanded; and

"Whereas all front-line workers should be properly compensated;"

They petition the Legislative Assembly as follows:

"To call on the Ford government to expand the \$4-per-hour pandemic pay to include all front-line workers that have put the needs of their community first and make the pay retroactive to the day the state of emergency was declared, so that their sacrifice and hard work to keep us safe is recognized."

1510

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

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Mr. Mike Harris: I have another petition here.

"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 again wholeheartedly support this petition and have affixed my signature.

ANIMAL PROTECTION

Ms. Marit Stiles: I'm very pleased to present this petition on behalf of Gitte Fenger of the Paw Project Ontario. It reads as follows:

"Ontario, Let's Stop Declawing Now!

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas the surgical procedure known as declawing ... is actually a partial digital amputation ... that is the equivalent of cutting off the tip of a human finger at the first knuckle (cutting through the joint below the nail); and

"Whereas scratching is normal cat behaviour and a cat's primary defence, declawing a cat alters that normal behaviour, causes avoidable acute pain and has the potential of causing behavioural problems (such as biting and litter box avoidance) and chronic pain; and

"Whereas it is estimated that over 20 million domestic cats in North America are declawed every year...; and

"Whereas both the Canadian and Ontario Veterinary Medical Associations oppose the declawing of domestic cats unless there is a medical reason to do so; and

"Whereas the Canadian Medical Association, Centers for Disease Control, American Cancer Society, Infectious Diseases Society of America, the National Institutes of Health and the National Hemophilia Foundation all advise against the declawing of domestic cats to protect human health even for the animals of persons who are severely immunocompromised; and

"Whereas the procedure is considered inhumane and is already illegal or only performed under extreme circumstances in the state of New York, eight California cities, the city of Denver and more than 40 countries including Denmark, Norway, Sweden, England, Ireland, France,

Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Israel, Croatia, Brazil, Australia, and New Zealand; and

“Whereas shelters in areas with declaw bans have documented decreases in owner-surrendered cats after the ban was enacted; and

“Whereas Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Alberta, New Brunswick and Manitoba have all banned declawing of domestic cats;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to immediately enact legislation that bans declawing of cats in the province of Ontario.”

I’m very pleased to affix my signature to this. It’s in support of my private member’s bill, Teddy’s Law, and I’ll pass it along to the Clerk.

DOCUMENTS GOUVERNEMENTAUX

M^{me} France Gélinas: J’aimerais remercier Réal Audet et Nicole Mayer de mon comté pour ces pétitions.

Les « Accents en français sur les cartes » de l’Ontario.

« Alors qu’il est important d’avoir le nom exact des personnes sur les cartes émises par le gouvernement, » telle « la carte santé...;

« Alors que plusieurs personnes francophones ont des accents dans l’épellation de leur nom », comme moi;

« Alors que ... le ministère de la Santé » a « confirmé que le système informatique de l’Ontario ne permet pas l’enregistrement des lettres avec des accents; »

Ils demandent à l’Assemblée législative « qu’elle s’assure que les accents de la langue française soient inclus sur tous les documents et cartes émis par le gouvernement de l’Ontario. »

J’appuie cette pétition, je vais la signer et je la retourne à la table des greffiers.

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 23, 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?

Mr. Jeff Burch: It’s a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 238, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act. It may look like a straightforward bill that discusses WSIB premiums and nothing more. However, during my

time today I want to highlight exactly what it means for this government to prioritize this bill, which doesn’t do much of anything, and what’s missing from it.

Bill 238 legislates the freezing of WSIB premium rates paid by Ontario employers for 2021. It creates the power to require the WSIB to report to the minister. WSIB has already frozen the rates for the first quarter of 2021, so a bill isn’t needed to enact these freezes.

This is what you might refer to as a filler bill, to fill the time of people in this House instead of doing things that will actually help those on WSIB. This bill does nothing to address the long-standing issues with WSIB and the plight of injured workers.

We heard the Minister of Labour, when he was speaking to this bill, talk about how important this would be for small businesses in this province. But I have to tell you, Speaker, what I’m hearing from businesses, and what the government must also be hearing from businesses, is that paid sick leave is what would actually support businesses to make it through the pandemic and ensure that they are able to survive and remain open with their workers still on the payroll.

COVID-19 is as much a workplace illness as anything else. Right now, in the province of Ontario, 819 workplace claims are pending regarding COVID-19—819. That means that 819 families are watching a loved one spend their time battling WSIB instead of focusing on their health.

Right now, in our province, almost 2,000 COVID-19-related WSIB cases have been denied by WSIB—2,000. That’s PSWs, nurses, paramedics. Every day that they go to work they’re in harm’s way, and with the new variants, it may get even worse. Every single day, they face COVID-19, and they do it to keep our communities safe.

This page-and-a-half bill does not address workers’ needs in the province of Ontario.

The government knows that the cases are being suppressed in workplaces at alarming rates, and yet nothing is done.

In Waterloo, a paramedic was denied WSIB coverage despite the fact that they were assisting a COVID-19-positive patient. The WSIB claims that they could have caught it anywhere. Imagine that: contracting COVID-19, the stress that a paramedic is already facing, and being turned down for WSIB—money that the family is depending on to pay the bills. That’s the kind of system we have here in Ontario. Paramedics are our front-line heroes, saving people’s lives every day, just like firefighters and corrections officers. They deserve to be treated with respect. They should not have to spend their time fighting the WSIB for coverage when it’s clear that they contracted the virus by providing care for those who are COVID-19 positive.

This is not the case of one situation where WSIB has been denied; this is merely one example of many. My colleague from Niagara Falls has been working with paramedics in Niagara who caught COVID-19 in the workplace. One paramedic’s partner was on a ventilator, fighting for their life against the virus.

Many workers across this province do not even qualify for WSIB. Ontario workers not covered include a large number in such industries as privately run care homes, social assistance services, and the tech and banking sectors.

My friend from Windsor will probably be talking about social service settings.

I used to be a union representative for front-line workers and represented many workers in community care—the counsellors. Believe it or not, they don't have WSIB. At one home that I used to represent, the workers had daily calls to the police, because they deal with extremely violent residents who are very troubled. Not having WSIB is a huge problem in those kinds of workplaces, where those workers are dealing with very difficult situations and many are getting injured on a regular basis.

Not a single worker in the province should have to go to work every single day and not know, if they have a workplace accident, whether or not they will fall into poverty.

1520

Workers gave up the right to sue employers in exchange for coverage. It's a system that has the potential to work if the minister fixes WSIB. The Premier knows that workers are working every day without coverage. Why would the minister not take advantage of this opportunity to fix many of the problems that are experienced by workers with WSIB?

Workers are still suffering from the issues of deeming. My friend from Niagara Falls talked about this the other day. Deeming is where you get injured on the job, WSIB deems that you could do a phantom job—and it doesn't matter what job is available or whether you could actually do that job, they deem that you could do it. They then reduce your benefits to reflect the salary of that deemed job.

This practice is how a lot of injured workers in this province get thrust into a life of poverty. Many of them end up on ODSP or OW and are unable to pay their bills or get meaningful work.

This government refuses to fix the issues with WSIB, but puts forward a bill for rate freezes, a bill that is unnecessary to accomplish that task.

I would like to talk for a moment about unpaid isolation pay. This government refuses to stand up for the workers of this province. For months, I've asked this House to repair the issue of front-line health care workers who, when they are exposed to COVID-19 at work, are sent home without pay. I've written letters to the Minister of Health that have not been responded to. Workers and unions and public health agencies, the Ontario Medical Association and the Ontario Hospital Association have all asked that the province, which took away workers' pay when they were in isolation last summer, restore that so that workers who are exposed to COVID-19 on the job don't have to worry about paying the bills. The government has refused to do that. I was assured that the government was looking at the issue, but nurses, PSWs and administrative staff continue to call my office, some

saying they lost two weeks of pay and couldn't pay their mortgage.

Local hospitals took it upon themselves recently to fix this issue that the government created. It's unfathomable to me that this government won't support front-line health care workers in a pandemic, and I hope that when we look into how the hospitals are covering this, we find that the Ministry of Health is going to cover that cost and it won't contribute to hospital deficits.

Paid sick days: We've heard a lot about that in the last couple of weeks, with good reason, because we're all hearing about it from our constituents. This government won't support workers who maintain our food supply, stock shelves in grocery stores. They, too, have been lauded as heroes but receive no recognition of that with policies that will actually improve their lives or their livelihoods. In this province, workers still don't have paid sick days. This bill says the rate freeze is what's needed to support businesses. Small businesses in this province are asking for support; they're asking for paid sick days for their workers.

There was a media conference on February 10 from the Better Way Alliance. This is an organization of small and medium-sized businesses that came to tell this government that paid sick days are good for their business, their employees and their communities. They pointed out to Conservative MPPs that paid sick days are not only a public health imperative but also make good business sense. They said the cost of providing paid sick leave is minimal compared to the cost of outbreaks or the cycles of lockdowns and restrictions, which will continue as long as workers without paid sick days have no choice but to go in to work sick.

One business owner here in Toronto said that if someone comes in sick, everyone gets sick. "Providing paid sick days protects against this. It means a better experience for customers and employees."

And this government knows very well that the Ontario Chamber of Commerce issued a statement which said, "Public health and safety are priorities for us all. Ensuring people, particularly during a pandemic, can afford to stay home, is both the right thing to do and an economical thing to do. When a worker protects themselves, they protect their colleagues and employer and in turn, they safeguard the entire business."

Speaker, it's unconscionable that paid sick days are not being provided, at the same time that WSIB is not covering workers who are exposed to COVID-19 and who applied to WSIB to be covered. This is something that I just don't understand, even from a public policy point of view or from an image point of view for this government. Why would they not step up and support workers who are in isolation due to COVID-19, or workers who are exposed and apply to WSIB? It makes absolutely no sense. It doesn't make economic sense. It certainly doesn't make sense morally. And it doesn't make much political sense, either.

I hope that the government takes advantage of this opportunity, changes its mind and decides to actually address the problems with WSIB.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much to the member for Niagara Centre for his remarks.

I will now invite questions to the member for Niagara Centre. We'll start with the member for Burlington.

Ms. Jane McKenna: The member opposite, you talked about prioritizing. Do you think you prioritized when you were in government? Ontario's unemployment rate increased by 28%; 1.2 million Ontarians were on welfare; Ontario had the highest marginal personal income tax in North America; middle-class Americans were paying the highest personal tax rate in North America; Ontario's debt-to-GDP ratio was 30.4%—it soared from 13.4%.

So I'm asking you: Will you drop the partisan language and begin working with us for the betterment of the workers of Ontario?

