

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

No. 230

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

N^o 230

1st Session
42nd Parliament
Wednesday
3 March 2021

1^{re} session
42^e législature
Mercredi
3 mars 2021

Speaker: Honourable Ted Arnott
Clerk: Todd Decker

Président : L'honorable Ted Arnott
Greffier : Todd Decker

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House Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400; fax 416-325-7430
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
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Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400; télécopieur, 416-325-7430
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 1180-2987

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

Wednesday 3 March 2021

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

Mercredi 3 mars 2021

The House met at 0900.

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

Prayers.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

PROTECTING ONTARIO ELECTIONS ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 SUR LA PROTECTION DES ÉLECTIONS EN ONTARIO

Mr. Downey moved second reading of the following bill:

Bill 254, An Act to amend various Acts with respect to elections and members of the Assembly / Projet de loi 254, Loi modifiant diverses lois en ce qui concerne les élections et les députés à l'Assemblée.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll look to the minister to lead off the debate. Again, the Attorney General.

Hon. Doug Downey: I'm pleased to stand in the House today to open debate on a bill that would, if passed, take steps to make it easier to cast a vote safely in an advance poll or on election day. It includes responsible changes that would protect Ontarians' essential voice in elections and ensure the province's electoral process is equipped for urgent and evolving challenges, including COVID-19.

Each and every Ontarian is a driving force of our democracy. From casting their votes to volunteering on campaigns or putting one's name on a ballot, this proposed legislation reflects that reality and reasserts the central role of individuals in Ontario's elections. As this Legislature has often done in the past, this bill proposes to update elections to better respond to the challenges of the day, the needs of voters and the ways Ontarians interact with their institutions.

We want to ensure that the electoral system continues to evolve to protect Ontarians' central role in elections and promote fairness in the electoral process for everyone. Never has it been more important to take steps to make our elections safer, more accessible and efficient for individuals. If passed, the Protecting Ontario Elections Act, 2021, would help strengthen our preparedness for the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, add additional guardrails on the influence of third-party advertising and add new protections against irregular campaign spending inclusion.

Before I begin to discuss the bill we're introducing today, I would like to acknowledge and thank the Integrity

Commissioner for his continued engagement. We will continue to work with him and his office with respect to the Members' Integrity Act and some reforms I will discuss a little later this morning. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Elections Ontario for its continued leadership in ensuring Ontario's elections are fair, accessible and responsive to Ontarians.

As Canadians, we are fortunate to live in a country where governments are defeated at the ballot box, and not in the battlefield. Ontarians are fortunate to be able to count on the independent excellence of Elections Ontario, which began celebrating 100 years of elections in 2020. Over the course of its proud history, Elections Ontario has administered 28 general elections, 149 by-elections and two referenda. Throughout that period, Elections Ontario has remained committed to meeting the changing needs of voters while upholding the integrity, accessibility and transparency of the electoral process in Ontario, and I know its dedication to excellence will continue.

As a result of that persistent commitment and the contributions of successive governments over the years that have made efforts to ensure legislation continues to evolve with the times, Ontario has continued to be seen as a leader in promoting and protecting the democratic process.

I would especially like to recognize the due diligence of the Chief Electoral Officer of Elections Ontario for bringing forward a special report on election administration that was released in November of last year. It responded to the risks that surround COVID-19. That report provided the groundwork for key amendments, including making it easier for people to get to the polls earlier, in advance of the general election, to avoid lineups.

I would also like to thank the diligent and dedicated teams at the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs and my own ministry, the Ministry of the Attorney General, and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing for their tremendous work on this proposed legislation. I am so grateful for all of your detailed attention and commitment.

And I'm grateful to the many partners in the justice system who are working with my ministry to respond and adapt with remarkable swiftness in order to address the challenges brought on by COVID-19 in other areas, including the courts and victim services.

Fair, accessible and safe elections are the cornerstone of a free, democratic society, and we need to do what we can to protect the electoral process as life in Ontario continues to evolve and grow. We know these are unprecedented times. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of safety and health in all aspects of our lives. Its impact has been remarkable—remarkable and unforgettable. In fact,

it's almost incomprehensible to think just how much the world changed over the past year, how we as a society have changed and evolved over the past 12 months.

In responding to these extraordinary circumstances, our government has taken bold and significant steps. My ministry has worked with justice partners to build a more accessible, responsive and resilient justice system. This is a system that we know will continue to develop, improve and better serve our communities as we work together to get our province back on track.

In response to the emergence of COVID-19, we took decisive action to keep Ontarians safe and maintain the administration of justice. Through persistent innovation and collaboration, we achieved a number of breakthroughs to move Ontario's justice system forward by decades in a matter of months. Acknowledging the risks of having large numbers of people congregate in courtrooms and judicial settings, we immediately set to work to move to remote hearings and help the courts with suspension of in-person proceedings.

Many justice modernization projects had to be accelerated or changed in scope to meet the new needs of Ontarians. This included supporting new ways of conducting matters, offering more remote proceedings and providing online methods for filing and interacting with the court to reduce the number of people who must visit a courthouse in person.

Although we had to make rapid changes in order to keep the justice system functioning during COVID-19, we also saw this as an opportunity to strengthen the system, to be more responsive to Ontarians' expectations and more resilient to the challenges of the future. In doing so, we've changed the culture of the system. We have created muscle memory around how we promptly identify barriers and collaborate on solutions to benefit all Ontarians.

The Protecting Ontario Elections Act includes changes aimed at strengthening and safeguarding another pillar of our democratic life: Ontario's electoral system. As we move forward in these uncertain times, we are dedicated to making sure Ontario's election process is safe and accessible to all, whether you're voting or running for office or volunteering in your local riding or working with Elections Ontario to keep our elections safe, fair and efficient. Now is the time to ensure this is one of the flagships of our democratic system, to make sure it is protected and updated to meet urgent challenges, including COVID-19.

The legislative action we are proposing would protect Ontarians' essential voice in campaigns and strengthen the integrity of the elections process. This is vitally important to all of us and to the province, and we intend to leave a better province to the future generations. We strongly believe that Ontario voters should determine the outcome of elections, and not pop-up organizations, big-money conglomerates or faceless political action groups.

This bill would provide responsible guardrails that would ensure the growth and scale of third-party organizations—make sure they don't drone out the voices of individuals who are willing to stand behind their convictions openly and transparently. The essential voice of

individuals should be maintained as part of the debates and dialogue that take place around elections, and the legislation that we're proposing seeks to protect individuals as the driving force at election time.

People are at the centre of the political process and of democracy in Ontario. It is the people who form the backbone of our communities, whose spirit and energy drive our economy. They are the essence of Ontario and they set the course for our province at the ballot box. I'm talking about everyone from the parents who are working so hard to protect and nurture their children through this global pandemic, to the front-line workers who put their safety on the line every single day to provide us with the essential services, to the health care workers who are working tirelessly 24 hours a day, seven days a week. With our proposed changes, we would reassert the central role of these individuals and put them back at the heart of the electoral process.

0910

We all observed the recent electoral turmoil experienced by our neighbours to the south; we don't need to go on too much about that. Here in Ontario, we want to ensure that guardrails are in place to ensure that American-style political action groups do not disproportionately overshadow a dialogue that must continue to make room for individuals. In fact, the reforms we are proposing build on the Ontario Legislature's 2016 decision to ban corporate and union donations to political parties and help ensure individuals remain at the centre of the electoral process.

I've said it before, but I won't ever grow tired of stating that it is the people of Ontario who are the driving force of our democracy—from casting their votes, to volunteering on campaigns, putting up signs and putting their name on a ballot. We want people to feel that they have a voice in our election, and that's why we've put forward a comprehensive suite of legislative amendments for consideration. These proposed changes are crucial to ensuring our electoral system continues to evolve and that fairness is promoted for everyone. Our proposed Protecting Ontario Elections Act is about putting people first.

Speaker, we've felt the effects of COVID-19 across Canada, around the world and, of course, right here at home. One thing it has driven home is the importance of ensuring elections are accessible and safe for all Ontarians, including people in the north and rural communities.

When we think about election day, our first thought is about polling stations. We know they can be crowded, with lengthy lineups, especially in peak times like after work. In today's environment of required physical distancing, we know many added measures will need to be in place, and we're proposing action now to ensure Ontario is prepared.

We know that the idea of lining up and gathering at polling stations can be a source of anxiety and concern that could deter some voters from participating as they normally would on election day. Being able to maintain a safe, healthy distance while exercising your civic duty has never been more important. That's why we are proposing to make it more convenient and safe to vote in a COVID-19 environment.

We want to increase the number of flexible advance polling days from five to 10, based on need. We want them doubled based on need. Increasing the number of advance polling days would reduce the number of people in a polling station at any given time so they could stay a safe distance apart and minimize risk. That added flexibility would allow people to exercise their civic duties without fear, apprehension or even anxiety of going to the polls in the first place. Ontarians who face obstacles in making their way to a polling station, such as people living in northern or remote communities, would have more options on when to vote.

We have to remember that for many Ontarians voting, it's not just a matter of walking a few city blocks or driving a couple of kilometres in their car. For some Ontarians, casting their vote is a time and travel commitment and it often means juggling an already busy schedule, whether it be dealing with children's needs or work needs or anything else. The change would also make it easier for shift workers and others on a strict work clock to cast their vote safely.

Even before the pandemic, we knew advance voting has been a beneficial and increasingly convenient option. According to the Chief Electoral Officer's 2018 post-election report, more Ontarians voted during advance voting in the last provincial election than ever before. In fact, almost 700,000 people chose advance voting, which is more than a 22% increase from the 570,000 people who voted in 2014. The Chief Electoral Officer said then that expanding the advance voting period to 10 days would let more electors take advantage of voting in advance.

Speaker, almost all these voters benefited from new technology-enabled polling stations. The success of the technology during this period provided Elections Ontario with some excellent insights about what to expect on election day. But in addition to the advance voting, mail-in ballots are also a popular option, and they were in the 2018 election. Mail-in ballot kits, if you've seen them, include the write-in ballot, so you have to write in the name; a secrecy envelope and an elector confirmation envelope, so you put your ballot into the secret envelope and it goes into another envelope; and a pre-addressed return envelope; and with voting instructions. Elections Ontario reported sending out more than 15,000 mail-in ballot kits for the 2018 election, which is up more than 50% from the 10,000 ballot kits sent out in 2014.

Speaker, we can clearly see that Ontarians have shown a growing interest in taking advantage of the more convenient voting options that are available. That was the case even before the pandemic. We can see that, for many people, voting in advance on election day can be a better fit for their individual circumstances and their routine.

I would hope that every member of this Legislature can agree that it is never a bad time—or a bad idea—to make our elections more relevant and convenient for the people they intend to serve. By increasing advance voting days, we would expand the opportunity for more Ontarians to vote safely and with more convenience, and help to ensure more individuals can make their voices heard. That is the

experience that has been measured recently here in Ontario.

I want to draw some comparisons with other provinces on each side of our country where elections have been run during this COVID-19 pandemic, with specific public health directives in place. Speaker, provincial elections were held in British Columbia and New Brunswick last year, as I am sure you are aware and you followed. Just last month, a severe COVID-19 outbreak in Newfoundland and Labrador created chaos for election officials and voters. As a result of the outbreak, election officials cancelled in-person voting on the eve of election day and extended the time voters had to cast ballots until March 12—extraordinary measures.

We want to ensure we take responsible measures to mitigate risks related to COVID-19 while providing more options for Ontarians to feel safe voting in advance of election day. Newfoundland and Labrador's experience shows how unpredictable elections can be in a COVID-19 environment and how quickly circumstances can change. I think we've seen that with COVID-19, things do develop quickly, things do need to change quickly, and we need to pivot quickly. We want to arm Elections Ontario with the tools that they need and the processes they need to allow people to vote safely.

Like Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick was home to a relatively low number of COVID-19 cases when the writ was dropped last summer. Fortunately, that election was not marred by a serious outbreak of COVID-19 as was the case with Newfoundland and Labrador. The New Brunswick election saw voters turn out for advance voting in record numbers. In fact, more than 133,000 people voted in the two days of advance polls, the most ever in that province. This was up from 88,000 voters in 2018, which represents a marked increase in the COVID-19 context. Just the numbers to contrast again: 88,000 to 133,000; that's a marked increase.

British Columbia also had its own unique voting experience during the pandemic. Voting was able to occur as originally scheduled. British Columbia also saw a rise in votes cast in advance polls. According to elections officials, in 2020 the advance votes cast as a percentage of total votes increased to 35%, compared to 30% in 2017. This demonstrates that there has been a greater uptake of advance polling in these provinces where elections have been run safely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Provisions have also been proposed to ensure election day and advance polls do not occur on weekends or on major religious holidays, as determined by Elections Ontario.

As I mentioned before, 10-day advance polling was most recently proposed by Ontario's Chief Electoral Officer in a special report released last November on election administration and response to the risks that surround COVID-19. As a matter of fact, we're putting forward several reforms that were recommended by the Chief Electoral Officer, including a proposed change to introducing guidelines on voting technology.

Just as Ontario's justice system needs to keep up with the times, so does Ontario's voting system. Speaker, as I

mentioned earlier, we're taking great strides in moving from an outdated, outmoded, paper-based system to one that embraces technology. We need to apply the same principles to our electoral processes. Voting equipment used to count and submit ballots needs to keep pace with the new advances in technology.

But in moving our electoral system firmly into the future, we can't sacrifice accuracy and accountability. That's why we are proposing to create an advisory committee appointed by the Chief Electoral Officer of Elections Ontario to advise on guidelines and make recommendations for Ontario's voting equipment. This would be based on election best practices across the country. Speaker, members of the Legislature will be heartened to know that, alongside experts, this committee would feature representatives of every registered party in this Legislature. We want to get it balanced, we want to get it right and we want to move into the future. It would be structured similarly to the existing political advisory committee to the Chief Electoral Officer, with the addition of experts in election technology, and it would advise on non-binding guidelines for equipment based on best practices in provincial elections. The advice of this committee would help modernize Ontario's voting process and ensure it is updated to meet urgent challenges, including COVID-19.

0920

Another recommendation from the Chief Electoral Officer has to do with enforcement. Currently, the Chief Electoral Officer reports election infractions to the independent prosecution services in the criminal law division of the Ministry of the Attorney General for possible prosecution. Once that has been done, the Chief Electoral Officer must wait and see whether the independent prosecution services will proceed with the prosecution. To help strengthen the suite of the enforcement tools that are available to Elections Ontario, to help drive compliance, we are proposing to provide the Chief Electoral Officer with new powers to impose administrative monetary penalties for what are classified as minor offences.

Speaker, I believe this is a vital element of this proposed legislation, and so I am going to take some time to explain some of the circumstances in which an administrative monetary penalty could be applied by the Chief Electoral Officer if the bill is passed. We'll call them AMPs, administrative monetary penalties; I'm just going to refer to them as AMPs, if everybody doesn't mind.

The AMPs could be applied for third-party advertising with no authorization. The AMPs could be applied for failing to register as a third party. The AMPs could be applied for exceeding spending limits. For nomination contestants and leadership contestants, they can be applied for failure to register. For all political actors—and political actors is what we call a term of art; it's for people participating in the process and people running for office in particular—if they fail to submit financial reports, they exceed spending limits or if someone releases election surveys on polling day, AMPs could apply, and there's failure to submit a variety of other reports.

The offences are subject to administrative monetary penalties. Most would be subject to a maximum of \$1,500 for individuals and \$5,000 for other entities, with the following exceptions:

—in the event that a contribution in excess of the limits imposed by the act is made, the maximum amount of the AMP is an amount equal to twice the amount that was contributed in contravention of that section—so there's some proportionality to it—plus the \$1,500 in the case of an individual who contravenes the act, and \$5,000 in the case of a corporation or entity that contravenes the act;

—for any political or third-party advertising appearing during a blackout period and any third-party advertising that does not disclose the source or that lacks authorization, the penalty could be up to \$10,000 if the third party is a person, or up to \$100,000 if the third party is a trade union, employee organization, corporation or other organization; and

—failure to register as a third party would lead to a maximum penalty of \$10,000.

Speaker, we believe the introduction of the penalties will reduce red tape, align with federal practices and, I think you will agree, improve the capacity of the Chief Electoral Officer to drive compliance. In fact, the Commissioner of Canada Elections within the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer is authorized to use AMPs in this manner, and election officials at the federal level, in British Columbia and Alberta can also apply similar penalties. Ontario would then be following the precedent of these jurisdictions. With respect to penalties for third parties, Ontario is proposing to follow the Alberta model, with higher maximum penalties of up to \$10,000 for individuals and \$100,000 for organizations.

Mr. Speaker, currently I just want to recap that a little bit. What happens now, if an individual or any organization breaches part of the act or isn't following the rules, the only recourse the Chief Electoral Officer has is to refer it to the criminal law division of the Ministry of the Attorney General. Then it's up to a prosecutor to decide whether to go forward or not. It's a very blunt way to deal with a whole variety of infractions. I don't have history on how often a prosecution has happened, but if you did something like donated over a limit by a hundred bucks, are you going to get prosecuted for that? That's up to the prosecutor, to decide what we're going to do. We think that we should bring in the tools for the Chief Electoral Officer to be able to drive compliance in all areas, so that it's not so blunt and so that mistakes and intentional behaviour don't go without consequences. We think consequences should come to bear, and that's part of the reason that we're doing the AMPs.

Speaker, I'm also very proud of this bill's responsible reforms to put safeguards in place to address under-regulated third-party advertising Ontario. Let's start with what third-party advertising actually is. Third-party advertising is a way for organizations that are not part of a candidate's or party's campaign to try to persuade voters to vote in a certain way, to vote either for or against a certain party or candidate. Some people refer to these kind

of pop-up organizations as a product of the influence of American-style politics in our system.

What we do know is that north of the border, this kind of campaigning takes on unique dimensions in our province compared with the rest of the country, even the federal context. In fact, Ontario is the only province in Canada where third-party spending is counted in the millions of dollars rather than in the thousands. In 2016, the Chief Electoral Officer stated that the scale of third-party advertising in Ontario was greater than at the federal level, and suggested that third-party election ads need to be monitored between elections—not just in the immediate lead-up or during the writ. That says a lot.

It is astounding to think that in 2018, in Ontario, third parties spent over \$5 million during the election period and in the six months prior to the election—over \$5 million. This is not spending by actual political parties. It is not spending by actual candidates who raised funds from transparent and accountable donations made by individuals. This is spending by outside organizations that can be funded by a wider variety of sources, including corporations and unions. Some Ontarians may be surprised to know, and some may not, that concerning that third parties can spend unlimited funds on advertising for an extended period of time between elections.

In this proposed legislation, the Protecting Ontario Elections Act, we are proposing to build on the Ontario Legislature's 2016 decision to ban corporate and union donations by requiring third-party advertising spending limits to begin 12 months before an election instead of six months before. This means that the advertising spending limit for third parties will be in place an entire year before the writ is dropped.

However, the spending limit is not changing and will remain at \$637,000. That's in addition to the \$106,000 each third-party group is permitted to spend during the official writ period. For clarity, I will note that these amounts are indexed annually and will be updated by Elections Ontario with the new amounts in January 2022.

The proposed time-limit increase would help to responsibly regulate third-party advertising between elections. It would also protect the essential voice of individuals and ensure they remain a driving force of our elections. This will ensure our democratic institutions, such as elections, are sustainable during a time of economic recovery.

I just want to go back to the numbers for a second: \$637,000. That allows a pop-up organization to receive money from a corporation or a union and spend over \$50,000 a month, every month for 12 months, and then another \$106,000 during the election, and there can be multiple pop-up organizations that do this. That's why we are in the millions of dollars in Ontario, unique in our Confederation.

We strongly agree believe that Ontario voters should determine the outcome of elections, not pop-up organizations. We can all agree that we don't want our politics to become as adversarial as what we witness in the United States. Much of the disenchantment that many people feel

about politics stems from attack ads funded by faceless political action groups, pop-up orgs and big-money conglomerates. We want individuals to make decisions based on what each party stands for, based on their record. The longer outside organizations are allowed to spend unlimited amounts of money on political advertising, the more risks we see. It is important that we strike a balance to ensure that under-regulated third-party spending is addressed.

In our proposed legislation, we're also proposing to strengthen enforcement around collusion. So what does collusion mean in the context of Ontario's elections? We are proposing rules to address collusion that focus on sharing of resources and not merely sharing a message. Currently, collusion can only be established where it can be proven that a third party's advertising has been done with the knowledge and consent of a candidate or party. Our proposed amendment would clearly outline what would entail collusion to help guard against these risks.

We looked at the federal definition and we strengthened our own definition accordingly. We would like to add more clarity around sharing information, common vendors, common contributors, use of funds obtained from foreign sources. We are also proposing that the Chief Electoral Officer would investigate complaints or allegations of collusion. Our suggested changes would strengthen safeguards against collusion, and most importantly, protect our elections from outside influence and interference. We will have the strongest framework in Canada.

Now, I would like to turn to and elaborate for a minute on the 2016 Ontario Legislature decision to ban corporate and union donations. That decision also helped to protect Ontarians' essential voice in campaigns and strengthen the integrity of the elections process. The Chief Electoral Officer has supported the ban of union and corporate contributions, and we agree with this action taken by the Legislature. In fact, we believe it is imperative to ensure individuals, not big corporations or organizations, remain at the centre of the electoral process.

0930

So we took a fresh look at personal contribution limits. We looked at Ontario's situation vis-à-vis other provinces and as Canada's largest province to see where we stood compared with some of our counterparts across the country. By increasing these annual limits from \$1,650 to \$3,300 this year, as this bill is proposing to do, we would be putting Ontario in the middle of the pack for individual donations in the Canadian context. This would still be an amount 23% lower than Alberta, where the limit is \$4,243. It's 34% lower than Manitoba and Nova Scotia. The annual contribution limits in both of those provinces is \$5,000. I would also note that Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador don't limit personal contributions at all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed almost every aspect of our life and how we interact with our communities. The last time this Legislature debated per-vote subsidies for political parties, before the pandemic, the relationship between parties and candidates and their

communities was very different. The reality then was that the parties and candidates could freely engage with the public, conducting outreach and engagement with voters.

The circumstances are very different now. Parties are facing unprecedented obstacles. As we all know, COVID-19 has created significant and unexpected barriers to increasing this personal engagement, or even maintaining previous levels of engagement. Any organized event requiring personal contact was no longer safe. Party and riding associations have not been able to engage with the constituents in the way they could before COVID-19, and that impacts their financial viability and ability to effectively connect with and represent their constituents and supporters.

In recognition of the current circumstances, we are proposing to extend the per-vote subsidies each party typically receives during an election at the 2018 rate of 63 cents per vote. These subsidies were scheduled to be phased out by 2022. In order to protect the essential political dialogue that Ontarians expect to engage in with political parties across the spectrum, we are proposing that the per-vote subsidy each party typically receives stay in place until December 31, 2024. This will give all parties a chance to find some financial balance and move forward with their plans. We feel this is a responsible approach in COVID times that protects the essential and vigorous dialogue that Ontarians expect in their elections. In terms of other jurisdictions, I would like to point out that Quebec, British Columbia and Nova Scotia also provide parties with per-vote subsidies.

We are proposing a balanced approach which ensures that we won't be in a situation where parties aren't part of the discussion because they can't afford to be there. We believe that this change would help our democratic institutions be a part of the province-wide COVID-19 recovery that our government is leading. We know that good, vigorous debate and a level playing field in that regard is healthy for a democracy. It's important that other parties not be excluded from that healthy debate.

I'll speak next about social media. Boy, voters are active on social media now more than ever. It's a modern reality. In every platform, there's politics happening, and it's an immediate, efficient and dynamic way for us to reach out to voters, supporters, constituents and people in opposition, quite frankly. There are a couple of those on Twitter. There are a couple of people in opposition on Twitter that show up frequently.

It really is—it's the new reality. It can help citizens reach potential candidates. It can help them hear platforms. It can help people understand things. You can reach directly or indirectly without making a phone call—the old way of having to make a phone call or even send an email. Social media is very immediate and very direct, and sometimes replies happen quickly and sometimes they don't happen at all. But social media can actually increase accountability.

Here in Ontario, we felt the time had come to clarify how existing election rules and responsibilities extend to these platforms. We're therefore proposing amendments

to the Members' Integrity Act, 1994, to allow members of provincial Parliament to have a single social media account before, during and after an election period, as opposed to having to create multiple social media accounts prior to, during and after the election.

In practice, this is saying that members of the House and individual candidates don't have to have campaign-specific accounts. They've had their account from before and they connected with individuals in their support base, whether it be elected or not, and it is critical that we ensure the legislation governing the conduct of members of the Legislature is clear and relevant to the world that we live in today.

The proposed legislation would also empower the Legislative Assembly to make the first set of rules for how social media should be used responsibly by members of provincial Parliament. Speaker, this would also be the first express recognition in Ontario law that members of the assembly use social media to reach the public and their constituents, supporters and followers. All members and their staff would have to obey the established rules regarding the permissible use of government resources. Similarly, all ministers would have to obey the special rules that apply to them and their ministerial staff to ensure that public funds are not used for partisan purposes. To my knowledge, Ontario is the first province in Canada that has sought to tackle this issue, and I am proud that Ontario is once again ensuring elections are updated to meet the needs of voters and reflect their reality.

Speaking of all members of provincial Parliament, I want to talk about independent members for a moment. Currently, independent members of provincial Parliament do not have the same ability or resources as registered political party candidates to fundraise outside of election periods or keep surpluses from their campaigns. As I look around, everybody here has a riding association, has a constituency association that is able to raise money between elections. Independent members do not have that. Their financial resources are limited, and we would like to change this. We are proposing to level the playing field and provide all sitting independent MPPs with access to constituency associations.