Mr. Jeff Burch: Talk about partisan language. The member is referencing a government from 30 years ago during a recession to address a situation—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order. Just a second. Please let him respond.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you, Speaker.

I would expect a question that perhaps had to do with workers in a pandemic in today's economy, not something about a government 30 years ago. What a silly thing to do. I don't know what else to say.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: It's my pleasure to ask a question of my colleague from Niagara Centre about the bill before us, Bill 238, Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act.

We've heard from this member and many others that there are no provisions for sick days in this bill. There is no presumptive legislation that would protect workers who got COVID-19 on the job—those front-line heroes this government likes to talk about yet don't actually support through action. There's nothing in here to change the practice of deeming when it comes to WSIB—that the WSIB is assigning phantom jobs to workers in order to cut them off of this much-needed benefit, income support.

I'd like to know from the member from Niagara Centre, can you tell me what is in this bill that actually protects workers or makes things better for workers in the province of Ontario?

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you to my colleague for the question.

There is nothing in this bill, either good or bad; there's just nothing in the bill. It's something that we didn't even need a bill to do. So there is nothing in the bill at all, and it's a huge opportunity that has been lost to address the things that my friend has brought up.

Deeming is a huge problem that my colleague from Niagara Falls talked about, and he has been talking about it for years and years, through the unions and through this House—that deeming is a situation that is designed to save money for employers and hurt workers. Workers are either assigned to jobs that are not what they're trained for, or they have their pay taken away. So deeming is a huge problem and one of the things that this government had an

opportunity to address with this bill, if they cared to put anything in it at all that wasn't otherwise—it could have been done without any kind of legislation at all.

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

Ms. Jane McKenna: My question to the member opposite: If the Ontario NDP thinks paid sick days are so important, why aren't they lobbying their provincial NDP cousins in BC to implement paid sick days in British Columbia? As the member knows, BC offers just three unpaid sick days.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Well, that's another doozy of a question. So the member is expecting me to lobby the British Columbia government to implement paid sick days?

I don't think this government can hold a candle to the government in British Columbia on almost every indicator.

What I do know is that paid sick days are a provincial responsibility, and it's a responsibility that this government should have lived up to a long time ago, by implementing paid sick days, not using some program from the federal government which doesn't provide workers with their full pay.

It's absolutely ridiculous that we would compare to British Columbia.

1530

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions to the member for Niagara Centre?

Ms. Marit Stiles: It's a real pleasure to rise, on behalf of the members of my riding of Davenport, to speak to Bill 238, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, so-called.

My question to the member from Niagara Centre—I thank him for his really thoughtful comments—is if he could explain a little bit or reflect on why paid sick days are so very important to those essential front-line workers in Niagara Centre, and particularly, if he might explain a little bit to the people of Ontario about why this government refuses to support those people who they often call the front-line heroes, the essential workers who have been so essential in this pandemic.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you to my colleague for the question.

Paid sick days are important, basically, for two reasons. First of all, we want workers to have their income restored, because we are already stressed out enough during the pandemic, and for a worker to have to stay home and for their family to go through additional stress is just not something that we should be ignoring. But even more important is the public health aspect of this—because a worker, when they've been exposed or when they feel they've been exposed, needs to feel that they can go to their employer and be honest with them and tell them that, without risking that they are not going to be able to pay their mortgage or pay their rent or get groceries. That's an impossible choice to ask workers to make, and it seems to me—and I mentioned this when I spoke—that businesses understand this, as well.

So I would implore the government to listen to workers and businesses and move ahead with those paid sick days.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Kitchener–Conestoga.

Mr. Mike Harris: It's awfully ironic, because the opposition members of the NDP love to stand up here and talk about the former Mike Harris Conservative government, which was almost 30 years ago, that had to come and clean up the mess that the NDP Bob Rae government left behind.

My question to the member for Niagara Centre, who I have a lot of respect for—we've worked together on some issues over the last little while. I'd like to know from him, if we're going to talk about paid sick days here today—there is a program in place that has 73% of its dollars unspent, that is there for workers in this province to go ahead and take advantage of if they need it. Why would we need to duplicate that program at the provincial level when it's already there from the federal government?

Mr. Jeff Burch: The answer is simple. It has many of the same problems that the program for businesses had, which are that many people don't qualify for it and the money that you get doesn't cover your bills. It's as simple as that. That's why we're asking for provincial paid sick days. Paid sick days are a provincial responsibility.

Shortly after being elected, this government cancelled not only minimum wage increases but paid sick days. We would have been a lot better off if this government hadn't cancelled those paid sick days back then; we would already have paid sick days for the people of Ontario.

What we should be having is enough paid sick days so that people feel comfortable and feel covered when they let their employer know that they have been exposed, so that they can stay home and keep their fellow workers and other people in the community safe and don't have to worry about their rent or their mortgage or buying groceries for their kids.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Member for Niagara Falls.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I will address their concerns about Mike Harris. The reason why we don't like to talk about Mike Harris, quite frankly, is because he closed 27 hospitals. He laid off 6,000 nurses. He—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): This is a forum for questions to the member who made the presentation, so I'm going to ask the member for Niagara Falls to pose a question to the member for Niagara Centre.

Mr. Wayne Gates: It was part of the question, though. It was a follow-up. But that's fair. I won't mention days of action and closing down tent cities.

I will ask the member, why would you bring out a bill that is supposed to talk about workers and yet there is nothing in this bill that talks about deeming, which is causing workers who get injured on the job, through no fault of their own, to live a life of poverty, to have to collect ODSP—to have to look at Bill 238 and say, "There's nothing in it for me."

Why would a government that's trying to tell people they care about workers in the province of Ontario not

include deeming, when people are living in poverty, collecting ODSP and OW? It's actually a disgrace in the province of Ontario what we're doing to injured workers on deeming.

Is that better?

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you to my colleague for the question.

Workers today don't have proper WSIB coverage. My friend from Niagara Falls and others in this party have been fighting the issue of deeming for an awfully long time, and no one has listened. It's something that hurts workers. This was an opportunity to include it in this bill and solve a long-standing problem, along with many other problems with WSIB.

At a time when workers have to depend on WSIB, we could have worked toward fixing it. We could have implemented paid sick days and made life a heck of a lot easier for workers in this province who are on the front lines, protecting all of us.

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

Mr. Mike Harris: It's always—

Interjection: Talk about the 1990s.

Mr. Mike Harris: Maybe we will talk about the 1990s and the Rae days and the unemployment.

But I'd like to take this into a bit more of a light-hearted tone.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it's nice to see you back in the chair today.

I rise to speak in support of this piece of legislation that could not come at a more important time for business owners. I know we've heard time and time again, but it bears repeating, just how difficult this last year has been for the job creators here in our province. These are unprecedented and challenging times for employers, but just like our government has been there from the start, we stand at the ready to support our businesses.

Along with the programs we've put in place to get them through these difficult days, like the Ontario Small Business Support Grant, the main street recovery grant, and rebates for property taxes and energy costs, we are also ensuring that when the time comes for our economy to safely and fully reopen, employers will be able to prosper like never before and Ontario will once again become the economic engine that we were before March 2020.

This bill, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, builds on the steps our government has already taken to provide relief for our business owners today, when they need it most, and in the future, through recovery and beyond. This legislation, if passed, would protect employers from unexpected cost increases due to COVID-19 and limit the impact that higher-than-average industrial wages will have on our insurance costs. What this means is that rather than facing a huge spike in WSIB premiums during an already difficult time, we are limiting that increase to a modest and fair 2%.

Before I had the honour of representing the great people of Kitchener–Conestoga, I was a small business owner, just like the member from Willowdale, just like the member from Hastings–Lennox and Addington, and just

like the member from Parry Sound–Muskoka. We have many more here on our side who have had to meet a payroll and have been major employers in our regions. So I understand the struggles that our local entrepreneurs are facing, having been there not too long ago myself. And let me tell you, Speaker, I cannot think of anything more devastating to a small business owner than having to navigate one of the greatest challenges that our generation will ever see, only to be hit with an unreasonable increase in costs.

Imagine if you moved your business online, you have transitioned to takeout only, but now you're facing something like a 7.8% increase to WSIB premiums as we head into recovery.

Thankfully, both workers and employers have found themselves a champion in our Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development. I specifically mention his efforts for the workers of this province because I want to be clear that he stands with them.

This change will in no way impact the coverage of a worker by WSIB or benefit payments that a worker may currently be receiving. What we are doing is ensuring that when businesses come out of these difficult times, they are not subject to exorbitant increases so that WSIB can run a surplus for the next year or so. Doing nothing would be a disservice to job creators while cushioning WSIB.

And I must say, I'm a bit confused, but not surprised, that the members opposite are not willing to put partisanship aside while we debate this focused bill that addresses a concern we have heard directly from those who are going to be driving forward our recovery.

1540

We've heard over and over again about the need to support workers, but the Minister of Labour, Training, and Skills Development has been abundantly clear that our government stands behind the workers of this province. In fact, one of the first things we did was to pass legislation to protect the jobs of those who are unable to work due to COVID-19, unanimously, in this chamber a year ago.

Along with the Premier, our minister was part of the agreement with the federal government that established the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit to provide workers with paid sick days, and he has been unequivocal in putting pressure on his federal counterpart to make improvements to the program so that it works for the people of this province. Over 110,000 Ontarians have used these sick days. On the government benches, we will continue to raise awareness about this program so that all of our constituents know that there is help for them when they need it.

I also want to recognize the work the minister is doing to connect those who have unfortunately found themselves out of work with good-paying careers in the skilled trades. He has been integral in the development of our skilled trades strategy, which will support our economic recovery by getting more people into the skilled trades. This month, he announced a \$115-million Skills Development Fund to support apprenticeships and workplace development projects to get people back to work faster. His goal to get

more young people into the trades is something I and organizations across my riding full-heartedly support.

When meeting with employers across Waterloo region, one of the things I hear over and over again is that they cannot find skilled workers to fill the vacancies they have. These are good-paying jobs, exciting careers, that too long have been stigmatized. Once we safely get our economy reopened, these companies will again be looking to hire, and I am pleased to see that the minister is already looking ahead at how we can prepare workers for these careers in the trades, especially for those workers who have been hardest-hit by the pandemic, in the hospitality, retail and service sectors. These workers have taken the brunt of job loss over the past year and are also typically making lower wages, which is part of why we are seeing the industrial wage increase of 7.8%. This is an unfortunate and unintended consequence and, without action, will have a ripple effect across all employers.

As I mentioned, since day one we have been fully committed to doing all that we can to support businesses. Back in March, we took the step of freeing up \$1.9 billion for our businesses by deferring WSIB premiums. This saved the average business \$1,760. That is money to cover hydro costs, inventory and other expenses that small businesses were facing, and every little bit can help them stay afloat.