They would also receive the related benefits of being able to fundraise outside of election periods, qualify for constituency association voter subsidies, and keep surpluses.

In terms of other jurisdictions, it should be noted that British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan also allow incumbent independent MLAs to form constituency associations.

These changes, if passed, would make it easier for independent members to participate in elections. This proposal is about fairness and addressing an area of our elections that has been neglected. However, it should not come as a surprise to see our government putting forth changes that support independents and their ability to participate in our democratic processes. For a moment, before I move on, I would like to discuss a few other examples of how our government has worked to support

independent members. The government House leader has worked to ensure fairness for all members in this chamber. A few recent examples that come to mind: In 2019, the standing orders were amended to provide equal time for independent members to respond to opposition day motions. And in 2020, the standing orders were amended to reallocate two government question period questions each day to the independent members. So that's two that we lost as a government, and we gave them to the independent members. Now, in 2021, I am glad to build on this work to support the independent members of this Legislature, and the next.

Proposed changes in this legislation will go a long way to ensuring that independent members are on an equal footing. The proposed changes will allow Ontario to catch up to our provincial counterparts and ensure that independent members have a fair shot in future elections. I am glad to be bringing forth this proposal, and I believe it's good for democracy.

Speaker, we know that Ontario's financial rules for candidates and parties in an election are inefficient and, in fact, serve as barriers. These outdated rules may discourage people from running for elected office. We feel it's time to do something about that too. We are proposing to streamline processes so that people vying for party nominations would only need to submit candidate registration papers and not the additional financial reports introduced in 2017. This proposed amendment would still require contestants to register, but would remove all requirements for financial reporting, as recommended by the Chief Electoral Officer. This would simplify procedures and reduce bureaucratic red tape that could negatively affect interested candidates, to the point that the actual candidate pool is reduced—and I believe that to be happening.

I also want to talk about spot audits for a moment. The term "spot audit" refers to financial audits of candidates, leadership contestants and parties that happen after an audit has already been submitted and found sufficient. Speaker, political parties and campaigns are already subject to financial reporting requirements that include many checks and balances. That's one point. The other point is that political parties in Ontario are incorporated, and like any other business in this province, they need to follow audit rules and requirements. For political parties and candidates, this means that political parties hire firms like PwC or KPMG and others to audit the party's financial statements, which then must be submitted annually and after each election. When I talk about these companies—CPAs, chartered professional accountants around Ontario—they're professionals, Mr. Speaker. They do the audit, it gets submitted, and these reports are then reviewed by Elections Ontario to confirm accuracy.

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What spot audits do is they reopen and reinvestigate the financial statements that have already been audited, reviewed, closed and approved. It places a large administrative burden on political parties and candidates. It's an unnecessary duplication of work. We're relying on third-party professionals who are paid to do the work, Mr.

Speaker, and they do it for companies large and small all across Ontario. There is no reason we can't rely on them for this as well.

We are therefore proposing an amendment that would limit the Chief Electoral Officer's authority to reopen previously approved audited financial statements. This change would help make the elections process more efficient while maintaining regular audits of finances and strong, effective oversight in provincial elections.

But as an additional balancing measure to ensure and drive compliance, we are providing the Chief Electoral Officer with a stronger suite of enforcement tools. This will be the most complete tool box of penalties and enforcement measures available to an election officer anywhere in Canada. As I mentioned earlier, if passed, this bill would empower the Chief Electoral Officer to impose penalties for offences such as exceeding spending limits, releasing election surveys on polling day and failure to submit several reports. This is a good counterbalance. It reduces red tape and maintains the integrity of the system.

We're also proposing a number of administrative changes to help simplify the electoral process and make it more efficient. As part of this bill, constituency associations will be required to submit financial statements to their registered party quarterly or as requested. This will help to increase the transparency of election finances between parties and their constituency associations.

We're also proposing to reduce the requirement to post events to a party website, from seven days in advance of the event to three days. This would align posting requirements during writ and non-writ periods and maintain the same level of transparency. This proposed amendment also builds on previous reforms voted into law by Ontario's Legislature to strengthen the integrity of elections and encourage fair participation by Ontarians.

Speaker, we are suggesting a new minimum threshold of contributions to trigger an audit. This would ensure that audit subsidies are paid only to organizations with significant financial activity. The contribution threshold we are proposing is \$10,000 of any financial activity. Previously, there was no threshold, so organizations that received significantly fewer donations, like \$100—if all they did was receive \$100, they would still be audited. With our proposed change, we would not be spending public money doing audits of financial statements where there has been little or no financial activity. By setting an audit threshold, we would also only need to give audit subsidies to those organizations that have more than \$10,000 worth of financial activity.

Speaking of audit subsidies, we have addressed that as well. We're also proposing to increase audit subsidies to a consistent level of \$2,000 across the board.

Another administrative change we are bringing forward is increasing the deadline for reporting total contributions over \$200—which is up from the current \$100 limit—to political parties and leadership contestants from a single donor. We are proposing to increase this deadline from 10 days to 15 days from the date of deposit. So again, to recap, right now, the rule is that anything over \$100 has to

be reported within 10 days. We have upped the limit to say we want quick reporting on anything over the \$200 limit, but they have 15 days to make that after the date of deposit. This administrative change makes it easier for political parties to record and report on donations received and increases efficiencies. It makes things a little less bureaucratic, which is a theme that you will see in all the changes that we're making, Mr. Speaker.

We would also like to provide candidates who register early with certificates up to six months before the writ. Now, this is really inside baseball. All the people who are in the chamber today know what I'm talking about. People who have run campaigns know what I'm talking about. It's an inside baseball kind of thing, but it's administratively smoother. It makes things more efficient.

This means prospective candidates can do things like open a bank account to be ready well in advance of the writ period, so you don't have that writ period scramble. Currently, you don't get your certificate until the writ is dropped. This will allow people to prepare. If members in particular regions know that they have been nominated by the party or they're an independent and they want to run, they can get organized. That gives them the chance to spend the time with the voters as opposed to doing administrative tasks. This will be a welcome change for many potential candidates and enable them to feel more prepared for the election period. It also serves as another incentive for people to become a candidate. We think that's good for democracy, and we want to encourage that.

Another proposed amendment would allow the chief financial officers of registered political parties to issue tax receipts sooner for political contributions to fundraising functions with direct costs of \$30 or less per person. This would make it easier for political parties and others who hold fundraising events to record and report on the donations they've received.

Ontario's financial reporting rules for candidates and parties are cumbersome and difficult. They're inefficient, and they make people think twice about running for elected office. We're proposing to make these financial reporting requirements more efficient. Currently, registered political parties must record political contributions in an electronic database and issue tax receipts for those donations from the same database. They are then required to disclose the contributions they've received to Elections Ontario in real-time disclosure reports. When political parties merge records in real-time disclosure reporting, the new donation that is created may be labelled as a late submission and then subjected to an offence under the Election Finances Act. We're proposing to make it easier for political parties to obey the law by no longer considering merged records in real-time disclosure reporting as new submissions or fined as late submissions. This is just a practical matter.

Again, I'm talking inside baseball stuff. These are the practical matters that all parties run into just because the rules are created in a way that's a little bit cumbersome and have unintended consequences. We're creating transparency. We're making sure that it's working more

efficiently. Again, that means we can spend more time talking to voters and less time doing administration, and the Chief Electoral Officer has more tools and it's a smoother ride for him as well.

We're also proposing to reduce the financial reporting burden for constituency associations. With this proposed procedural change, we would no longer need the CR-3 form that's currently used at the end of a campaign. We're proposing to eliminate that form. What that form is: In an election year, the campaign itself has to report. Anybody who has been a CFO—and I've worn all hats in this kind of thing—you have to file your campaign ins-and-outs and your accounting, which will remain. But the constituency association isn't active during a campaign; the campaign itself is the body that's working through the writ. So sometimes money is lent or moved over from a constituency association, but then that constituency association is no longer active during a campaign. Nonetheless, the CR-3, which is talking about any financial activity during that period, has to be filed. The riding association, the CA, has to file at the end of the year anyway, so they're going to capture that period of the writ. It really doesn't make sense to make them file for the 29-day period and file for the year. We don't lose any transparency. We don't lose anything, except for red tape and inefficiency.

A final administrative amendment we're proposing is to provide the Chief Electoral Officer with the authority to share data extracts from what's called the "single register of electors," with the district social services administration boards—the DSSABs—for electoral purposes. This is having different parts of government talk to each other to be able to share a list. This is the Chief Electoral Officer sharing data extracts with the DSSABs for electoral purposes. This proposed amendment will help DSSABs have accurate data to reach out to electors in territories without municipal organizations attached.

Work is currently under way to build a single register, which will be in place to support the 2026 general election and regular municipal elections and any municipal by-elections initiated after January 1, 2024.

We've also received requests from municipalities to modernize election services and make them more efficient. In response to these requests, Ontario is proposing changes to make the election process more efficient for local staff, potential candidates and third-party advertisers. The proposed amendments to the Municipal Elections Act would enable clerks to allow candidates and third-party advertisers to submit their nomination and registration forms electronically, to reduce red tape and increase efficiencies.

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Another proposed change would allow registered third-party advertisers to end their advertising campaigns before voting day. The proposed changes provide that if a third-party advertiser files a nomination to run for office, their advertising campaign would automatically end. These proposed changes would apply to municipal by-elections initiated during the current term, and all future municipal elections. This is one more way that Ontario is responding

to the municipal sector's request to modernize election services.

Last year, in response to a long-standing request from municipalities, we made changes to eliminate duplication and combine the provincial and municipal voters lists into a single list managed by Elections Ontario. For the last several elections, we have heard concerns about the accuracy of voter information that municipalities receive. Our changes will help make voting easier by reducing duplication and improving the accuracy of the municipal voters list, resulting in fewer corrections at polling stations, shorter lines on election day and reduced costs for municipalities.

Beginning on January 1, 2024, the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Ontario would be responsible for establishing and managing the single list. This action could cut red tape, help municipalities save money and make voting day easier for candidates, voters and our beloved municipal clerks.

We know that our municipal partners have been working hard to continue to deliver the critical service the people in their communities rely on, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are making it more important than ever for municipalities to deliver modern, efficient services that are financially sustainable. Our government is proud to support initiatives that will strengthen local service delivery, modernize municipal processes and better respect taxpayers' dollars. We'll keep working in partnership with municipalities to better meet local needs.

Mr. Speaker, these electoral reforms are aimed at making our elections work better for everyone. We have introduced the bill to make it easier for people to vote, to make it easier for people to run, to effectively represent their constituents' best interests. The role of an elected representative is an honour. There is no doubt about that. I believe when we got elected—there are several new members in the House in this current Parliament—what we were told by the Clerks was that we are among the honoured few, 2,000 people, who have ever sat in this Legislature. It really is a privilege. It's an honour to be of service to hard-working Ontarians.

We want to make it easier, not harder, for anyone who wants to make a positive difference in their communities and our province. We want to make it easier for them to become a candidate. We want people to feel that they have a voice in our elections, and we want everyone in this brave new COVID-19 environment to feel safe in exercising their right to vote, their ability to run, or even their ability to participate, whether it's putting up signs or knocking on doors—if that's a thing, depending on where we are in COVID-19—but certainly phone calls. Lots of phone calls happening these days.

Our proposed Protecting Ontario Elections Act is about putting people first. We're putting them at the centre of our electoral process, and as the Attorney General and minister responsible for bringing these amendments forward, I'm proud of the work that went into this legislation. I look forward to seeing an election process that keeps up with the challenges of the day and continues to respond to the needs of voters.

It's also important to acknowledge that the challenges we have faced in responding to COVID-19 are by no means behind us. In fact, some of the biggest hurdles remain ahead as we plan for a strong and sustainable recovery and get to the other side of a crisis that has been felt by every sector and every person in this province. But what we have learned during the COVID-19 era is that when there's something to improve or fix, it does not help to put it off. These are responsible changes that we know are needed to make it easier and safer to vote during COVID-19 and beyond. They're the essential changes that will protect the voice of each and every individual who votes in our elections.

I think, Mr. Speaker, that we all have moments in time during elections or the lead-up to elections, or individuals who you have conversations with who want to participate in our system, and they're intimidated by the system. They're intimidated by all these rules and red tape and inefficiencies, whether they want to put their name forward or whether they just want to do the simplest thing like vote.

I remember I was knocking on one door on a very busy highway. I went up to the door, and there's a guy. He was, I'm going to say, 6'4", a great big guy, probably mid- to late-thirties. I knocked on his door and I told him what I was doing and why I was doing it, and that I wanted his support. He said, "I don't vote." I said, "You've never voted." "Nope, I don't vote." I said, "Not municipal, school board, nothing?" "Nope, I don't vote." I said, "Why don't you vote?" He said, "Because nobody wants to hear what I have to say." I said, "I'm standing in your doorway."

I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, he voted. That individual voted. He made a point of telling me—the first time in his life he voted—because people do want to participate. They want to be asked to participate. They want the barriers to come down. It's not a partisan thing, as some members of the opposition would like to think. I have no idea how he voted; he may not have voted for me. I have no idea, because we have a secret ballot, which is another beautiful thing about our democratic society and our system. But the fact is that he did vote and that, for me, is success.

If we can take down barriers, if more independents come to the table to voice their piece and we don't get drowned out by third parties and we have individuals who are putting forward what they believe in, that's good for our democracy, Mr. Speaker.

As a practising lawyer, I used to do corporate deals and real estate deals. I had a client one time. We had a lawyer who was not very good on the other side, very, very—anyway, it was not good. My client said, "Well, that's great." I said, "No, it's not great. I want a strong person on the other side. I want somebody with whom we can actually get down to the nub of it and we can have a conversation. I want a strong lawyer on the other side so that when we are negotiating, we're negotiating with the things that we both know matter the most."

We want to open doors to people. We don't want to put barriers up. Nobody wants to take advantage of anybody based on that kind of thing.

That's why we are supporting the other parties. We're bringing balance in everything that we're doing. The Chief Electoral Officer will have powers that no other Chief Electoral Officer in any province has. The administrative penalties are important tools. They apply equally across all party lines. It's not a partisan issue; it's good governance. That's what our government does. We don't always get credit for that—coming forward with balance and good governance and good rules because it's good for democracy.

Let's have those healthy debates. Let's make sure that all parties—when I say “parties,” I mean people who are running for office, whether they're with a party or not—have the opportunity to have their voice heard, and let's have the best idea win. That's what happened in the last election, when we brought forward our positions on a variety of things. The public spoke and the public said, “This is what we want to see happen.” Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, I think that's healthy.

In terms of independents, we know that independents—particularly in this Legislature but in all Legislatures—can be very vocal, can put forward bold ideas, can advance things. It offends a sense of fairness that they shouldn't have the same tools that the rest of us here have when it comes to fundraising between elections or getting their voice out.

We want to open doors. The advance voting—I expect everybody here has worked in a campaign before as a volunteer, probably. They're remarkably similar across the country, in terms of how you connect with voters, but they're very different in urban versus rural. The campaigning is very different. I've campaigned all over the country for different friends doing things. In parts of Halifax and Dartmouth in Nova Scotia, you go to a house and you've got these stairs and, boy, you were in good shape by the time you were done all of that. Then I started knocking on doors in my own riding, in Horseshoe Valley, and I can tell you there are some beautiful, beautiful homes up some very tall hills, and lots of stairs. It's very different than campaigning in a condo building down in Toronto or even in downtown Barrie, where there are several condo buildings.

Campaigns have to adapt. But at the end of the day what we need to do is make sure that we're taking down barriers, make sure that individuals have a chance to participate. That's why the advance voting. People have busy lives. There is no advantage to trying to put up barriers to people getting out to exercise their franchise.

I'm thrilled that we're changing the system to fit the needs of the individual voter who wants to participate in our system and we're changing the rules to allow greater access. Again, I expect the other parties will support that.

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In terms of donations, we've had some commentary on that. The largest province in Canada moving to the middle of the pack: I don't know how much more balanced you can get than that, Mr. Speaker. There's no magic to the existing number, the \$1,650, so we looked at our colleagues across the country and moved to the middle of

the pack. Some people knock on doors. Some people put up signs. Some people have a sign on their lawn. Some people vote. Some people donate. We want to make it possible for people to participate in our system in whatever way they choose to participate, with transparency and all the things that go with that, Mr. Speaker. So again, I think we found a balance there.

I think that in all of these areas, the theme running through all of this is that we're putting Ontarians back at the centre of voting in our democratic system. Again, back to the third-party advertising: I could literally—I can't, but somebody could—create an organization, funded by a company, and spend over \$50,000 every month for the 12 months leading up to the writ, and then another \$100,000 during the campaign. You could have 10 companies do 10 separate organizations spending that kind of money. I think that's pretty—you know, we want to keep balance. We want to make sure that the parties are getting their message out and the individual candidates are able to not be droned out by the third parties.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I thank you for your time, and thank you for listening. I'm really excited about this bill. I think this moves us forward again, like I've been trying to do with the justice system, moving us forward decades in months. I think this moves forward our democratic institutions, and arms the Chief Electoral Officer to be even more effective and build on the excellent work that they do.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I look forward to questions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Time for questions.

Mr. Joel Harden: I listened with interest to what the Attorney General was saying this morning about the need to be mindful of the role of third-party advertising in elections. I'm wondering if the Attorney General, with that in mind, has any reflections on the role of Ontario Proud in the last provincial election.

I ask the question to the Attorney General because in Ottawa Centre I have a lot of good friends who drive taxis, and they would tell me, “Joel, there's a group called Ontario Proud saying you're going to raise the price of gas by 30%—you, on your own—and I see that Conservatives are saying the exact same thing in their campaigning. What's going on? Who is this group, Ontario Proud?” Do you know what I found out, Speaker? I found out that Mattamy Homes, one of the biggest funders of the Conservative Party, was the biggest funder to Ontario Proud.

So I'm asking the Attorney General, through you, Speaker: Does he believe there was a relationship between Ontario Proud and the Conservative Party, and does he feel that that was a problematic relationship for voters getting accurate information in the last election?

Hon. Doug Downey: I'm absolutely thrilled that we're aligned on this, that we want to make sure that the individual candidate has the ability to have the conversation and not have conversations by third parties drone that out. That is the entire point of this: to make sure that if they think that there's an organization that has disproportionate

influence, we bring some balance to that. That's exactly what we're trying to do. I'm thrilled to hear that they're supportive of that idea, that we come to balance and that we make sure that the individual candidates have a chance to get their message out, without what I'll call special interests being able to drone them out. I'm thrilled about that.

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

Mr. Will Bouma: Protecting Ontario's elections and ensuring that it is easy and safe to vote is not a partisan issue. It is the responsibility of the government to protect our elections and ensure that they are equipped to meet the challenges of the day, whether that be simply preparing for the challenges that COVID-19 might pose or in-person voting or addressing the unchecked third-party spending that we were just talking about.

Will the Attorney General please explain to this House why he has introduced this legislation and how it will protect elections in Ontario?

Hon. Doug Downey: It will help protect elections—not just during COVID times, but the advance voting, I think, is a key part, where we're doubling the number of days from five to 10. I think that's an important feature. I think it's good practice in any event, but COVID-19 has certainly been a catalyst for that, and the Chief Electoral Officer has noted that. Again, we received his report last November, which was very helpful in moving us forward, in terms of getting these pieces in place. It will have long-term impacts beyond COVID-19, those extra voting days.

We talked about third-party advertising. I think I've been pretty clear on that. I think that this moves forward a responsible balance. But also, the irregular campaign spending and collusion: The collusion piece I'm actually quite proud of. A lot of work went into that. We looked at the federal model and we strengthened it to make sure that it's operating the way that it can best operate. It moves forward a number of items, and I'm really proud of that as well.

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

Ms. Suze Morrison: I listened quite intently to the Attorney General's remarks, but as he was speaking, I was also flipping through a couple of news articles over here. I found an interesting one this morning, an op-ed in the Star, entitled, the Premier's "New Elections Act Bill Moves to Silence Critics." One of the interesting things that I read in this article this morning:

"Even more outrageous is that this bill limits individuals or organizations from sharing information, appealing to donors who share a similar point of view and using a common vendor.

"For example, an environmental organization promoting clean water could be limited to appealing for funds from supporters if there is a different environmental group seeking support for a species of fish residing in that water system. They could not use the same vendor for sending out direct mail or use consultants who have experience in the same area." That's from the Star this morning.

Would the Attorney General clarify, would you elaborate on where your bill draws the line here? Our common organizing tools that we all use and that community groups and organizers and activists use, like CallHub, like NationBuilder, placing Facebook ads: These are all common vendors. Where does your bill draw the line on what appears to be a truly draconian measure that will ultimately silence critics of this government?

Hon. Doug Downey: I have no idea how it's silencing a critic when they can spend over \$50,000 a month every month for 12 months up to a writ, and another \$100,000.

To suggest that we should allow organizations to pop up beside each other to skirt around the limits doesn't make sense to me. I'm not entirely sure how the sharing of information from the member's NationBuilder to a fish habitat organization—I'm not sure where the lines are on that. I won't get too far into where those lines are.

Data matters these days; data matters. People's privacy matters. There are rules around all of that. But what we're focused on is not so much—I mean, those rules do matter in their own way, but we're focused on two organizations, which are really one, skirting around the rules. We can talk more about that in further questions.

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

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: I want to thank my MPP colleague and neighbour from Barrie–Springwater–Orillia–Medonte and, of course, the Attorney General. He's been working tirelessly on bill after bill, and here's another one.

It's understandable why we are speaking about this today, because we have all experienced the unpredictability that COVID has brought upon us. When we talk about administering elections, that could also bring an additional unpredictability. We've seen other provinces that have had to pivot because of that unpredictability with COVID. The Attorney General was talking about Newfoundland, but there are other provinces.

I just wanted to ask him how he's preparing for the Ontario elections to deal with certain uncertainties, like COVID-19.

Hon. Doug Downey: I guess I'll start with one that really resonated with me, in Newfoundland and Labrador. I was out there a few years ago during an election, knocking on doors for my friend in Mount Pearl. Speaking of stairs and hills, my goodness.

Mr. Speaker, we're using the experience that we see from those jurisdictions in BC and New Brunswick to be best in class, to make sure that our Chief Electoral Officer has all the tools, has extra advance voting days, if needed, has all of the pieces that we need to run the most democratic, best kind of election in Canada. We're trying to embed that in the legislation and the rules that surround it.

Again, I'm very proud of what we're doing here. We're pivoting because of COVID-19 in many respects, but for good democracy in others.

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

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I listened quite carefully to the member from Barrie–Springwater–Oro–Medonte’s presentation, but I’m left wondering. At a time when people have been struggling to pay their bills, and small businesses have been left behind and left hanging by this government for almost a year after the pandemic began, regular Ontarians are not sitting at home just waiting to donate thousands and thousands of dollars to political candidates. This bill is so very clearly for the elites.

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There’s a saying with species in nature that there’s a survival of the fittest, but I would posit that this bill is the survival of the richest. When we consider third-party ads, constructive criticism is necessary to the functioning of our democracy. Muzzling critics, like the Liberals before this government, is an appalling lack of transparency and a dearth of accountability.

My question is: how does this bill help regular Ontarians and not just insider Conservative elites?

Hon. Doug Downey: It helps regular Ontarians—again, we’ve taken the donation limits to the Canadian average. It puts us in the middle of the pack. Again, it’s balanced.

We’re extending the per-vote subsidy so that others can be in a position to articulate their positions. We’re advancing the number of advance vote days: We’re doubling that to make sure the average person can participate. We’re supporting independence by allowing them to set up constituency associations, and we’re getting rid of red tape so that other groups and other people will run, who may not be connected to a party, or otherwise, or a small party.

Mr. Speaker, we’re doing a ton of things to open the door for the average Ontarian to be able to donate the average amount.

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

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: My follow-up question to the Attorney General is: In 2016, we saw that the Ontario Legislature here—I wasn’t around for that—decided to ban corporate and union donations to political parties. Again, talking about that influence, my question to the Attorney General is if he can explain how the change in the bill addresses the influence of other third parties.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Back to the Attorney General for final response.

Hon. Doug Downey: We’re finding a balance to make sure that third parties have an ability to articulate their position, but not drown out the important work that candidates of all stripes need to do.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you very much. The opportunity for members here in the Legislature to contribute to debate and questions—

Interjection.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Is this a point of order? It’s not a point of order. All right. Listen, there isn’t enough time to move further into debate. So, unfortunately, the time has ended for debate.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): However, we do have an opportunity now to listen to members and their specific member’s statement. And because I noticed the member from the official opposition, the member from Beaches–East York, the floor is yours for your member’s statement.

MEMBERS’ STATEMENTS

LAND USE PLANNING

Ms. Rima Berns-McGown: In Beaches–East York, Metrolinx is about to begin a project in the beloved Small’s Creek ravine to widen a culvert and prepare the tracks for expansion with a fourth rail and electrification. But if the preparatory project goes ahead as planned, it will result in the clear-cutting of half the ravine, the removal of 268 trees and the destruction of a much-used community walkway.

The Small’s Creek community group, made up of neighbours who are homeowners and renters and who include architects, engineers, lawyers, landscape engineers, hydrologists and planners, is asking Metrolinx to make sure they get it right before they destroy the ravine’s ecosystem. Everyone in the Small’s Creek group wants transit to move ahead quickly, they want the fourth rail, they want electrification; but they have serious concerns with Metrolinx’s current approach.