On top of this, we have also worked with the WSIB to freeze premium rates at 2020 levels for the upcoming year. However, without this legislative amendment in this bill, the unexpected increase in the average industrial wage would still see premiums balloon by 7.8%. Imagine for a second you budgeted for an average increase in your insurance, and all of a sudden you were faced with an increase that is quadruple what you were expecting. It is a no-brainer, what is proposed here in this bill. We're just asking for the opposition members to support us in providing some predictability to our employers at a time when they can use it the most.

On top of this deferral, our government has also reduced WSIB premiums by over \$2 billion—\$2 billion—since 2018. When we were elected, we wasted no time, under the leadership of our Premier, and got to work immediately, putting our mandate in place to reduce red tape and burdensome regulations for our job creators, and we saw this pay off with over 300,000 new jobs being created in less than two years.

In 2018, we announced the elimination of unfunded liability, saving employers almost 30%. This meant, in 2019, the average premium rate decreased from \$2.35 to \$1.65 on every \$100 of insured payroll. And in January 2020, we officially eliminated the unfunded liability charge, saving 222,000 businesses over \$600 million.

To be absolutely clear, none of these changes impacted the safety of our workers.

As the Minister of Labour has said, safety is always our number one priority. His ministry is continuing to demonstrate this through their ongoing health and safety inspections, to ensure that business owners are taking the

necessary steps to protect their workers and their customers, and this piece of legislation is an important part of building on that.

We've all heard over the last 11 months about the challenges that businesses in our ridings are facing, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel, when we one day will see our lives return to relatively normal. When that day comes, we need to ensure that our job creators are there, because it is them—our manufacturers, our hospitality industry, our business community—that will push forward into the recovery. They are the ones that will create the jobs that will support the families of this province, keeping a roof over their heads and food on the table. Doing this for businesses will benefit workers, benefit Ontario families and make the province whole again.

Let's make sure that our businesses can not only get back to the level they were at at the beginning of last year, but that they can expect getting more and more people back to work. With more people employed, more people are able to pay their bills, they're able to shop at local businesses, and they're able to support Ontario.

I ask the members opposite to join me and my government colleagues in supporting this bill. Let's do the right thing by our businesses and our workers and get this bill passed.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Questions?

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you to the member from Kitchener–Conestoga for his presentation.

My question is with respect to workers in front-line jobs, especially in hospitals. I've been dealing with a lot of workers in hospitals who have been sent home to isolate and are not getting paid for it—often, trying to access WSIB but being told they have to prove that they've been exposed, and not having access to WSIB while at the same time not having access to a fully paid sick leave program. At least maybe we can agree on that—the federal program only partially restores people's pay.

Does the member not feel that we could have used this opportunity to address some of the real issues with WSIB and help workers during the pandemic?

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you again to the member from Niagara Centre.

We've talked about this before here in the House and I mentioned it during my part of the debate here today: This is a very focused bill that's trying to take a niche issue and solve it. It's something that we've been working towards, using other bills to supplement it.

The members opposite have been saying that this bill doesn't accomplish anything. Well, I beg to differ. When we're saving businesses billions of dollars, I think that translates into jobs for people.

On the issue of paid sick days—and I know that's something the opposition continues to bring up—if people out there are having a problem and they're not able to access the services, please call 1-800-959-2019. There's still 73% of funds unspent, and we're ready to help out wherever we can.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: The member was saying that there are so many extra funds available within the federal program, and that's thanks to the provincial labour minister and the Premier, who expressed the need to add sick days, which have been added—from two weeks to four weeks. Of course, that's a great program.

I know the member is a huge advocate for his constituents. What is he doing to make sure that his constituents know that this funding is available to them?

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you to the member for Barrie–Innisfil.

When we have people who are calling in to our office—and we get lots of correspondence, whether it be calls or emails, from people who are having trouble accessing the services—it's the job of all of us, as MPPs, to be there and to be promoting these services.

I don't know why the members across the aisle here today continue to pretend like this fund, which is 73% unspent—when we're talking about 20 paid sick days here in the province being available—doesn't exist, that it's not even there.

Again, I implore people: If you are looking to find access to these paid sick days, call the number, visit the website. The money is there, and it will get out to you.

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The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: We heard government members talk about how much they seem to care about small businesses, and so I have a question on behalf of the small businesses in my area: Where was this government when small business owners in my area were having to sleep in their units for fear of having their locks changed the next day, asking about proper support that wasn't coming from the government?

Ultimately, while they have been kept closed—these small business owners who are reaching out to all of us—places like Walmart remain open and are making record profits.

Where was this government for small businesses then and now?

Mr. Mike Harris: While we might philosophically agree a little bit on what our government has done to support the people here in Ontario, I would like to say that this is an unprecedented situation. It's very fluid. We have been moving, we have been hearing, we have been doing consultations. We have been listening to what business owners have to say when it comes to commercial evictions. There is a lot that has been done over the last 11 months. For the other member to say that we didn't do it quick enough or we're not following through with these programs—the small business support grant, the different rent subsidies that were put forward, which needed a bit of tinkering. We have been working with the federal government to do this.

One thing we were pushing for with the paid sick days was moving it up from 10 days to 20. We were able to

accomplish that through the partnership we have been able to build with the federal government through this pandemic, working hand in hand with them to do what's best for not only the member from Humber River–Black Creek's constituents, but all of the people here in Ontario and all of the people here in Canada.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Robert Bailey: It's a pleasure to be here.

Before I ask my colleague a question, I would like to make a comment. Many of those big box stores—a lot of your voters and my voters shop there. So by complaining about them being open—I have some of the same concerns in my riding.

Anyway, I know that many in my riding of Sarnia–Lambton—the COVID-19 pandemic has hit low-wage earners the hardest. Many of them lost their jobs in retail and hospitality. I spoke to some of the restaurant owners just last night.

Since the start, our government has continued to support businesses in Ontario.

Why does this bill need to be implemented now, considering that we're almost a full year into the global pandemic?

Mr. Mike Harris: This was one of the things that, again, I mentioned during my presentation here—that one thing in business that you can plan around and try to budget for are things that have a little bit of certainty. We're talking about a time that is very uncertain. There are lots of balls in the air right now. It's very tough to get through some of the challenges that we're having.

But doing this now—freezing WSIB premiums, lowering these specific rates by changing some parts of this act and amending it—is going to give businesses certainty moving forward. It's going to give them a little bit of time to be able to plan, to be able to budget. Certainly, in a time like right now, that is something that is going to be very welcomed by the business community.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Wayne Gates: It's always a pleasure to rise on Bill 238.

I was very interested in my colleague talking about how they want to focus, in a bill, on one certain issue. Yet what I don't understand from the government is—it's now trying to say that it cares about workers. Why is there nothing in this bill on deeming? I'm going to continue to say it all afternoon: People who have been deemed are living in poverty. They're losing their homes. They're losing their families. Yet they don't want to put anything on deeming.

I've got another bill—presumptive language—where if you're in the hospital, you're a front-line worker and you get exposed to COVID-19, you would automatically get WSIB. But guess what happens? The WSIB is denying WSIB.

So I want to ask you: Why do you continue to try to fund our businesses in the province of Ontario on the backs of injured workers, by not addressing deeming and

presumptive language? There's a lot more that could have been in this bill, and it could have been focused. You could have focused, quite frankly, on deeming. They're your constituents as well who are off with deeming issues.

Mr. Mike Harris: Mr. Speaker, while I appreciate the advocacy and the passion that the member from Niagara Falls puts forward, what we're talking about here today is solving a very specific issue that our workplaces have been reaching out about through consultation and have been talking about. This is something that we're very focused on. We want to make sure that we have a very fair and modest increase of 2% with these premiums over the next year. There are so many other bills that have gotten us to where we are, and there are going to be a lot of other bills to come in the future, but this specific bill is addressing this specific problem.

Speaker, I don't know why these members aren't going to stand up and support this bill and support our small businesses.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Ms. Jane McKenna: I just want to elaborate on what the member from Niagara Falls was saying.

On January 2, 1990, the Liberal government of David Peterson passed Bill 162, which made deeming much more prominent in Ontario than it was in the decades before.

In November 1990, the only NDP government Ontario has ever had took office, and for the next five years the NDP government did nothing about deeming.

In May 2007, the McGuinty government introduced legislation that said they would eliminate deeming, but on third reading of the Liberals' deeming bill, the NDP were nowhere in sight. They abstained.

My question to the member for Kitchener–Conestoga is, when the NDP had the chance to stand up for the workers, do you think they were MIA?

Mr. Mike Harris: I think we all know here that the NDP government in Ontario back in the mid-1990s was the one and only opportunity that they had to shine, and quite frankly, they blew it. The Conservative government, under Mike Harris, had to come in and clean up that mess. They continue to talk about all of these things that they want to do but they've never been able to accomplish—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you. Further debate? I recognize the member from Essex.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Speaker, as always, it is obviously an honour to rise in this House and to speak, through you, to my colleagues about any subject that affects the people of the province, but more particularly the workers of this province.

As a member of the Ontario NDP, as a labour activist, as someone who worked in the construction sector prior to being elected and worked with the Labourers' International Union of North America as their training director, I have some knowledge about the subject of workplace injuries.

In fact, my mom, as a constituency assistant for one of my predecessors—Pat Hayes, a member who served in

this House—did a whole lot of work on WSIB. Even post-career in politics, she dedicated her life, pro bono, to fighting for and defending injured workers. And she still acts as a resource, because people know that Sheila Natyshak is someone who stands up for injured workers and knows the system, and who certainly knew the system at the time, back when it was based on fax machines and telephones. It has evolved quite a bit.

Nevertheless, I come to the debate with a little bit of context.

The one thing I do know and I can tell this House with some degree of certainty is that workplace injuries and fatalities are not getting better. Statistically, that is unequivocal. As this province continues to embark on all nature of precarious work, we see workplace injuries and fatalities get larger. In fact, in 2018, Ontario and New Brunswick were at the top of the list in terms of increases in workplace injuries, around a 15% year-over-year increase in workplace injuries. What does that mean? It means that more people are going to work and getting hurt—very simple.

So what do we do in this province? Well, we have a no-fault insurance regime called the WSIB. What it says is that I assume that I will come to work and if I do get hurt, I'm not going to sue my employer. It's a social contract. It's something that I think is a model that necessitates, always, some review, but also some understanding of the responsibilities on both sides—and the “both sides” means that, as an employer, I'm going to make sure that I pay into that insurance plan; I'm going to make sure that if you do get hurt, you are going to have the money to cover your expenses, to support your family, to continue to be a productive person in society and to have a valuable quality of life. On the other side, the responsibility of the worker is to ensure that they work safely, given the parameters of the work and the training and PPE and all the metrics that you could imagine are involved in health and safety in a workplace.