They have done their research and found alternative engineering and ecological solutions. They believe it’s possible to prepare for the necessary transit without clear-cutting half the ravine. They’re asking Metrolinx to pause the clear-cutting, take the Small’s Creek group’s alternative solutions seriously and make sure the project is done right. None of this will affect the timing of the construction of transit.

I stand with the Small’s Creek group in asking Metrolinx for the pause, and I am asking the Minister of Transportation to stand with us in asking Metrolinx to pause to make sure they get it right. The future of eco-friendly transit will thank you.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Jane McKenna: As Canadians woke up this morning, 57 countries were ahead of us in the vaccine race. To date, Canada has administered just over 2 million doses, with 3.86% of Canadians receiving at least one dose. Ontario has given 727,021 doses, with 264,896 people fully vaccinated. On both these measures Ontario is leading the country.

In Halton, 28,622 people have received a shot; that’s 4.85% of our population. In January and February, despite Canada-wide supply shortages, Halton region continued to receive our fair share. The last thing we want is freezers in Halton region or anywhere else full of unused vaccines. We need shots in people’s arms.

I know how thrilled Sheri Levy-Abrahams was at Bethany Residence when seniors received their first dose January 26 and their second dose on Valentine's Day. They even created a video to celebrate.

Medical experts, not MPPs, determine how Ontario's vaccine supply is distributed across the province, and that's how it should be. This week, Halton region will receive 7,070 Pfizer doses and another 7,020 the week of March 15. This is great news.

We all have the same goal: to put COVID-19 behind us.

PROTECTION FOR WORKERS

Mr. Joel Harden: Next Monday is International Women's Day, and one of the events that we're very proud to organize back home from the MPP office in Ottawa Centre is a round table on safe workplaces for political staff. Back in November, I put forward a motion in this chamber asking the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Attorney General to empower municipalities with the tools to remove councillors who were proving to engage in serious acts of misconduct.

The whole country knows about the saga of Councillor Rick Chiarelli back home, and our round table is going to feature survivors of Councillor Chiarelli's office. It will also feature experts who will tell us what legislative changes need to be made to keep people safe in political office.

I've heard friends in government and I've heard others say that politicians need to be held to a higher standard. I totally agree. Unfortunately, what has happened today is that the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing has written the mayor of Ottawa, who has asked for these powers, and said, "I'm sorry. I'm uncomfortable with giving myself the power to remove a city councillor." Speaker, through you, the minister was never asked for that.

The city right now wants the power to take action against a councillor who is known to be a predator to women in his office. It is 2021. We need to make sure this never happens again. We need to make sure political offices are safe. I invite all folks watching this to tune into our round table to participate and share your thoughts with us. We must do better in Ontario.

STRATFORD FESTIVAL

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Speaker, last spring, many were devastated when the Stratford Festival announced it would postpone its season because of the pandemic. Scores of constituents wrote me supporting the festival. In June, I hand-delivered their letters and petitions to the Premier and Minister MacLeod. It was an uncertain time, but we spoke up because the future of this Canadian cultural icon was at stake; we spoke up for those who work at the festival and those who depend on it. Many suddenly found themselves out of a job. Our local small businesses, especially those in tourism and hospitality, are still struggling. Some had to close shop. After all, the Stratford

Festival is responsible for generating about \$135 million in economic activity every year—except last year.

This year will be different, because this year the show will go on. The festival recently announced it will return to the stage with live performances in an outdoor setting. It's wonderful news. Then, just yesterday, our government announced we're supporting the festival to the tune of \$1.8 million. We're also supporting Stratford Summer Music with over \$42,000. This will go a long way to help them survive COVID-19 and it will help people whose livelihoods depend on their success.

I want to thank Premier Ford and Minister MacLeod for recognizing the value of these institutions. I also want to recognize the festival's executive director, Anita Gaffney, artistic director Antoni Cimolino and their team. I also want to mention Kendra Fry, the new general manager of Stratford Summer Music and her predecessor, Judy Matheson. All of us can be proud of your organizations, and we can be proud of your contributions to artistic excellence right here in Ontario.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I rise today on behalf of the people of London West to share some of the emails I have received about this government's sluggish and sloppy vaccine rollout.

"I still find this entire rollout extremely frustrating and inequitable. It is, without a doubt, those seniors who do not have an advocate to assist them who will fall through the cracks and be left alone."

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Here is another: "We need vaccines soon so we can visit our disabled daughter in her home. When will we ever get the vaccine so our daughter stays COVID-19-free? We are both over 80 years."

And this one: "I am an over-80-year-old woman, who has daily home care. There has been no communication about my receiving the vaccine. Nor have my caregivers received any confirmation about when they will receive the vaccine."

And this one: "My mother is extremely high risk as she has diabetes and high blood pressure.... At 89 it is even difficult for her to access this booking system.... Are we getting seniors' hopes up when the reality is there is no vaccine but for a lucky few who 'win' the telephone lottery?"

Speaker, the Middlesex-London Health Unit is doing its best, but Londoners are rightly frustrated by the lack of provincial leadership. Yesterday, there were over 200,000 calls in London for 5,000 appointments. As one constituent put it, "Being eligible for a vaccine does not equal having access to a vaccine."

MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION SERVICES

Mr. Robert Bailey: It is my privilege to rise today and share more good news with the people of Sarnia-Lambton and with this House.

Over the years, we know there has been an increase in student mental health issues at our colleges and universities in Ontario. Even at the best of times, post-secondary education can be difficult for students. Recently, the added stress and uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the strain on student mental health.

That is why today I am pleased to announce that the Ontario government is investing \$315,000 in Lambton College to help increase access to mental health and addiction services for its students. This is a critical, timely investment for the students of Lambton College. Having mental health supports in place for when students need those most is key to helping students succeed, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This funding is a piece of the province's total investment of over \$26 million in mental health supports for post-secondary students in 2020 and 2021.

Providing mental health supports for post-secondary students is part of Ontario's Roadmap to Wellness, the government's plan to build a connected and comprehensive mental health and addictions system that ensures children, youth and adults in Ontario receive appropriate services where and when they need them. Mr. Speaker, this is truly important news for the students and the families of Lambton College.

LABORATORY SERVICES

Mr. Gilles Bisson: In the city of Timmins, our office has been receiving a number of calls in regard to the wait times in order to get into LifeLabs. You're having to wait three weeks in order to get bloodwork and various tests done. And once you do end up at the LifeLabs office, it's a fairly long wait. That has been really difficult on seniors, specifically, and those who are not doing so well and are frail.

The good news is, I've had conversations with LifeLabs. I want to thank them that we've managed to come to some sort of a way forward that might be able to speed things up. They have agreed and will allow blood tests and various tests to be done at doctors' offices, to be done at health clinics, to be done at family health teams, and to be done by home care workers, provided that all of these people are qualified to do so, and any other type of clinic that is equipped for being able to draw blood.

All they need to do is to get a hold of LifeLabs. LifeLabs will make the arrangements to get the paraphernalia that you need in order to do the various tests at the doctor's office or wherever it is, and that will greatly assist to lower the demand that we have currently in our labs in order to get blood tests.

We all know that COVID has brought a new reality to the world. I was glad to be able to work with LifeLabs, and hopefully we can make this happen. It will be a way of being able to reduce the wait times for the citizens that we all represent.

RADON

Mr. Stephen Blais: Today I rise to bring awareness to an important contaminant that has become a problem in Orléans and communities across Ontario. Radon is a cancer-causing gas that naturally occurs in our environment, but when trapped indoors and at high levels, it can be incredibly dangerous and cause innumerable health issues. Radon gas is the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers and is responsible for approximately 16% of lung cancer deaths in Canada.

Some level of radon can be found in most homes, and as more people are staying home due to COVID-19, this problem has only grown. Preliminary research indicates a 35% jump in a residential radon exposure from March 2020.

Radon is a colourless and odourless gas, so testing is the only way to know if radon levels are elevated and if remediation is required. In Orléans, there are neighbourhoods where dozens of new homes have high levels of radon, putting residents at risk.

Radon control measures and radon rough-in systems have been included in the national building code. Unfortunately, in Ontario, the current provincial code only contains limited provisions. Moreover, the province doesn't require radon testing in schools, daycares, hospitals or other public buildings.

Mr. Speaker, the government must do more to address radon in new home construction and in public buildings. They can begin by making radon mitigation mandatory as part of new home construction, doing mandatory testing in public buildings and raising awareness of the dangers of radon with Ontarians. I encourage all Ontarians to visit takeactiononradon.ca for more information.

PIPELINE

Mr. Toby Barrett: Imperial Oil's refinery at the Nanticoke industrial park, formerly Texaco, is a key anchor in our Haldimand-Norfolk industrial economy. Since the early 1980s, our area's refinery has provided around 300 full-time jobs, in addition to a daily average of 200 contractor positions. About 25% of the petroleum products used in Ontario go through a supply chain including Imperial Nanticoke by rail, water and, of course, pipeline—products including diesel, gasoline, aviation fuel, asphalt, heavy oil and home heating oil.

The line 5 pipeline running through the Straits of Mackinac, coming in from the west, is crucial for our refinery's operation and crucial for the operation of the economy in Ontario and Quebec, as well as Ohio, Pennsylvania and certainly Michigan itself. If the governor of Michigan were successful in shutting down line 5, it would jeopardize 65% of the propane going to Michigan's Upper Peninsula and 55% of the propane requirements across the state. The shutdown would put at risk half the jet fuel supply to Detroit metro airport.

The governor would know that Michigan is Ontario's largest export market and the largest source of imports into our province, totalling \$82.3 billion in two-way trade.

We're friends, we're neighbours, we're allies: We have a great and close working relationship, and we hope that continues, as well as the flow of product through this pipeline.

SENIORS AND KIDS INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS

Mr. Will Bouma: It's my pleasure to rise in the House today to speak about an amazing program in my riding of Brantford-Brant. SKIP, or Seniors and Kids Intergenerational Programs, first began in 2004 by sending a classroom of students to visit seniors at a local retirement home. In September 2005, they had 22 classes signed up to visit seniors in nine seniors' facilities.

Now, seeing the new challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and realizing that there is a need for all seniors, not just those who are living in retirement homes, SKIP has worked tirelessly to keep all seniors connected to our community.

Recently, SKIP was a recipient of the Ontario Trillium fund communities grant. With this new funding, they have shifted their focus to a new initiative called Buzz Me. Buzz Me connects seniors with a live volunteer between the hours of 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday. In an effort to combat social isolation, seniors can stay up to date about what's happening in the community or simply enjoy a pleasant conversation with one of our dedicated volunteers. This line of communication is not a crisis line, but a friendly, kind and welcoming voice on the other end of the phone.

I would like to thank Liz Martorano, co-founder of SKIP, and her team of volunteers for working so hard to connect the seniors of Brantford and Brant with a friendly voice to reach out to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): That's it for our members' statements this morning.

The member for Brampton Centre has a point of order, I believe.

Ms. Sara Singh: Good morning, Speaker. I seek unanimous consent to immediately pass private member's motion 141, calling on the Ford government to mandate paid sick days to better help protect the workers of Brampton in the fight against COVID-19.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Brampton Centre is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to immediately pass private member's motion 141, calling on the government to mandate paid sick days to better help protect the workers of Brampton in the fight against COVID-19. Agreed? I heard a no.

It is now time for oral questions.

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QUESTION PERIOD

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, we know that the long-term-care commission has been hearing testimony.

In fact, we've had testimony from the Minister of Health and we've had testimony from the Minister of Long-Term Care, and it's really apparent from that testimony and others that the Premier was ignoring advice that ended up costing lives.

My question is, when is the Premier going to start answering questions? When is he going to go to the commission?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To respond, the government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: As you know and as we've said on a number of occasions, both the Minister of Health and the Minister of Long-Term Care have appeared before the commission. We're very grateful for the work that the commission has been doing. I know also that Dr. Williams appeared. There have been a number of recommendations that we have already enacted and we are very much looking forward to a final report from the commission.

It's really to help build upon the things that we started when we took government. As I said in an earlier answer to this question, we inherited a system that was woefully inadequate. We immediately set out to improve the system. We've learned a lot through the pandemic and are in a much better place. The recommendations that come out of this will help not only improve the system, should there be another pandemic, but will also help build on the really great work that both the Ministers of Health and Long-Term Care have done to rebuild the system that was so woefully underfunded for many years.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: The Minister of Health's testimony made it pretty clear that the Premier was ignoring expert advice when he decided to open the province up back in May to asymptomatic testing. As we know, that caused some significant problems with our antiquated lab system. It caused a backup in testing results coming into long-term care, which cost lives.

It's really troubling when, at the commission, the Minister of Health, in response to some of these queries, in terms of the Premier's decisions, would only say, "You would really need to speak to him about that"—meaning the Premier.