Over the years, governments of all stripes—certainly, we saw it in the mid-1990s. There was an opportunity for governments to try to tip the scales on the side of the employer. And how did they do that? They reduced WSIB premiums. They hired a guy named David Marshall.

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Does anybody know David Marshall? Some folks who were elected early on saw David Marshall head up the WSIB. He was tasked with the job of reducing the unfunded liability. At that point, the unfunded liability was around \$13 billion. That means that they had \$13 billion of outstanding cash in reserve to make up should they have to actually cover those workers who were injured and continued to get injured. So what did David Marshall do? Well, they implemented various procedures and policies that ultimately led to the degradation of the WSIB, whereby workers continued to get refused at the door, no questions asked—and we got the calls in our office. For those of you who served in the early 2000s and 2010, if you weren't getting those calls in your constituency office from injured workers who had to battle tooth and nail to

just get WSIB to respond to them, then you weren't doing your job, because we were overwhelmed and continue to be overwhelmed.

The nature of our workplaces has changed, certainly, in the last year. There has been a decline—and there's no doubt that a reduction in WSIB premiums will be a welcome reprieve by local businesses and small businesses, because of the absence of any support that this government has offered them previously.

In April, we stood here—don't take our ideas, claim them to be your own, rebrand them, repackage them. I don't care what you do with them, but understand that when we put the call out, we weren't making it up on the fly. We asked this government to come to the table with supports for small businesses to keep their doors open. We called it the Save Main Street plan. It would ensure that people could receive up to \$10,000 a month in a grant—and to continue that as the pandemic rolled on, to ensure that they could keep their lights open. You didn't listen to us, and now here we are, 11 months in.

I will acknowledge that the government came to the table this January. I would say, it's too little, too late. The supporting business program you rolled out is welcome, and it will be welcomed in all of our communities. But you could have done it in April, when we asked for it, when we put it on the table. We suggested it. We begged you to do it, and you didn't do it.

So now what are you doing? Here, you're looking at continuation of the freeze of the WSIB premiums. Again, in the absence of anything else tangible—I haven't heard any Premier in Confederation put so much love towards Justin Trudeau, because Trudeau is funding every one of the support programs coming through this building. This guy hasn't had to do anything. He woke up on third base, which is ridiculous, because there's so much of a responsibility that the province has to ensure that small businesses have the support they need and that those workers are protected when they go to the job. Now they're going into the job faced with an unprecedented pandemic—one that doesn't give them access to quality PPE, one that does not, through their own government, ensure them paid sick leave. It's unconscionable, in a developed society. You can do better. You should be able to do better. My colleagues across the way, you have the gumption to do it, and it will inevitably lead to better economic conditions going forward as we recover. There's no question about that.

But the case that you're making today is one that is such low-hanging fruit, when we need to talk about deeming, when we need to talk about ensuring that there is no unfunded liability built into the WSIB and that fund actually has the money to cover those workplace injuries you're not doing enough about.

The minister talks about inspections. Upwards of 80% of those inspections are phone-in inspections: “Hey. How's it going at your operation there? We heard that some things aren't kosher. Can you tell us if you're adhering to all the rules and regulations?” “Oh, yes, absolutely. We're doing everything possible.” Well, lo and

behold, workers get injured every day, and workplace fatalities happen every day. Those are families that lose their loved ones just because they went to work.

Speaker, I implore this government to look at a different option: to look at all the options on the table, not just the low-hanging fruit. Look at the systemic problems that have existed in the WSIB for such a long time that they cannot be ignored. That means addressing deeming, making sure that these phantom jobs, this excuse—it's a way that they can get out of paying the benefits to injured workers who are legitimately injured on the job.

If you have ever dealt with an insurance company, Speaker—and you only have to look at the private health care insurance regime in the United States, where you have coverage through a private insurer. They will do absolutely everything they can to make sure that they don't pay for the basic health care services that you need—and if they do, it's definitely not adequate.

That's where we're heading down with this decision, because you will get caught in the trap of not funding the plan that is based on co-operation, based on understanding and based on no fault. Or—I submit to my colleagues across the way—allow injured workers to sue their businesses and see how that creates economic turmoil. That's the road you're heading down right now, and let it be a cautionary tale.

New Democrats definitely understand that small businesses in our communities need to have support. But workers are at the cornerstone of a healthy economy, and healthy workers, as we know today, are fundamental to a workplace, to an economy. We are only as safe as the most vulnerable among us. We know that now; it's in plain sight. So we must do everything, we have to dedicate every aspect, every effort that we can in this House to ensure that everyone is as safe as possible. The members across the way know what those remedies are. They can certainly do that. Take our ideas. Address deeming.

My goodness, the Premier stands up and says he's the champion of working-class people; if he takes on deeming, he very well might be. I don't think he has the gumption to do that, though. I'm apprehensive about his motives.

I welcome the debate today, and I welcome the questions from my colleagues.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): It's time for questions.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: I listened intently to the member from Essex's debate today. The proposed bill clearly provides a win for both employers and employees, and I'm sure that there are many family businesses from the honourable member's riding of Essex that would greatly appreciate any and all forms of support from the provincial government.

So my question to the member is, why would the member oppose supports for businesses in this proposed legislation?

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Thank you very much to my colleague from across the way.

This member doesn't oppose supports for businesses; in fact, this member has advocated for even more supports

for businesses since the beginning and before this pandemic.

We have proposed ideas where this government could have intervened—had the money to intervene from transfers from the federal government, and sat on \$12 billion of unspent money when our communities and our small businesses were crumbling. This government sat on the sidelines and watched it happen. So I will take no quarter from this member in terms of my position on supporting small business. I wish they would, in fact, come to the table with comprehensive reforms to actually do the job that they're supposed to do.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: It's my pleasure to rise on behalf of my constituents, the neighbouring riding to the member for Essex, to ask a question about Bill 238, Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act.

We have heard time and time again that there's nothing about paid sick days in this bill—provincially funded sick days. There is nothing in this bill around presumptive legislation to protect workers who get COVID-19 while on the job. There is nothing to end the practice of deeming, where the WSIB makes up some job that someone is apparently able to do and cuts them off benefits.

The other thing, though, that I noticed that's also not in this bill is the practice with WSIB where oftentimes an injured worker will go to the doctor; the doctor will fill out the necessary paperwork for them to file for WSIB and hopefully be approved; and then WSIB says, "We don't believe your doctor. We're going to provide a doctor that you have to go see, who is likely going to say the opposite of what your actual family physician has said." There was a W5 investigation into it.

To the member from Essex: Do you see anything in here that would stop that particular practice?

Mr. Taras Natyshak: I thank my colleague from Windsor West very much. I know she's an incredible advocate for workers of all sorts in her riding and raises a really important question.

To answer your question, straightforward: No. Obviously, this is strictly about premiums and the freezing of premiums through the year 2021. I do not see anything that addresses the imbalance that is already structural and embedded in the mechanics of how someone accesses the benefits through WSIB. It would definitely be a welcome addition to this bill.

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Again, if the members are not getting calls about these issues that we hear every day, then they aren't picking up the phone—because we know that they are clear, they're present. They existed before; they continue to exist. And if they don't do anything about them, we're going to continue down that road.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Will Bouma: It's a pleasure to rise in the House today and have a conversation with my friend from Essex. I miss the good old days when we were able to sit a little

bit closer to each other over there on that side of the House. I have to say, I very much appreciate your heart for workers and your comments in the House this afternoon.

You did say earlier that you consider this legislation to be low-hanging fruit, and I won't disagree with that. This is an easy fix.

So I was wondering if you could answer to us in the House today whether you will be supporting this simple piece of legislation that will fix a low-hanging-fruit problem that can make life better for workers in Ontario?

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Here's how bizarre things are: I actually miss sitting next to the member from Brant as well, because sitting next to him conjures up nostalgia of when things were normal, and as uncomfortable and as combative as that was to my colleague—oh, man, I miss the old days. So I hope we get to sit near each other soon, and I appreciate that.

To the member: No, I am not going to support this bill at all. This is the weakest attempt on the part of this government to support small business that I've ever seen. Don't take my word for it—I'm just partisan; you know me—take the word of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, which called your government the most anti-business government in the entirety of Confederation.

I would say, you could probably do more. As a private member, I would advocate and ask you to ask your members to do more. Repeal this bill and pack a lot more substance into it, because it doesn't really do enough.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Ms. Marit Stiles: I'm pleased to rise here and speak to Bill 238, the so-called Workplace Safety Insurance Amendment Act. I want to thank the member from Essex for his excellent comments. It's always a pleasure to listen to the member from Essex, particularly on issues like this.

I know the member mentioned this as well, but I want to refer back to last week, I think it was, when the member brought forward an opportunity, a motion asking the government to provide unanimous consent to change course and deliver real supports to small business. That package would have included small business supports like a rent subsidy, like funding to reopen safely and establish remote operations and a strategy to support the arts sector.

I wonder if the member from Essex would help me understand a little bit better why the members opposite, the government, rejected our call to provide those supports? Why were they so resistant? And why is it that they continue to fail our small businesses while big corporations like Walmart are making a pretty penny off this pandemic?

Mr. Taras Natyshak: I appreciate the comments from the member from Davenport. Her question asks me to enter into the minds of the government members. Not only can I not do that, it frightens me to actually think about that prospect.

I don't know why they wouldn't have acted sooner to support small businesses, when we saw other jurisdictions take the same approach that we were advocating for in

April, whereby direct cash grants to small businesses, with parameters that made sense, would have definitely bolstered their ability to maintain a footprint in our communities. Now what we see are empty storefronts. We see businesses going under. We see folks losing hope, and there's not much hope to go forward.

She mentioned, specifically, the arts. I know it's an important industry in her region. We all want to see a vibrant arts and culture industry back in Ontario. Without a focus by this government, I think other jurisdictions, like BC, will be eating our lunch to entice the arts and culture and film production into their provinces.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Ms. Jane McKenna: Speaker, I'm getting whiplash trying to keep up with the NDP's evolving position on supporting workers.

In November, the NDP voted against a bill, supported by various labour organizations, to create an annual health and safety day.

In September, the NDP celebrated Jagmeet Singh's push for paid sick days at the federal level, but then last week the NDP member for Ottawa Centre said the 20 paid sick days offered by the federal government are "useless."

From one day to the next, the NDP's position keeps changing.

What does the NDP actually think about the federal paid sick days they supported just a few months ago?

Mr. Taras Natyshak: The bill, which I believe the member put forward, was, again, the bare minimum. It's nothing tangible. It's a day to say that workers who get injured on the job shouldn't get injured on the job. Yes, we agree with that, but we will not stand with a government that does absolutely nothing to mitigate against injuries or workplace fatalities in our province. We have not seen anything tangible from this government to actually bring us towards that metric; in fact, we see the opposite. Workplace injuries are going up—as I mentioned, in 2018 by 15%. That's not something that this government should be celebrating.

They should be digging their heels in and offering substantive legislation to fix the issues and ensure the proper training, oversight and enforcement, which this government has taken a lacklustre approach to—enforcement of the workplace health and safety code—to make sure workers feel safe and are safe in the province.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Unfortunately, there isn't enough time to get into another question and response.

Therefore, I will turn to the member from Brantford—Brant for further debate.

Mr. Will Bouma: I have to confess, to begin with, that I don't know what else I can add to this debate that hasn't been said already. I think we've heard that this is a fairly simple piece of legislation.

I want to begin by bringing out a couple of numbers that I think we should all keep in mind. Of those numbers, the first number I'm going to say is five million—in the province of Ontario, there are five million workers who

are covered by WSIB. COVID-19 has obviously impacted that, and we see those numbers also, and the different responses that we've had to do to try to solve those.

I want to say to those people in my riding of Brantford-Brant who have been impacted by COVID-19, who have seen their hours reduced or their job eliminated, that our hearts go out to you. These are very, very stunning days.

And as my Twitter trolls like to say, I haven't yet missed a paycheque in this job.

Mr. Wayne Gates: You haven't?

Mr. Will Bouma: No, and neither have you.

So I always feel so unqualified, in that sense, to be making decisions for other people who are actually going through it, on their behalf, and I feel the same in this.

The second number that I want to throw out to you, Mr. Speaker, is 300,000—there are 300,000 workplaces that pay WSIB premiums. Those are 300,000 workplaces that employ those five million workers.

The vision that I have—and I apologize for being idealistic, but I believe in a strong collaborative relationship between employee and employer. We heard that earlier from my colleague from Essex. The vision of WSIB is that it works on both sides, give and take.

COVID-19 has messed up so many of those things so deeply.

I'm sure we all did this through the break, before we came back, and before and after Christmas—I spent hours on the phone with constituents, with workplaces and with workers talking about the different ways that COVID-19 has impacted them.

Number one, I have to say that in my community of Brantford-Brant, the resilience that my people have shown in standing up and supporting one another, showing up and helping one another is—I am humbled and yet I am so proud to be able to represent such incredible people. In the face of an existential threat to our very way of life, my businesses, whether it's Booster Juice, whether it's a sandwich shop, whether it's a steakhouse giving their food to workers, whether it's a large corporation buying lunches for the front-line workers at our hospital, whether it's a company switching production to making hand sanitizer and alcohol to donate those to our front-line workers—it has been such an incredible thing to be a part of.

1620

The next number that I would like to say is 2%—it's interesting, the unintended consequences that we see of something like COVID-19, because people a whole lot smarter than me figure out these different ways of calculating insurance premiums and figuring that out. In my small business as an optometry clinic, we have to pay our WSIB premiums and things like that. They go through these numbers, and they spit these things out, and you put in your payroll, and it spits out a number and you put that in. But that's all based on a normal economy. Our economy right now is anything but normal.

We have put out all these supports; the federal government has put out all these supports to try to support individuals, to support businesses, to protect workers, to

protect small business owners. And we work on all those things together.

Normally, a small business will face about a 2% increase, based on normal business practices, in their WSIB premiums that they have to bring forward.

The next number I want to bring out is 7.8%. This year, 2021, doing normal business because of the issues faced—and these are stories that I heard from business owners that have—let me tell you, if you've never had the opportunity to own a small business, and I know members here and some members across the way have owned small businesses, you carry every mortgage and car payment and loan that your employees have on your shoulders. When you have a young person working for you and they buy a car that's way out of their price range, it's almost, if I can dare say it, parental—the responsibility that you feel for them.

That's the same story that I've heard from so many small business owners—to have to let go of staff who have been loyal and productive and working hard for you, because of the conditions that have happened because of COVID-19. It's heartbreaking, but that is the situation that we face through COVID-19. And who goes first? It's the people who are lower on the totem pole; it is the people who have less seniority; it's people who are less experienced. And so, we've seen a dramatic laying off of people in our communities who have less experience in all of those things. What does that do? That puts us into a situation where employers will have to face a 7.8% increase in their WSIB premiums, because of something that happened completely out of their control. They did not decide to lay off their less experienced employees. They would much rather have them working for them. And yet they're in this untenable situation where they have to make these brutal decisions about people who have become family to them, about who they have to lay off—and on the other side, as a worker, to have that too. So what do you do in those situations, as a government?

It has been said—I shouldn't say this—almost derogatorily in the House this afternoon that this is just low-hanging fruit, that this doesn't really make a difference to any of the real issues that are facing workers and employers in the province of Ontario. Quite frankly, I have to say that disappoints me, because little things add up.

If you've ever heard of the butterfly effect, you understand that according to that theory, a butterfly flapping its wings on the other side of the world can make a hurricane happen here. This is the same thing that I say to high school students who are lost in the hopelessness of climate change and everything else when I speak to them—that the little things that you can do do make a difference.

In the final few moments I have here this afternoon, in just a quick 10-minute talk about this legislation, I want to advocate for—this is a very simple legislative change that we can make temporarily to make that burden just a little bit easier on our small business owners through 2021 and,

if possible, by extension into 2022 by an order in council, I believe it is, or the Lieutenant Governor in Council—LGIC, if I got my names right.

I commend our minister and his parliamentary assistant and our bureaucrats and our staff in the minister's office for finding these simple little things that can make a difference in the impact of everyday Ontarians.

If we all work together and find some more of those little changes, we can get through this.

I don't even know if the numbers are right, but I saw a headline the other day that said because of the vaccinations we're rolling out into long-term-care homes, the COVID-19 rate in long-term-care homes has been decreasing precipitously. Yes—that is good news. That's how we're going to get through this—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you.

Mr. Will Bouma: —with little things done.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm sorry I went over time.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): It's time for questions.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I want to address the sick days, because the other side has been saying that it's just the NDP who are talking about sick days. So I'm going to list a few people: the GTHA mayors and chairs, the Ontario Medical Association, Peel regional council, Waterloo regional board of health, Ontario's Big City Mayors, Toronto Public Health, Halton regional council, Mississauga regional council, the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, St. Catharines city council—look at this one—Toronto city council, Perth board of health, Ottawa Public Health, and Toronto District School Board. As they stand up and say they care about workers, guess who else is supporting sick days? Listen to this. I'm shocked. The Ontario Federation of Labour—wow—the Canadian Labour Congress, and just about every other major union in the province of Ontario. So it's not just the NDP that's calling for sick days. All these organizations I could list—I could be here all afternoon, but I only get a minute.

So my question is very clear—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you very much. Back to the member from Brantford—Brant for a response.

Mr. Will Bouma: I appreciate the member from Niagara Falls. I said to him the other day when we met outside the House—because I have to say how much I value when we get out of this environment and get to say, “Good morning, Ralph. Good morning, Sam.” If you remember the old—

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'm Wayne.

Mr. Will Bouma: And Wayne. I would love to look across and see everyone wearing his mask with the moustache on it at some point.

The reality is, we know that people shouldn't be going to work sick. That's why the very first initiative that our government brought in—and I will mention to the members opposite that it was the very first piece of legislation in North America to protect jobs during COVID-19. If any worker is in self-isolation, if they're in quarantine, if they're a mom or dad who has to stay home

and look after a son or a daughter because schools are closed, they cannot be fired for that in Ontario.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: I listened intently to the member's debate, and I want to thank him for the very insightful and informative comments that he made today.

The member is actually an optometrist, so the member has a lot of experience with medical practice and workplace injuries and all that.

So my question that I have to the member is: How can the WSIB afford to compensate injured workers what they deserve if the premiums their employers pay do not rise, as well?

Mr. Will Bouma: I appreciate the member from Carleton.

I enjoy answering this question, actually—because I know that WSIB is one of North America's largest insurance providers and provides coverage for the five million workers in Ontario across the 300,000 workplaces, which I talked about.

The very fact that at the end of June 2020 WSIB reported a sufficient ratio of 115.4%—we heard this afternoon that there was an unfunded liability; that liability was taken care of, and they are in a good position right now. Again, we're only going to the end of 2021, potentially to 2022 if we need it.

Thank you for the question.

1630

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: This government's plan for businesses has really been about give and take: When it comes to small businesses, they take, and when it comes to big multi-retail co-operations, they give.

My question for the member is, what have you been telling the small business owners who have called your office asking why places like Walmart are open and doing great while small mom-and-pop shops are being forced to close and are struggling?

Mr. Will Bouma: I always appreciate getting up and having a chat with my friend from Humber River—Black Creek. We have a very good relationship that way.

The reality is, we have to take care of the people of Ontario. The simple response to his question is the fact that while we're trying to protect, support and help every business recover in the province of Ontario, we also have to take care of the needs of the people of Ontario and where they want to shop.

If I can just throw in a quote from David Frame, chair of the Construction Employers Coalition for WSIB and health, to get back to the topic at hand: “This legislative change will avoid an unforeseen pandemic-related issue from significantly impacting high-wage employers across the economy. These industries are essential to Ontario's economic recovery. The government's proposal will provide injured workers with a benefit ceiling increase while protecting employers from unreasonable costs.”

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Lorne Coe: I thank the member for Brantford–Brant for his presentation today.

I'd like him to spend a little bit more time, Speaker, through you, explaining why the legislation is being proposed now.

Mr. Will Bouma: Thank you to my colleague from Whitby. That is a great question.

The honest truth is that this is an issue that has just arisen right now through COVID-19. We are in this strange situation where employers just can't stay as busy as they want to be and they have to make these very difficult decisions. They have to lay off their lower-wage workers and maintain their higher-wage workers, which is putting an undue burden on them because of the way the WSIB system works.

Again, this is a simple solution, temporarily, to solve what I pray will be a temporary problem.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Taras Natyshak: My colleague across the way asked a similar question, but I'm not sure it got an appropriate answer. It was that, if premiums are being reduced and the WSIB fund is now on its way towards being underfunded—at this point, the member states that there is no unfunded liability, but we have seen how the province and various governments have gotten to that point, denying benefits to workers for legitimate injury claims. If the premiums are being reduced, how can this member and this government guarantee that that fund will not be underfunded in the future? What are the actuarial calculations the member is using? Is the 2% freeze an arbitrary number that you came up with? Where's the math on this that actually makes economic sense for workers going forward?