Why is the Premier refusing to attend the commission and take responsibility for the decisions that he made?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Actually, Mr. Speaker, the Premier has been very clear right from the beginning of this pandemic that he accepts responsibility for all the decisions that have flown out of the pandemic. He has said that both in his daily news conferences and in the House.

One of the reasons we sped up this commission, and we started it earlier—in fact, earlier than any other jurisdiction in the country—was because we wanted to help build on some of the things that we started in the pre-pandemic. As you know, we inherited a system that was woefully underfunded. There were not enough spaces. The Minister of Long-Term Care immediately set out to help build capacity in the system. The Minister of Health, with the

onset of the Ontario health teams, started to create an umbrella of care that included our long-term-care system.

We are using the evidence that we've heard from—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Response?

Hon. Paul Calandra: —and the suggestions that we've gotten in the first series of recommendations to help build on that. But the Premier has been very clear and will continue to be clear: He accepts all responsibility—

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: What's really clear is that the Premier said that he would leave no stone unturned in trying to get answers for families who were losing their loved ones in long-term care, but apparently there are lots of stones that are being hidden here. There is a problem when the Premier is hiding the issues around, for example, PPE, staffing and lack of infection control. All of these things led to the problems when it came to long-term care and COVID-19. There was no iron ring at all around long-term care, as the Premier was suggesting.

Now the Premier is not showing any accountability whatsoever. In fact, he exempted his government from any accountability with legislation. He's exempted himself from the commission. He's not even answering questions in the House.

When will the Premier stand up and take responsibility and be accountable for the actions and the decisions that he made?

Hon. Paul Calandra: As I just said, the Premier has said right from the beginning in this House on a number of occasions that the buck stops with him. We have all been working, on both sides of this House, to help deal with this pandemic.

In long-term care, we inherited a system that was woefully inadequate. Six hundred beds was the legacy of the previous Liberal government. We knew right away—and this Premier campaigned on a promise to expand long-term care. We have done that, building more beds, removing roadblocks to building capacity in the system.

This Premier is the one who brought in a commission to take a look at what had happened in the initial phases of this pandemic, before any other province or jurisdiction had done that. We acted on the recommendations that we saw coming out of the commission. And need I remind you, Mr. Speaker, it was this member, the Leader of the Opposition, who so fought against the commission, said that it would be a waste of time and it would provide no results for the people of the province of Ontario. The opposite has happened. They've done good work and the better part of it is that we're acting on the work that they have done.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My next question is for the Premier, but I think the government House leader should correct his record. In fact, what we said is the government would control the commission, and of course, they're

shutting the commission down and not giving them the time to do their work. So we were right, in fact.

The question I'm asking is about those front-line workers and COVID heroes who have been there for us all the way through, folks in Brampton, folks in Scarborough, folks in Weston, folks in Jane and Finch. These folks are the ones that actually did all the heavy lifting during COVID-19.

The science table that the Premier has advising on vaccinations suggested, recommended that these very folks be prioritized when it comes to getting the vaccines, not only because it's the right thing to do but because it will stop the spread of COVID-19, in fact suggesting that 3,767 COVID-19 cases would be prevented and an estimated 168 lives would be saved.

It's been almost a week. When is the government going to commit to vaccinating these workers and these neighbourhoods?

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

Hon. Paul Calandra: As we have said right from the beginning, that as more vaccines became available, of course we were going to be expanding the vaccine rollout, and we have seen that.

I'm actually proud to say, if I can, that my father-in-law was one of the first people to receive a vaccination in York region yesterday, after getting on—

Interjection.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I hear a comment from the opposition. He went online, booked his test all on his own, drove there and got his vaccination.

We are starting to see, as vaccines come in, ramping up of vaccinations and getting them into people's arms quicker. The results have been very, very, very encouraging.

As more vaccines come in, as the minister has said, as the Premier has said, we will get them into people's arms, including all of those people as we said in the framework, first in the long-term care and congregate care settings, and then working our way down from 80 and up. I'm very confident in the work of the vaccine team and encourage that—

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, this is about the COVID heroes in specific neighbourhoods, like Scarborough, like Weston, like Jane and Finch, like Brampton. These are the folks that the government's own science table has recommended get prioritized. These are the folks whose neighbourhoods have death rates 27 times higher than the rest of the province.

Dr. Peter Jüni said this: "We need to ... avoid ... the (scenario) where those who suffered the burden are not among those who get the vaccine". That's what we need to do. That's the right thing to do. The recommendation is almost a week old. Will the government commit to these COVID heroes and ensure that they get vaccinations as soon as possible and are prioritized in the government's plan?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To respond, the Solicitor General.

Hon. Sylvia Jones: The member opposite is highlighting exactly why we are making sure that local public health units can make decisions based on their local circumstances. The city of Toronto has already done that by ensuring that high-risk neighbourhoods and communities that have congregate settings, like homeless shelters, have access to the vaccine quickly.

So many of these challenges go away as we get more vaccines from the federal government. Last week's news about the approval of AstraZeneca is wonderful for the people of Ontario and Canada. We will make sure that as those vaccine supplies come into Ontario, we will get them to the public health units and they will do the job that they have done historically, which is vaccinate the people of Ontario who want to do it. They're doing an excellent job, and all we need to do is make sure they have sufficient supply.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Well, we've seen how this Premier has not taken advice from the experts. We don't want that to happen again.

The hardest-hit workers, the essential workers in these neighbourhoods are the ones that deserve to get those vaccines as quickly as possible. They're the ones that worked every single day in hospitals, in long-term-care settings, in manufacturing, taxi drivers. These workers were working while the rest of us could stay home and stay safe. They should not be left behind.

And we know the science table has clearly indicated that this kind of commitment will mean lives saved and the spread stopped. So when will this government listen to their science table and make the commitment to get vaccines prioritized for those very neighbourhoods and those COVID heroes?

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

Hon. Doug Ford: Through you, Mr. Speaker: As the Solicitor General just mentioned, there's the flexibility within the 34 health units to focus on the areas that they feel most important, going by the guidelines that the chief medical officer and the health table have laid out; and that's exactly what's happening, here in Toronto, for example, with Chief Pegg doing a great job taking care of the homeless people, making sure there's a priority, because the priorities of Toronto aren't the same priorities up in Kenora.

But the good news is, rather than the opposition party of doom and gloom and the world's coming to an end, the facts are we vaccinated more people than anyone in the entire country, with 754,000 vaccines. We set another country-wide record yesterday at 27,398 and, totally, 266,000 have been fully vaccinated.

Do you know there's one problem here? We need more vaccines. We have the infrastructure. We need the

vaccines from the federal government. That's what's holding everything up.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Sara Singh: My question is to the Minister of Long-Term Care. Yesterday, the Minister of Health was crystal clear in her testimony to the long-term-care commission that only the Premier can answer for this government's biggest failures. But the Premier still won't show up and testify at the commission. He won't even extend their deadline so that they can carry out their work.

Speaker, through you to the Minister of Long-Term Care: Do you agree with the Minister of Health that the Premier needs to appear before the commission and provide these answers to grieving families and seniors, or are you okay with taking the blame for him?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to remind the members to make their comments through the Chair, not directly across the floor.

Minister of Long-Term Care to respond.

Hon. Merrilee Fullerton: I reject the premise of that question. I'm just astonished how the members opposite go on. Let me be clear: The government that is addressing the systemic issues that have faced long-term care for decades is this Conservative government. We have a government that has been committed to long-term care since day one, addressing the staffing issues, addressing the capacity issues that had been left to languish, which set the stage for the damage that we saw from COVID-19 in our long-term-care homes.

The foundational pieces that should have been done were not done. We are spending \$1.9 billion to train 27,000 people for this sector, and from the pandemic pay alone, we were able to achieve hires of over 8,600 people—8,600—to address a massive gap. It is our government that will repair, rebuild and advance long-term care, so sorely neglected.

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

Ms. Sara Singh: Speaker, the Premier has said that the buck stops with him, yet he refuses to answer any questions, take any responsibility or literally do anything meaningful to help ensure that these tragedies in long-term care never happen again.

It's clear that the minister didn't agree with the decisions of Dr. Williams. It's clear that she didn't agree with some of the decisions made by the Premier and her colleagues around the cabinet table. Then why, Speaker, why won't the Minister of Long-Term Care do the right thing and call on this Premier to appear before the long-term-care commission?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Premier to respond.

Hon. Doug Ford: Through you, Mr. Speaker: I'm going to just tell you the facts here. There's no elected official in the entire country who has answered more questions about this pandemic than myself—no one.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll ask the Premier to take his seat. Order. Allow the Premier to respond.

Premier?

Hon. Doug Ford: The opposition has been hiding out in I don't know where, but anyways. As the Minister of Long-Term Care mentioned, our government approved \$1.38 billion in surge funding for the sector, because of the failures of the NDP and Liberals for 15 years, just to dismantle and destroy long-term care. We're in there. We're fixing it.

Our government put forward \$1.9 billion in staffing plans, again, to hire 27,000 new staff. This all happened under the leadership of the Minister of Long-Term Care, who is fixing the problems. We hired 8,200 PSWs. We're the first jurisdiction in Canada to focus on four hours of care. We're fixing the problems that were destroyed by the two previous governments. The NDP and Liberals have been in bed for 15 years destroying long-term care.

SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: There are thousands of youth on track to age out of the supports of the child welfare system across Ontario in the next year. In my riding of Carleton, constituents have raised concerns about how our government is prepared to support children aging out of care during these unprecedented times.

During normal circumstances, the transition for young people leaving care has proven difficult. There are many obstacles and factors that can create barriers for their success. With the added stressors caused by COVID-19, our youth require additional supports in order to thrive. They're aging out of care into an ever-changing society that has been greatly impacted by the pandemic. Our youth deserve stability and support.

I know our government has made a commitment to help keep our young people safe and secure. Can the Minister of Children and Women's Issues explain to the members of the Legislature how the government is prepared to support youth in Ontario aging out of care during these difficult times?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you the member from Carleton for that question. COVID-19 has put immense pressure on all Ontarians, and youth in care are no different. As soon as we saw the impacts of COVID-19 last year, we started working with our partners and officials to ensure youth who were expected to age out of service got the supports they needed. I am proud to say we have further extended the moratorium, so no youth will age out of care until September 30, 2022.

We wanted to provide more certainty, and believe that 18 months will help with that. Our hope is that additional time will allow these youths to have the supports post-pandemic and then move into a system that provides an opportunity to thrive. This decision will benefit thousands of young people previously on track to age out of care, by

providing them the additional time they require to flourish in our communities.

The pandemic has created many uncertainties, but one thing our youth can be certain of is that they will not lose the supports and services they have right now. We want to make sure all youth leaving care feel prepared and confident for the next chapter in their lives.

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

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Thank you to the minister for that great news. It's reassuring to know that these youth will not be left behind or left on their own. There have been countless stories of youth not having proper support around them. Data shows that many former youths in care don't graduate high school, and some end up homeless and struggle when they leave care. We cannot let that continue. There needs to be a better option for them.

The minister also mentioned that our government took swift action last year and put the moratorium in place for youth in care, but the extensions were all short-term. Today, she is saying that the extension is for a full 18 months. The minister has spoken about redesigning our broken child welfare system, and I couldn't agree more. I believe that helping children and youth throughout their entire time in care is essential.

Speaker, through you: Can the minister tell this House how the decision to extend the moratorium was made and whether more is going to be done to help youth as they transition out of care?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member for the question. The decision to extend the moratorium was made based on consultations with our incredible front-line workers, sector partners and youth advocates from across the province who tirelessly work for our youth. As the member mentioned, right now, young people leaving care are not set up for success. As a mother with daughters right in this age range, I cannot imagine leaving them to support themselves and become adults.

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Our government wants all children and youth, no matter whether they are in care or not, to have positive experiences growing up. That means ensuring they are hitting milestones such as graduating high school, having a safe place to stay and having friends and mentors. We want to work with those who have lived experience to create a better model so all youth leaving care feel supported as they transition to adulthood, and I thank Cheyanne and Conner for all the work they've been doing.

I believe this extension gives us time to have constructive conversations and develop a new model that's responsive to the needs of young people currently in care and those who are preparing to leave.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Marit Stiles: My question is for the Minister of Education. Yesterday, I asked the Minister of Education why so few asymptomatic tests have been conducted to date, and he suggested, "Check the ministry website." So

we did that again, went back to the ministry website and, as of February 26, only 6,659 tests have been completed since the minister's announcement way back when that the government would test 50,000 students, school staff and their families per week.

Experts have made it clear that we don't just want to wait for symptomatic cases to appear in schools, like the 160 new cases we have today. We need to identify asymptomatic cases early so we can prevent their spread. It is absolutely essential to keeping schools open.

Speaker, I'm looking for a clear answer today from the minister: Why aren't you testing more students and education workers?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I should note the last week in the province of Ontario, working under the leadership of the Minister of Health, there have been 17,000 tests provided for children under the age of 18 in Ontario—much more than the member opposite suggested.