Mr. Will Bouma: Indeed, it's my pleasure to respond to the member from Essex and to provide a more fulsome response to that question, because it is a very good question.

At this point, the difference is going to be paid out of the WSIB insurance fund. As I mentioned earlier, the WSIB currently has more than enough funds to cover the cost of current and future benefits of injured workers.

However, he brings up an excellent point. We have to make sure that we get back into balance and keep that going, and that is the plan. But as I mentioned earlier, at the end of June 2020 the WSIB reported a sufficiency ratio of 115.4%. So we were well above having to worry about any unfunded liability.

If I can just reiterate to the member—again, I appreciate his question, because these are valid concerns that workers in Ontario should have—this is a temporary relief measure, for 2021 only. However, we have baked into this legislation the idea that, if necessary, we could have a possible extension by regulation until December 2022.

Thank you for the question.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Daryl Kramp: Mr. Speaker, in my riding, the vast majority of our jobs are in the small business, retail, tourism, hospitality sector, a sector that has been disgustingly hard-hit—many, many, jobs; many, many have lost income. Obviously, the government has tried to come up with programs to assist or provide guidance or support at this time. I would ask the honourable member—as I call him, my eye man—why it is important that we are doing this at this time.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Back to the member from Brantford–Brant for a final response.

Mr. Will Bouma: I thank my brother from Hastings–Lennox and Addington for his question.

I know that in my riding of Brantford, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the low-wage earners the hardest—he just said the exact same thing about his riding—and many of them have lost their jobs in the retail and hospitality sectors.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, our government has made a pledge to our workers that we will stand with them, and by inference, we will also stand with their employers. That's why this bill needs to be implemented right now—so that we can take care of these things.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further debate?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: It's my pleasure to rise to speak to Bill 238, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act.

I'm going to start with something that the member from Brantford–Brant said during his remarks just before me. He was talking about a previous unfunded liability with WSIB and how that is not an issue; they've come to balance now, so this government can reduce the WSIB premiums to employers. Speaker, I just want it to be clear to the people in this room and across the province why that happened. The way they were able to address the unfunded liability was to deny injured workers WSIB coverage. That is how they did it.

In fact, there were 2,000 COVID-19 claims for workers in this province. The people they want to call front-line heroes—2,000 of those COVID-19 claims were denied in order to help deal with the unfunded liability, and for this government to be able to put forward this piece of legislation talking about cutting WSIB premiums that employers have to pay.

I don't think anybody on this side of the House—no, I know that nobody on this side of the House in our caucus—is saying that there should be some sort of added burden to employers, but this government has had numerous opportunities, before the pandemic and since the pandemic hit, in the early days, to actually support businesses. Just in the plaza where my office is, I've seen three businesses permanently close, because this government would not provide direct support to those businesses for them to be able to cover rent costs, so they lost their business. In some cases, they lost their homes. But this government did nothing, and now they want to stand here, almost a year into a pandemic—almost a year to the date that it was declared—and pretend like they're heroes

because they're reducing WSIB premiums that employers have to pay. They're trying to say that they're business heroes, that they're the champions of business, but where were they when all of those businesses were closing? I know we were getting phone calls. I know they were getting phone calls and emails. As my colleague from Essex had pointed out, if you don't think you were getting them, it's because you weren't answering your phone and you weren't reading your emails. I wasn't just getting calls from my constituents; I was getting calls from people across the province.

I think it's pretty telling, as the member from Essex raised, that the Canadian Federation of Independent Business says this is the most anti-business government that they've seen.

It's good that we have public health care, because the members on that side of the House are going to hurt themselves patting themselves on the back.

1640

I want to talk about paid sick days. As was mentioned before, the GTHA mayors and chairs, the Ontario Medical Association, Peel regional council, Waterloo region board of health, Ontario's Big City Mayors, Toronto Public Health, Halton regional council, Mississauga city council, the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, St. Catharines city council, Toronto city council, Huron Perth board of health, Ottawa Public Health, Toronto District School Board and many, many unions—because they claim to be pro-union now—have come out, and my own health unit has come out, and said to this government, “We must have paid sick days.”

Speaker, I'm tired of hearing it; I'm sure my colleagues are tired of hearing it—my constituents, more importantly, are tired of hearing this government talk about the fact that they've miraculously negotiated paid sick days, when the reality is—and people see through it—what they have done is, abdicated responsibility to ensure that every worker in this province not only has their jobs protected if they get sick but that their income is protected too. These workers are going off sick, and they can't feed their kids, and they can't pay for the medication that they need, and they're losing their homes. Homelessness is on the rise because this government—instead of doing what everyone I've listed and more are calling for, they're saying, “All those people are wrong. We're doing it right.” But they're not doing it at all. They've just completely abdicated responsibility to the federal government—and then they want to stand there and pat themselves on the back and say, “Look at the good job that we're doing.”

Speaker, I know we've talked at length, but it bears repeating—the fact that I've heard the Minister of Labour stand and talk about how this bill supports workers. There is nothing in this bill that supports workers—zip, zero, zilch in here that actually protects workers. There are no paid sick days. If this government actually wanted to support workers, then they would have given, when they had an opportunity, unanimous consent to pass my colleague the member for London West's bill, Bill 239,

the Stay Home If You Are Sick Act. They didn't do it. They said no.

Bill 191, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, which was tabled on May 19, 2020, and Bill 119, Respecting Injured Workers Act, tabled on May 27, 2019—both were tabled by my colleague from Niagara Falls. One would eliminate the practice of deeming—saying that an injured worker can do a job that doesn't exist and cutting them off of their benefits—and the other one is presumptive legislation, so that those 2,000 workers who got sick with COVID-19 would not have been denied their WSIB. But this government—it's not in the bill. Instead, they're cutting premiums so that more workers will be denied. They will make it easier for more of those front-line heroes they purport to support, who get COVID-19, to be denied their claims.

I know it's frustrating for me and especially for my constituents to hear this government talk about how supportive they are of workers when they're doing very little to actually support workers. They had an opportunity, through unanimous consent, last week to pass the Time to Care Act. The Time to Care Act would ensure that there are enough front-line workers in our long-term-care homes, which have seen the worst COVID-19 outbreaks, between residents and workers. They could have passed that on unanimous consent to ensure that there were proper staffing levels, so they would be supporting the workers in those homes doing those essential jobs, and they said no.

But do you know what they did do? They brought in Bill 218 so that the member from Kitchener–Conestoga's dad, who sits on the board of Chartwell, can be protected—he and the company he represents—from liability, so that the families of those residents who got sick and died can't sue the companies. That's what they did. Well, that's not supporting workers; that's supporting the companies.

The member from Burlington stood up on a question to talk about the bill she tabled—that we are supposedly anti-worker because we didn't support this special day in a bill that she tabled. Speaker, let me tell you about that bill. When that member from Burlington initially tabled that bill, the date that she had chosen for her special recognition of workers, those who have been injured or died on the job—she tabled it with, or she was going to table it, and she might have actually tabled it and pulled it—she picked the same date as the Day of Mourning. It was a date that already existed, a date that was brought forward by the labour movement that every single one of us on this side of the House in the NDP caucus—every single one of us honours that date. Every single one of us shows up and marches with workers and stands shoulder to shoulder with them to get governments like this one to actually bring in protections for workers. So you can't tell me that your bill is pro-worker and we're anti- when you don't even know when the Day of Mourning is.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Questions?

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: My question to the member opposite is, in terms of advocating for a program that only has 73% capacity—has she directed any of her

constituents to the fact that there are supports available? Has she done that through her constituency office? And how many constituents has she been able to direct to this program that is so under-utilized right now? There are so many people who can utilize it.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: What the members opposite don't want to acknowledge is that many of the workers in this province who are directed to that program are not qualifying for that program. What the government members refuse to acknowledge is that you have to miss four days of work before you even are considered to qualify for that program, and then it takes time for that money to come in. And because this government won't raise the minimum wage and allows them to live in poverty, many of those workers are already at risk of losing their housing. They're already going hungry or going without medication because they had to miss four days of work before they would even be considered to be accepted for that program, and then they have to wait for the funding to come in.

So my question back to the member opposite is, what are you telling your constituents when you are abdicating responsibility for bringing in a provincial paid sick days program?

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Next question?

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Thanks to my colleague from Windsor West, who is always clear and concise in her points—and none more than today, when she's advocating and continues to advocate for paid sick days, which is just a bare necessity in these times.

This bill, as the government members have purported, supports workers in some way. I have yet to find a way that it supports workers, but they say that this somehow supports workers in some way.

Did their efforts to legislate a 1% salary raise at the beginning of last year for almost all public sector workers support workers, as well? Did that give them support heading into a pandemic?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I appreciate the question from the member for Essex.

No, it does not. In fact, I believe there are legal challenges to that.

What the government should be doing is looking at the cost of living—what it actually costs to live in this province, what it actually costs for the average person to be able to self-isolate if need be, what the average cost is to workers if they do have to take time off because they are sick.

This government would see, if they did the math, if they actually talked to the workers in this province—if they listened to all of those people I just went through, what they would hear is that workers need paid sick days. They don't need a freeze on their pay. They need additional support to get through this pandemic, just like the businesses that employ some of them.

1650

So to the member from Essex: No, bringing in that wage freeze certainly has not been very employee-friendly, worker-friendly.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Next question.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: I listened intently to the member in her debate, and she seemed to be throwing out a lot of numbers. So I just want to share a few numbers with the member that we have discussed at length here in the Legislature and get some feedback from the member on them.

At the end of June 2020, the WSIB reported a sufficiency ratio of 115.4%. It's also important to know that the proposed legislation is a temporary premium relief measure for 2021 only, with a possible extension by regulation until December 2022 at the very latest.

So given that there is an overcapacity in the funds, how can the member stand up and claim that we're not supporting employers or employees and that there aren't enough funds to support the employees if they do rely on the WSIB? Because the numbers here clearly prove the opposite.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: My answer to, "How can you say we're not supporting workers?"—let me make this clear: 2,000 workers who had COVID-19 were denied WSIB, and by denying them benefits, that goes right back into the coffers for WSIB. That's how you're balancing the books—by denying injured workers WSIB, those front-line heroes you're talking about.

When we talk about supporting businesses—I don't think that Walmart or Costco need a break on their WSIB premiums when they have doubled, tripled, quadrupled their profits during this pandemic. If you want to truly support businesses, if you really want to support the small, medium-sized mom-and-pop shops in our community—for some of them, it's way too late for that because you already didn't help and they have closed permanently. If you want to help them, you should have been doing it by now. You should have been providing direct support. When we were calling for it and when those businesses were calling for direct rent relief support, you weren't there. You failed, and you turned your back on those businesses.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you to my friend for her presentation. She has done a lot of great work with social service agencies in Ontario.