But in addition to the Ontario Health capacity deployed in every region of the province, yes, we have a surge testing capacity in the Ministry of Education alone, deployed where it is needed, working in conjunction with public health units and school boards. Of course, as the member would understand and appreciate, it is a voluntary test. Unlike perhaps the members opposite, New Democrats and Liberals, who would impose a requirement on testing on parents, we believe in that choice being critical to our program. We want to encourage participation. We have more capacity than demand. That's why I've spent the past weeks, as have other members of caucus, encouraging parents to take advantage of the easy local, seamless testing capacity. We've deployed another layer of prevention to keep students safe and to keep schools open in the province of Ontario.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: This government has gone out of its way to make testing inconvenient, and now they're blaming parents and kids? There are 24 schools closed right now in the province; 672 schools in this province have cases; hundreds more kids are getting sick with COVID-19 every single day, including some who are catching and then spreading the variant.

I'm hearing from parents who can't find information about where to get this testing, and we know education workers are being turned away from pharmacies, being told they're ineligible. Speaker, this is not the time to let our guard down or hold back on actions that could keep our kids and our families safe just to save a few bucks.

Why isn't this government testing the tens of thousands of kids, teachers and education workers per week that it promised?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I think the member opposite has gone out of her way to instill fear in the people of Ontario because, honestly, when you have 99.5% of schools in the province that are open—let's just reverse the facts: She mentioned 24 schools of roughly 5,000—99.5% are open. As I understand it, there's 11 million tests—we lead the nation in testing in the province of Ontario, in this country;

99.9% of students have no active case; 86% of schools have no cases at all.

What we have done when it comes to deploying testing: There's 18 schools identified in York for this coming week, 31 in Hamilton, 75 in Toronto, 24 in Ottawa, 11 in Waterloo and 15 in Durham, and of course the list continues.

Our plan has been fully supported by the Chief Medical Officer of Health. Our plan has been fully funded by this province. We are working hard to keep schools open and schools safe. That is our number one priority, and we'll continue to follow public health advice to achieve that.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. John Fraser: My question is for the Premier. Last week, the Deputy Premier and Minister of Health testified in front of the long-term care commission. Specifically, she said that the Premier overruled the chief medical officer and expanded COVID-19 testing criteria to everyone. Then, she suggested that the commission speak to the Premier as to why.

That decision had consequences in long-term care. It inhibited our ability to do testing quickly in long-term care because of a rapid expansion of the group that could be tested, and it had serious consequences for residents and their families.

The Premier is always saying that he's taking the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health. Through you, Mr. Speaker: Can the Premier explain why he overruled the Chief Medical Officer of Health and expanded COVID-19 testing to everyone in Ontario?

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

Hon. Christine Elliott: I thank the member very much for the question. When I appeared before the long-term-care commission, I did indicate that the Premier was concerned about transmission in the community and that asymptomatic testing was necessary in order to prevent community spread and prevent the transmission of COVID-19 into our long-term-care homes. It was done in order to protect the residents of long-term-care homes from COVID coming into them. It was necessary to do it.

It did not overwhelm our lab system. We had already built our lab system up so that we were able to handle that capacity. We created, as you may remember, a lab system from Public Health Ontario, an interconnected lab system that was able to handle increasing volumes of tests. That's what we did: We increased our testing, but at the same time, we increased the lab capacity so that it could manage the level and the number of tests coming in.

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

Mr. John Fraser: Thank you, Minister, but respectfully, the commission asked you the question specifically because it affected long-term care. That's not a good answer, and I would have preferred to hear it from the horse's mouth.

Throughout this pandemic, there's a—

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

Mr. John Fraser: I withdraw.

Throughout this pandemic, there's a clear record of delayed decision-making and failure to act in long-term care. The vaccine "strollout" in long-term care is just the latest example of that.

We know that the government withheld critical documents from the commission and then, weeks before it is to report, dumped 217,000 pages on them. Then, actually, the Minister of Long-Term Care gave her notes at 11 o'clock the night before the testimony—the night before.

The Premier has denied this commission's reasonable request for an extension. All that says to me is that they want it to go away; they want their own commission to go away. They're not interested in what it has to say.

Will the Premier grant the commission the extension they have asked for so that families can get some answers and some justice?

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

Hon. Paul Calandra: As we've said right from the beginning, it is certainly strange now hearing the opposition, both the NDP and the Liberals, supportive of a commission that neither one wanted to do. Now they're very supportive of it—as are we. The commission has done some good work. That's why we started it earlier: so that we could get some of the recommendations, valuable recommendations.

But let's be clear, Speaker: Many of the problems that we're seeing in long-term care today stem from the inadequacy of the previous Liberal administration, of which this member was a parliamentary assistant, during that period of time. They underfunded long-term care. They did not build it. They did not have capacity. It was this Premier, this Minister of Long-Term Care and this Minister of Health who started to rebuild the system.

Every step of the way, whether it was more capacity, whether it was better care, whether it was the blanket of care that the Ontario health teams were bringing in, that side of the House has voted against it, Mr. Speaker. We'll get the job done that those two parties were unable to do over 15 years of sharing power together.

ASSISTANCE TO FLOOD VICTIMS

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: My question is for the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry. As we enter the month of March, we will hopefully begin to see some relief from winter with some warmer temperatures. Of course, those warmer temperatures bring melting snow, which can result in flooding risks for communities across the province. As the minister and I can attest to as representatives from the Ottawa Valley, flooding is a major concern to our constituents.

I recall joining Premier Ford in April 2019 as he visited and met with Ottawa first responders during the state of emergency caused by the Constance Bay floods. These flooding events across the province led the government to

take action by commissioning a flooding strategy led by special adviser Doug McNeil.

Speaker, we are now in 2021 and on the verge of another potential season of flooding across the province. Can the minister please tell this House what actions from the government he has implemented from the 2019 Ontario flooding strategy?

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Hon. John Yakabuski: I want to thank the member for Carleton for that question. Absolutely, we are now at that time of year that comes along every year, and it's called spring. Spring is coming, and with it comes the spring melt and the spring freshet.

After the 2019 flooding, which the Premier was very involved in—I was involved myself as the minister, and I know the member for Carleton was very involved in her area as well. It was massive flooding across the province in many areas, and we did something that has never been done before: hired a special adviser from outside, a third party from outside to evaluate the system here in Ontario and what could be done to mitigate the effects of flooding, and just a flooding report in general.

Mr. McNeil came up with the most comprehensive report that we've ever seen in the province of Ontario or anywhere else. Out of his report came 66 recommendations—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Response?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Speaker, my gosh. Time goes by quickly. I'll have more to say in the supplementary.

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

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Thank you to the minister for that response. It will come as good news to people in my riding of Carleton that the government has learned from past events so that we can avoid some of the most devastating effects that flooding can bring. However, each year is different when it comes to flooding. Right now, we are only a few weeks away from the start of a potential flooding season.

I know that this government has taken steps to implement best practices when it comes to flooding preparedness and prevention. Speaker, can the minister please tell this House how this government is preparing for the spring thaw and ensuring that the province is prepared for flooding events, not only in my riding of Carleton, but also in Ottawa and across the province?

Hon. John Yakabuski: Thank you again to the member for the question. As a result of that report, we brought out Ontario's first-ever flooding strategy last year at about this time, so that we had a plan to deal with the spring freshet, the spring flooding.

What happens, Speaker, is that we have significantly increased our ability to monitor the potential for flooding across the province. We work with our municipal partners. We work with conservation authorities so that we have a better understanding of what could be the potential for flooding down the road, as they say. The municipalities right now—we're working with them to look at this year's potential, and we're going to make sure that we are able to deal with that.

In the past we've had, through other ministries as well, substantial support programs to deal with the effects of flooding if and when it happens. We're going to continue to have those. We have a plan to deal with flooding in the province of Ontario. It is a matter of nature, but we're prepared to deal with it.

LAND USE PLANNING

Ms. Sandy Shaw: My question this morning is for the Premier. Yesterday, Vaughan council's committee of the whole voted to withdraw its previous support for the GTA West highway, also known as Highway 413. This follows votes by the councils of Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon to oppose or reconsider this unneeded \$6-billion highway through valuable agricultural lands and the greenbelt. Will the Premier cancel this wasteful and environmentally destructive highway?

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

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think we've had a number of questions on this from the leader of the Green Party. As I said, look, the greenbelt, of course, always envisioned and does allow for important provincial infrastructure to be built through it. This is, of course, a highway that still requires a number of consultations to be carried out, both with local officials in the area and it requires an environmental assessment.

But there obviously can be no denying the fact that this is a region of the province that has had tremendous population growth. It continues to be forecasted that there will be tremendous population growth. It's obviously something that we need to look into if we're to get people moving around.

Having said that, we will continue our consultations within the community. We'll continue the environmental assessment. If it makes sense to build this piece of infrastructure, we will. If it doesn't, we won't.

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

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Mr. Speaker, almost every municipality that would be impacted by Highway 413 has now voted against the Premier's plan to fast-track this unneeded highway through the greenbelt. The special interests who still support the highway are well-connected donors and land speculators who own property along the highway corridor and stand to make big, big profits. It is a matter of fact that many of these developers and speculators are friends and donors to the Premier and the PC Party.

Will the Premier bulldoze ahead with an unneeded \$6-billion gift for his friends and donors, or will he put the public and the environment first and cancel this wasteful and destructive highway scheme?

Hon. Paul Calandra: As I said, there is an environmental assessment that needs to be done. There is consultation that still needs to be done before any construction is even contemplated on this.

She mentions the greenbelt. The greenbelt obviously does allow for important infrastructure to be brought in through it.

Look, this is a project, if it does go ahead, that would bring significant economic benefits to the area—a very fast-growing area. Obviously, when you have population growth in an area such as we've seen in that part of the province, a government is going to look at how we get people moving around. We have done that right from the beginning—again, woefully inadequate by the previous government, whether it was transit and transportation. We are starting to fix those problems, whether it's subways in the province of Ontario or expanding our roads in other parts of the province.

But as I said, we will take a look at this. We will do all of the work that's needed to be done. If it makes sense, we will continue; if it doesn't, we won't.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

IMMUNISATION CONTRE LA COVID-19

M^{me} Lucille Collard: My question is for the Minister of Health. Mr. Speaker, there are workers across the province that, despite the risk, have been going out to provide essential services when we were all required to stay home. I'm thinking of grocery store workers, bus operators and Ottawa Community Housing workers that need to move between crowded units in my riding to provide services to tenants—and, of course, teachers and education workers. Everyone that had to continue working outside the home during the lockdown has been essential to our community.

Toutes les personnes qui ont dû continuer à travailler dans la communauté quand nous étions en confinement ont fourni, et continuent de fournir, des services essentiels.

Can the minister confirm who will be considered an essential worker when the province begins vaccinating this group of people?

Hon. Christine Elliott: I thank the member very much for the question. We do have a plan for vaccinations. We have a three-phase rollout; we're finishing phase 1. As a result, we have successfully vaccinated everyone in long-term-care homes with at least the first dose who wants to receive one. We will be moving into phase 2 very shortly.

The biggest issue here that we need to deal with is age. That is the biggest contributor, unfortunately, to hospitalizations and deaths in the province of Ontario. So we need to make sure that we vaccinate people in the order of harm to them and to make sure that we protect them as much as possible. So we will be proceeding, first of all, with vaccinations based on age, with people 80-plus, and moving down in five-year intervals.

But it's also based on risk, so we need to make sure that we continue to vaccinate all of our front-line health care workers, home care workers and others, and then we move down thereafter. I will be able to speak more to this in my supplementary.

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

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Again to the Minister of Health with a supplementary: Anyone who has had to continue to work as we moved in and out of the various levels of lockdown put themselves at risk to help us, and they should be considered essential workers, not just the categories currently identified in the second phase of the plan.

I understand age as an issue, but you've got the AstraZeneca that you said you won't be administering to 65 and over, so maybe there is an opportunity there.

The government's plan is to carry out community vaccinations from April to July of this year. This is a very long window of time and does not provide much clarity.

These workers have been working in high-risk environments since the beginning of the pandemic last year, working under stress and having to work in uncomfortable and challenging settings. They deserve to be prioritized for the vaccine when it becomes available.

Still, with three vaccines now approved in Canada and a steady stream of vaccines becoming available to the province, we still don't have a clear mass vaccination rollout plan.

Est-ce que la ministre peut indiquer à ces travailleurs essentiels quel est le plan pour qu'ils puissent obtenir le vaccin?

Will the minister confirm to these essential workers what the plan is for them to get vaccinated?

Hon. Christine Elliott: The member is absolutely right: There are many people who are involved in providing essential services to us as Ontarians. Food supply, of course, is going to be one of the major areas. People who are working in grocery stores, pharmacies, the places that people have been going to for the last year—of course they're going to be considered.