I was referencing, in my speech, working with Community Living across Ontario. I was always shocked that they didn't have WSIB. Is that one of the issues that could have been addressed by this government? And how would that have helped social service agencies that often deal with very difficult situations and have violent incidents and don't have any WSIB coverage?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'd like to thank the member from Niagara Centre for that really important question highlighting the gaps when it comes to WSIB and for truly supporting workers in this province.

Let me be clear: No worker should ever have to worry about going to work and getting injured on the job—not a single worker. Not a single family member, a loved one,

should have to worry about their partner or their children going to work and getting killed on the job. It is never acceptable to see what we are seeing now with WSIB, where these workers are being denied their benefits.

Every worker in this province deserves to have a safe workplace. They deserve to have a program in place that will support them if they do need to be off work. They deserve a government that will be there for them when they need it, and right now, they don't have it.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Jim McDonell: I sat back and listened to the member opposite and her discussion.

Our government has worked with our federal counterparts to provide an array of different programs—halting evictions during the year, rental agreements. We've frozen rents. We provided services for small businesses, citizens and workers.

This is one of the programs we have for small businesses. I have heard many times how the members opposite have said we have to do more for small businesses. Well, this is not only a program to help small businesses, but I would suggest that when your job is still there—when this COVID-19 pandemic is over, people want to return to their jobs. This will help those businesses to be there. How is that not a benefit for not only small businesses, but actually for the workers who will have a job to go back to when this pandemic ends?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Three words to that question: paid sick days. They not only support the workers, but they support the businesses. Businesses are coming forward. There are some small businesses that are already providing paid sick days to their employees. They get it.

All of these different city councils, public health, labour organizations, workers have come forward. Health experts have come forward and told this government, “Do you want to help small businesses? Make sure that their workers don't have to come into work sick. Make sure that they're not coming in and getting other workers sick. Make sure they're not coming in and making customers sick. Make sure that they stay healthy so they can come back to work and be productive members of that business.”

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further debate?

Ms. Marit Stiles: It is always an honour to rise in this place.

I'm going to be speaking this afternoon on Bill 238, the so-called Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act. It is clear I share the sentiments of many of my colleagues who have already spoken and who have noted—I will add as well, in the last week or so, that it's good to be back here. It's good to be back here after such a lengthy time away, while Ontarians were struggling with some of the hardest months of this pandemic. I heard from thousands of my constituents who wanted to see their Legislature back at work dealing with the pressing issues facing our province. It's why we in the official opposition were calling for an early return since early January.

Anyway, now that we're here, I have to say that I'm really disappointed that the government's agenda doesn't seem to match the scale of the crisis our province is facing. In fact, what's being put forward amounts to housekeeping motions and little minor adjustments and changes to the standing orders, in many cases, tinkering with sitting hours and procedures. It is certainly not what my constituents in Davenport are demanding action on.

The bill that we are debating today really, sadly, seems to fall into that same category. It seeks to legislate the freezing of WSIB premium rates through 2021, something that has already been announced by WSIB and something that doesn't actually require legislation at all. And in typical fashion for this government, the bill also makes changes that would concentrate new powers over an arm's-length agency in the hands of the minister.

Speaker, there is no doubt that WSIB needs reforms, but those reforms should be in the interest of helping injured workers and in broadening the scope of benefits to acknowledge the unprecedented nature of workplace safety during a global pandemic—and this bill does neither of those things.

So what is the purpose here? I recall the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development provided some motivation for the bill when he opened second reading debate last week, I believe. He said, “This proposal fits within the larger context of our government efforts to stand with workers and employers ... and within my ministry's mandate to support and protect workers and employers.”

Well, I would have an easier time reconciling that statement with what we have in this bill if the government hadn't also been simultaneously taking actions that undermine the protection of workers.

Just this past week, the official opposition sought all-party support to pass nine urgent bills that would offer some hope for Ontarians. That included a bill that has broad support from Ontarians, from public health experts, from leaders, from the government's own COVID-19 advisory panels, from workers' unions and from the business community, as my colleagues have mentioned: paid sick days. It is a common solution to stopping the out-of-control spread of the virus in workplaces. It's a common-sense solution. Give people the means to stay at home when they're sick.

1700

This very simple measure would protect workers' lives and employers from halting operations due to outbreaks, but it was opposed every step of the way by this government. It continues to be opposed by this government, by the Premier. In fact, this government refused to work with us in the official opposition to get it done.

Let's look at the second reason that the minister gave for making the changes contained in Bill 238, which was that it will help employers get through this difficult time. Well, I mean, certainly it might provide some businesses some benefit in terms of lower premiums, but those lower premiums generally favour large employers: in other words, those, as we know and we've mentioned many

times, that have already been the least impacted by the pandemic—in fact, some have profited, arguably, from the pandemic—and also, by the way, those that have a higher occasion of workplace accidents.

I've been talking to small businesses in my community, Mr. Speaker, every week since the pandemic began, throughout the fall, throughout the summer, and into the early days of this year, 2021. Our local business improvement associations—and I attend as many of their meetings as I can—are doing an incredible job of advocating, taking on a lot of responsibility as small businesses in my community struggle, and I've made a point of listening to those small business owners. I have great relationships with them. I've brought those concerns forward, along with my colleagues here in the official opposition, and those considerations, those concerns, have informed everything that we have brought forward in this place.

At every turn, and despite the government's claim that they're a champion of small business, we've seen businesses fighting tooth and nail to squeeze out any kind of support. Mr. Speaker, I can tell you: When I walk through my community or drive around my riding, it is heart-breaking, the number of businesses that are closed. I want to tell you, and it really saddens me to say this, but it's going to get worse before it gets better.

Most of the small businesses that I know, that I was talking to in the spring around the first lockdown here in Toronto, were saying, "We might survive this first lockdown, but we won't survive another one. We need direct supports." So we pushed really hard at all levels to get those supports in place. The small businesses waited for months and months for federal assistance programs to come online, only to find more hurdles with eligibility, and most of them involving taking on more debt. Time and again, they asked for those direct supports to get through these very painful lockdowns, and they have been denied.

Businesses in my community were frustrated—and I raised this in the media and in open letters—to see Instagram ads promoting the new small business grant before applications were even opened. When they did open, really desperate small businesses got their applications in immediately, let me tell you, knowing that the grant could make the difference between getting through all of this or having to close their doors for good.

Speaker, I can tell you that as of today, businesses in my community that applied now over a month ago—over a month ago—through that portal still do not have that grant money. Folks like Matias, who owns Houndstooth on College—I mean, they have tried everything. We have tried everything. We continue to raise these issues with the government. We go to the ministers. We talk to the minister directly. We work with the BIAs. Nothing seems to shake these guys. Like, what is it going to take to get that grant money into those hands, to save those small businesses? That would be helpful. So I have a really hard time accepting that this bill amending the WSIB is part of any kind of real commitment to small business in this province.

As I mentioned earlier today, last week the member for Essex brought forward a motion, a unanimous-consent motion, asking this government to support a number of our Save Main Street plan ideas, and the government said no. This is a government that just says no to everything—just no. They said no to paid sick leave for workers. They said no to a permanent raise for our phenomenal personal support workers; no to an eviction ban so people are no longer tossed out in the street during a pandemic—and let me tell you about the people of my riding living in the streets and in tents, the people who have lost their lives in tents that burned down in our community. They've said no to an equity strategy to address the impacts this pandemic is having on racialized communities. People are hurting. We all know that. They need a government who will use all the tools it has to help them.

This bill fails to offer that help because it fails to put the needs of injured workers first and it fails to put in place the paid sick days we have all passionately advocated for, that mayors across this province have advocated for. In fact, opening up the legislation governing WSIB would have been a perfect time—let's just say it—to incorporate the member for Niagara Falls's bill, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, and make it law. That bill would have retroactively ensured that front-line health care workers and workers in essential businesses receive presumptive WSIB coverage during the pandemic. But no, no. In fact, they'd rather just push forward this—I'm going to say it—pretty useless piece of legislation when there was an opportunity to do so much more.

I mean, what are we doing here? What are we doing here in this place if not trying to improve the lives of people who are really struggling? And I mean really struggling. Like those essential front-line workers the members opposite constantly call heroes, our angels—what have you done for them lately? What has the government done for them lately, Mr. Speaker?

Paid sick days would help those workers more than anything else, and this government continues to refuse for purely political and ideological reasons. They had an opportunity. They continue to have the opportunity to do the right thing, and they continue to fail the workers and the small businesses of this province.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you. Questions?

Ms. Jane McKenna: April 28 is an important day in Ontario and around the world. In Canada, April 28 is the National Day of Mourning. It is also the World Day for Safety and Health at Work, which is recognized by the United Nations.

My original bill would have declared April 28 as safety and health day in Ontario. My bill in its original form was supported by the Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals and the Ontario General Contractors Association.

My question to the NDP member: Was the official opposition unaware that April 28 is the World Day for Safety and Health at Work, or was the opposition just playing

politics by voting against a bill that would support safe and healthy workplaces?

Ms. Marit Stiles: I'm just tickled, Mr. Speaker, that the member opposite would raise that issue, because I am quite enthusiastic to point out to the member that we have a day of mourning. We have a day of mourning when people in this province, workers in this province, families of workers who have lost their lives on the job, have an opportunity to mark that day and that occasion. It is a very sacred occasion for working people, let me tell you, and the fact that this member would try to kind of gloss over that and pretend that that was not a major mistake on her part—to come forward with that date was offensive to the people of this province, deeply offensive to working people in this province. I think they've made it pretty clear, Mr. Speaker, and I welcome the opportunity to debate the member any time on that point.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Jeff Burch: I thank my colleague from Davenport for that. She raised an interesting question. It reminded me of a similar situation we had back in the summer and fall with the safe reopening portal for businesses. I had one heck of a time with my constituents not even getting a response ever from the government on their safe reopening plans, which they put all kinds of work into, to open safely, whether it was a racetrack or an agricultural setting, and right on the edge of losing their business, taking time to put in a plan and not even getting a response from government—and here we have another portal that my friend has mentioned where they're desperately trying to get some assistance and not even getting an answer.

Could she expand a little bit more on what the businesses in her riding are going through with that?

1710

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you very much for that question. I welcome the opportunity.

Yes, actually, in my community, as I mentioned, we've been dealing with small businesses coming to my office for support throughout the pandemic. But there was some hope. They were excited about the potential for this portal to open. Let me tell you, when that Instagram ad went out saying, "We're ready for business. Sign up. Enter here," and people couldn't get in because it wasn't ready, small businesses were fuming. And I know it wasn't just in my community. I know the members opposite got those calls too.

One of the things we did immediately was to alert the minister to the problem that existed. But as it stands right now, every time we call the minister's office to say that we have yet another business that's been waiting—it started out two days, two weeks, now a month—we get the response that it will just be a little bit longer. Well, how long are these businesses supposed to wait? They are literally closing because they cannot afford to stay open. These are desperate times, and this government needs to take action.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mr. Will Bouma: I always appreciate having a chat with the member from Davenport. I just wanted to make the House aware—and to that member—that I just got an update email that as of today, we have approved more than 67,000 applications, with more than \$950 million—that's almost \$1 billion—in payments going to businesses in communities across the province through our small business support program. That wasn't actually my question; I just wanted to let everyone know that.

We heard this afternoon from the member from Essex—and obviously the member from Davenport disagrees because she says it's unnecessary and a waste of time to pass this legislation, but I recall the member from Essex saying that this is a good, low-hanging-fruit piece of legislation that we could be doing. I'm not going to argue about who is right or wrong in the opposition, Mr. Speaker, but I'm wondering if she could say if she is going to support this legislation, because it is low-hanging fruit and this does support small businesses—if she would be willing to do that.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you to the member opposite. I think that when we talk about—I mean, boy, that's low-hanging fruit. This, to me, actually does a lot more to support those big businesses like the Walmarts. Those guys are the ones who are going to benefit from this legislation.

What would benefit working people and small businesses—and I appreciate the numbers the member opposite shared, but I want to share another number: 2,000—2,000 workers with COVID who have been denied WSIB. I would like to see the government do something to address those numbers, to address those people who have been so poorly treated by this government and continue to be.

If you want to actually change WSIB and make significant reforms, we've given you a whole lot of good examples of what needs to happen. You could address deeming, for example, but this government refuses to. They pick and choose very carefully the things they want to change because they want to change only the things that benefit the biggest businesses, the biggest donors, and that's a fact.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions?

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I'd just like to say to the member for Brantford—Brant that it's such low-hanging fruit that even someone my size, at five-foot-nothing, could have reached it.

To my colleague from Davenport, I want to say bravo to you for pointing out that the member for Burlington and the shameless self-promotion on bringing forward a bill about workers and those that have been injured or killed on the job—the fact that she would bring it on the Day of Mourning, which was brought forward by the labour movement itself—thanks for pointing that out. We've clearly struck a nerve with the other side.

But to the member for Davenport, I would like to know, since we've already talked about some of the other things that aren't in this bill—I know that my constituents and

constituents in my colleagues' ridings and ridings that the Conservatives represent as well—those businesses, while they were closed or under the COVID restrictions, while they saw decreased business or no business, their insurance premiums went up exponentially. So I'm wondering if the member from Davenport can tell me if there is anything that she can recall that has come forward from this government that will actually reduce insurance premiums for these struggling businesses.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you so much to the member from Windsor West. I've got to tell you, yes, I've actually just recently spoken to some businesses at a BIA meeting in Corso Italia in my community, where the head of the BIA, actually, was reporting that now, when they have empty storefronts—he owns a building; there's an empty storefront, and the insurance has gone up 1,200%. So that's what's hurting small businesses and small business owners in my community. It's almost unimaginable, right? And when you consider, of course, the costs involved in the city of Toronto, in downtown Toronto, they're high anyway.

These are small business owners. These are folks who oftentimes have had generations who have owned these buildings and run the businesses, especially along Corso Italia, and they are struggling. Businesses that have been open for 30, 40 years are closing their doors. Generations of people in our community who have relied on those businesses are seeing those doors close forever. It's deeply disturbing.

They're being gouged by insurance, but they're also being gouged by folks like—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you very much. Further questions?

Mr. Mike Harris: I cannot understand for the life of me why the member from Davenport seems to stand up here and preach to us on this side of the Legislature that what we're doing here isn't going to support small businesses. I was a small business owner. He was a small business owner. He was a small business owner. This member was a small business owner; so is this member. And I can tell you right now, for having to meet payroll, WSIB was a huge part of that, along with all of the other—1.4 times what an employer has to put in to cover the cost of those employees, whether that be EI, CPP, WSIB etc. For her to stand up here sanctimoniously and say that this is only helping big business—I want to know why she's not going to support this bill and why the other members of this House are going to stand up against this.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Back to the member from Davenport for final response—

Interjections.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Order, please.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Mr. Speaker, you know when we're getting it right over here by the level of outrage over there.

Do you know what this government doesn't like to deal with at all? The idea that they would in any way be doing less than 100% for small businesses. Well, talk to the small businesses in my community about how this government

is measuring up. The federal government has not been exactly stellar either. But I can assure you, if you poll the small businesses in my riding and across Toronto, they will tell you this government has failed so badly—so deeply, so badly. How many small businesses have closed during this pandemic—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you.

Ms. Marit Stiles:—while businesses like Walmart—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you very much. When I say, "Thank you," that's exactly what I mean, which then means that it's someone else's turn, but your turn is over.

Further debate?

Mr. Lorne Coe: I'm happy to rise today to speak on the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act. This legislation is part of our government's efforts to stand with workers and employers during this challenging time. What's clear is that, as a government, we're constantly looking for opportunities to provide safety, security and opportunity in my riding of Whitby and other parts of Durham.

The Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development has been hard at work in this challenging time, putting into action initiatives to help protect the safety and well-being of workers, supporting businesses in following health and safety requirements to stop the spread of this deadly pandemic and finding ways to ease some of the unexpected financial burdens that businesses have encountered while they do their part to keep their customers and workers safe.

Speaker, the proposed legislation is an important part of this government's actions to support employers at a critical time. I hear that from my Whitby Chamber of Commerce. I hear it from the Whitby business improvement association. Small businesses are the job creators in our towns and cities, without a doubt.

If passed, the legislation will help protect businesses from unexpected increases in their Workplace Safety and Insurance Board premiums. At the same time, it would not affect the annual increase in the maximum earnings cap for workers benefits. Simply put, this is a win: It's a win for workers, and it's a win for employers, and that's good news. The seven-point increase to the earnings cap for worker benefits will still take effect this year. But for businesses, the relief we're providing will make a world of difference in Whitby and adjoining ridings in Durham and other parts of this great province.

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Meanwhile, Speaker, I want to remind everyone that there is financial help for workers who need to stay home. Thanks to an agreement between Prime Minister Trudeau, Premier Ford and other Premiers, there is over \$1 billion available for workers to access 10 paid sick days. To date, over 111,000 workers in Ontario have accessed this funding. Now, Speaker, we know that this program needs to work better, and we have heard that this afternoon. There is \$800 million still in the bank, and workers need this support. Members will know that the Minister of Labour has spoken to his federal counterpart about what needs to be done to improve the federal paid sick leave

program. There is a need to pay workers faster, make it easier to access and raise awareness about the benefit.

It's our job to spread opportunity more widely and fairly. Ultimately, Speaker, and you'll know this, our role is to connect people to good, secure jobs within communities like the town of Whitby and other parts of this province. Speaker, you'll know that right across our magnificent province, neighbours are helping neighbours, and that's a good thing. And our Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development has been thorough in ensuring that workers and businesses are being taken care of in this pandemic. Importantly, he and his parliamentary assistant have been listening carefully to workers and employers across the province. I know that's the case. I've heard it from my chamber of commerce members, and I've heard it from my local business employment association, and Speaker, I know you have as well.

We heard earlier about the level of support that exists for this particular legislation. I want to read part of what the president of the Ontario General Contractors Association said about this bill, because I think it's material to the conversation and discussion of the debate: "Ontario's industrial, commercial and institutional general contractors commend the legislation proposed by Minister McNaughton. This will mean workers remain supported, and employers can continue building the critical infrastructure needed for Ontario's economic recovery."

We're all invested in this Legislative Assembly, regardless of party affiliation, to the economic recovery of our province, to the well-being of the people we have the privilege of representing.

I want to read another excerpt, from David Frame. Many in the Legislature will know Mr. Frame. He's the chair of the Construction Employers Coalition for WSIB and health and safety and prevention. He had this to say: "The government's proposal will provide injured workers with a benefit ceiling increase while protecting employers from unreasonable costs. It's clear that Minister McNaughton is committed to listening to employers and making the institutions aimed to support them more effective"—absolutely more effective.

Speaker, I see that I'm running out of time, so I'm going to wrap up at the present time. I will conclude by calling for all in this House to support Bill 238, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, 2021. If passed, it will help protect businesses from unexpected increases in their Workplace Safety and Insurance Board premiums. At the same time, it would allow for an increase in the maximum WSIB benefits for workers.

Speaker, the government has been steadfast—absolutely steadfast—in our support for workers and employers throughout this pandemic. This proposed legislation is yet one more step to help our province come through and recover from an unprecedented fight against an invisible enemy. Now, as challenging as it has been, this pandemic has shown that we can work together with all partners in other levels of government, as well as with each other, and come up with swift, effective and innovative actions.

Mr. Speaker, at this particular junction, I move that this question be now put.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Mr. Coe has moved that the question be now put. I am satisfied, since there has been over 10 hours of debate on this particular bill, to allow this question to actually be put to the House. Therefore, is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion that the question be now put, please say "aye."

All those opposed to the motion that the question be now put, please say "nay."

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

Interjection: On division.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): On division? Carried on division.

Mr. McNaughton has moved second reading of Bill 238, An Act to amend the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed to the motion will please say "nay."

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

A recorded vote being required, unless I receive a deferral slip, the bells will ring for 30 minutes—

Interjection.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls):—but I have in my hand a deferral slip.

"To the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly:

"Pursuant to standing order 30(h), I request that the vote on G238, Workplace Safety and Insurance Amendment Act, 2020 be deferred to deferred votes on"—Wednesday?

Interjection: Thursday.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thursday. That's what I thought.

Interjections.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): So that was a practice run.

"To the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Pursuant to standing order 30(h), I request that the vote on the motion for second reading of Bill 238, An Act to amend the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997, be deferred until deferred votes on Thursday, February 25, 2021."

Second reading vote deferred.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Orders of the day?

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Point of order, Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): I recognize the member from Barrie–Innisfil on a point of order.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you, Speaker. I'm seeking unanimous consent to see the clock at 6.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): The member from Barrie–Innisfil is seeking unanimous consent to see the clock at 6. Agreed? Agreed.

Report continues in volume B.

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Hassan, Faisal (NDP)	York South—Weston / York-Sud—Weston	
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Morrison, Suze (NDP)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	
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Shaw, Sandy (NDP)	Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas / Hamilton-Ouest—Ancaster—Dundas	
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Skelly, Donna (PC)	Flamborough—Glanbrook	
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