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But the essential issue right now is the number of vaccines that are coming in. We can only vaccinate so many people right now. We have the ability to vaccinate many more people than we have supply. The news about AstraZeneca coming forward is very welcome news. Perhaps J&J, since it's now been approved by the FDA in the US, will be moving forward as well. That will allow us, hopefully, to be able to start vaccinating at a higher rate as these vaccines come in. We are expecting a shipment—we don't know how many right now—of AstraZeneca vaccines next week. As soon as we receive them, we will be distributing them to the public health units so that they can put the needles into arms. That's the goal: to get as many people vaccinated as soon as possible in Ontario.

SMALL BUSINESS

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: This question is for the Minister of Finance. It has been almost a year since this pandemic began and we are finally beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel. However, we know that the difficult but necessary decisions our government has taken to protect the health and safety of all of our constituents have had an

incredible toll on job creators and businesses in our communities.

Small businesses in my community of Carleton have stepped up. They've provided essential goods and services under difficult circumstances. They've retooled to produce much-needed PPE. They've put food on our tables and taken every step to keep us safe. They've been good neighbours, supporting my community long before the pandemic took hold. I can think of the Osgoode Care Centre as an example.

Can the minister explain what we're doing to support these businesses?

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

Mr. Stan Cho: Thank you to the member from Carleton. I know she's a tireless champion for her constituents and the business community in the Ottawa region.

Small businesses are the backbone of Ontario's economy, but they're also the beating heart of our communities. We've asked a lot of them this past year, and we've done whatever we can to support them. In the first days of the pandemic, we moved quickly to inject a cash flow of \$10 billion into Ontario's economy. We worked with the federal and municipal governments to provide a blanket of support to cover wages, rent, taxes and operating costs like hydro and PPE. We provided relief today and positioned businesses to compete tomorrow by permanently lowering property tax bills, lowering commercial hydro rates and reducing taxes on jobs. Perhaps most importantly, we provided businesses with cash in the form of the Ontario Small Business Support Grant, which, as of yesterday, has provided over \$1.1 billion to over 78,000 businesses in Ontario.

There is more to be done. But this government will continue to be there for job creators and entrepreneurs, as we have been since day one.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary?

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Thank you to the parliamentary assistant for his answer. I know that he, along with the minister, have been listening to businesses and communities across Ontario to ensure that our government is being responsive and taking steps that will help them weather this storm.

Last month, I attended a virtual pre-budget consultation with the minister in the Ottawa region. We heard first-hand about how businesses are struggling and how our supports are helping them to survive. We heard first-hand from people like Earl Stanley of Stanley's Olde Maple Lane Farms and Nicole McKerracher of the Osgoode Youth Association.

I know the Minister of Finance will table a budget in this House in the weeks ahead. Could the minister please share the work that's been done to consult and collaborate with Ontarians to ensure this budget meets the needs of our people, businesses and communities?

Mr. Stan Cho: The member is absolutely right: Premier Ford and our entire government have always put the highest importance on listening to the people of Ontario.

Since January, the minister and I have travelled this province virtually to listen and learn from Ontarians. From Kenora and Hamilton to Windsor and Ottawa, we've met with front-line health care workers, farmers, restaurateurs, grocery store clerks, construction workers, bankers and teachers. I hosted round tables with non-profits and charities, with credit unions, our natural resources sector and main street businesses. Their ideas, their experiences will directly inform our government's next budget as we continue to work tirelessly to protect the lives and livelihoods of every Ontarian.

In the last few months the members opposite have attempted to paint themselves as supporters of small businesses, yet they have voted against every single measure we've introduced to help job creators survive. While it's clear that the NDP and Liberals will continue to listen to career politicians and union bosses, this government will continue listening to Ontarians and fighting for our main street businesses. We are listening, and we are here to help.

ELECTION FINANCES

Mr. Taras Natyshak: My question is to the Premier. You would think, in the midst of a pandemic, we would see a government that is laser-focused on the needs of its people—a pandemic that has claimed thousands of lives, a pandemic that has disrupted almost every aspect of Ontarians' lives. Yet today we see a government that is focused on its own electoral fortunes and padding its own coffers to the extent that they are now. We will be debating a bill later on this afternoon that will double the donation contribution limit by big donors to the Conservative Party.

Speaker, that is reprehensible in a time of need. This government should be focused on health care, on paid sick days, on support for students, on support for long-term care. Instead, they're padding their own pockets through changes to the Election Act. Speaker, it's clear that—

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

Mr. Taras Natyshak: I withdraw. It is clear that the changes that have been made are a continuation of the Liberal Party's pay-to-play politics. My question is simple: If this is now a government—

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

Mr. Taras Natyshak: I'll withdraw that one too, as well, Speaker.

My question is clear: For essential workers who are demanding paid sick days, who does this government expect they should make their cheques out to?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Attorney General to respond.

Hon. Doug Downey: Mr. Speaker, I'll start with the last question first and say that people looking for paid sick days, as the Minister of Labour has said so many times, should be accessing the federal program that still has \$800 million in there.

The other piece there, the part of his question—he was all over the place, so it's hard. I'm going to focus on this part: What are we doing? We're focusing on Ontarians and making sure that they are at the centre of everything that we do. We've gone through the experience with Newfoundland and Labrador, with BC, with New Brunswick in adopting best practices to make sure that the Chief Electoral Officer has all the tools that he needs to make sure that he can do things in making sure that Ontarians are at the very centre of elections and protecting the democratic institutions of our government.

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

Mr. Taras Natyshak: It's very clear: The legislation that we will be debating later on this afternoon increases the donation limit to over \$3,000 per person. Go into any community in Ontario. Ask any of the essential workers if they have an extra \$3,000 laying around to donate to the Conservative Party. I don't think that's a priority of the people in our communities today, although we see it is exactly the priority that this party, the Conservative Party, is putting forward.

Speaker, again to the Premier: Did Conservative insiders have to pay upfront for these changes, or is this a pay-to-play kind of thing as you go?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. I don't need any assistance on this matter. I'm going to ask the member to withdraw.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Withdraw.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): And the response, the Attorney General.

Hon. Doug Downey: It's not the member's fault that he's not been paying attention to the rest of the country and what happens with donations. We're in fact moving to the middle. The largest province in the country is moving to the middle of the pack in terms of donations. There's no magic to the \$1,600 number. We're moving to the \$3,300 number, which puts us right in the middle. Some jurisdictions have no limits at all. Some jurisdictions like Nova Scotia have \$5,000. Some jurisdictions have very similar systems, but different amounts, Mr. Speaker. It's not—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order. The official opposition will come to order.

Hon. Doug Downey: Mr. Speaker, we're just letting Ontarians participate in the way that they choose to participate, whether it be knocking on doors or donating or voting or putting a sign on their lawn. We're just making sure that we're in the middle of the pack, even though we're the largest province in the country.

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Good morning. My question is for the Minister of Health. This week, the government gave their thoughts on recent reports that Peel

region and a few other regions in Ontario have implemented, or advocated for, cruel isolation policies for children, even if the child doesn't have COVID but someone in their class does. The government's Minister of Health called this policy "very sensible" without of course providing any science or data to justify the comment.

Mr. Speaker, would the Minister of Health please explain what part of government telling parents to put their children in solitary confinement is very sensible?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you to the member for the question. No one would suggest that putting a child in solitary confinement is a good idea—no one would. We don't agree with that at the Ministry of Health, and in fact, Dr. Loh has clarified his remarks to indicate that he didn't recommend that either. That is not something that is good for children.

What is important for children is for them to be at school. They need that for both their mental and physical health. That is something that has been our top priority since the beginning, to make sure that children can be returned to school as soon as it's safe. That is exactly what we have done, and in 99.5% of the cases, all schools are remaining open.

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

Mrs. Belinda C. Karahalios: Let me be clear: Any isolation of children is cruel and inhumane. There is nothing sensible about it. While children are less likely to spread COVID, the government continues to implement, praise or avoid condemning such harmful policies like this one, and the mandatory mask-wearing and others, all of which negatively affect the long-term health of our children by traumatizing them with fear.

My question is, when will this PC government stop negatively affecting the health and mental well-being of our children by putting an end to ineffective policies such as forced isolation, forced distancing and mandatory masks on children?

Hon. Christine Elliott: As I indicated previously, no one is suggesting the isolation of children for 14 days. No one is suggesting that. No policies are directing that. What we are suggesting and recommending—and this has been recommended by all of the 34 public health unit regions' medical officers of health, as well as Dr. Williams—is that it is really important for children to return to school whenever it is safe. We've had some interruptions in that when we had a magnitude of transmission in the community, but at this point schools are open.

This is important for children. It is important for them to be in school, to learn, for their physical activity, for their mental activity and their mental wellness. This is what we are recommending and this is what we are putting forward within the province of Ontario as the best course of action for children.

RETIREMENT HOMES

Mr. Joel Harden: Tomorrow, we will be debating Voula's law—it's a question for the Premier—a motion

that calls upon my friends in the government to clarify that the operators of retirement homes, long-term-care homes and group homes cannot issue trespass orders that ban family caregivers when they complain about the living conditions of their loved ones.

The motion is named after Voula Sardelis, who was separated from her daughter Mary for 316 days when she complained about the banning of a personal external care worker she had hired for her mom. Mary missed Christmas with her mom, missed her birthday, missed Thanksgiving. Speaker, this is wrong. But unfortunately, it's happened to too many other families.

My question for the Premier, very simple: Will you help us clarify the law so what happened to Mary, what happened to Voula never happens again? Will you support Voula's law tomorrow?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Children, Community and Social Services.

Hon. Todd Smith: I want to thank the member opposite from Ottawa for the question today. We look forward to the debate on this issue tomorrow afternoon, but I can assure you that the health and safety, and the health and well-being, of our retirement home residents and their families continues to be at the forefront of all of our policies. Our Minister for Seniors and Accessibility, Raymond Cho, has been doing an outstanding job in ensuring that we're shining that lens on that sector so that we are keeping those in that sector as safe as possible.

We do have a visitor policy that we've been working on across government ministries to ensure the safety of all individuals in congregate care settings, including long-term care, retirement homes and the developmental services sector and others. We want to ensure that those seniors and individuals who are living in those congregate care settings and their families are being kept as safe as they possibly can be.

Under the Retirement Homes Act, the RHRA has a comprehensive complaints process, which we encourage residents and their families to utilize as we stay on top of issues like the one that the member opposite has mentioned.

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

Mr. Joel Harden: I didn't hear a yes or no there. So I would love to know—we've approached the government several times over the last two years as we've been advocating this. I've talked to the minister, who is sympathetic to what we're attempting to accomplish here, but I want to know from the government: What can we expect? What can voters expect tomorrow at 6 p.m.? Will the government stand up for people like Mary Sardelis and Joy Seguin, who's the mom of a 34-year-old son, Andre, who lives with a developmental disability and who was evicted from his group home, unceremoniously dumped on his family's front step, his possessions in a garbage bag, because they dared to complain about Andre's living conditions?

Speaker, I think we can agree this is wrong, but we need leadership from this government to clarify the law. Should we allow a cruel practice by a minority of home operators?

Or will this government stand by families and make sure trespass orders are not unlawfully used ever again?

Hon. Todd Smith: Thanks again to the member opposite for the follow-up question. We can all, in this House, agree that the circumstances that the individual has outlined here are not acceptable to anyone who occupies a seat in this Legislature.

As part of our comprehensive review of the Retirement Homes Act, we'll be considering all relevant regulations and legislation, ensuring that the needs of residents and their families are being best served. Unlike the motion that was introduced by my colleague opposite, any changes that we make as part of our review will be binding on the retirement home sector, unlike a motion in the Legislature. But I do appreciate the fact that the member from Ottawa has brought this motion forward.

We look forward to engaging with the public and our broad stakeholder community to help build a stronger retirement home system. Once again, I want to remind anyone out there that we do have a comprehensive complaints process that exists with the RHRA, and we encourage any residents or their family members that have these concerns to utilize the system that's currently in place. We look forward to the debate tomorrow.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Stephen Blais: My question is for the Minister of Health. Mr. Speaker, as of this morning, Ontario remains seventh in Canada for per capita vaccinations. Furthermore, despite knowing for months that vaccines would ramp up in the spring, the government has still not made some basic decisions about COVID prioritizations public.

Phase 2 begins in less than a month, and the government claims that individuals with high-risk chronic conditions and their caregivers will be part of that group. But, Mr. Speaker, amongst other things, the government hasn't disclosed which high-risk chronic conditions will be included, how those individuals will be informed and what kind of documentation they will need when they get vaccinated. And of course, the government has still not rolled out their online booking system.

Mr. Speaker, after months of work and planning, why has the government still not decided which high-risk chronic conditions will qualify for vaccinations in phase 2?

Hon. Christine Elliott: We do actually have a very comprehensive plan for vaccinations, one plan across the entire province. Of course, it's being modified by the 34 public health units that are involved, because they know their local conditions. They are experts in vaccinations, having done the flu vaccines for many, many years very successfully, particularly this year, with over six million Ontarians receiving the flu shot.

This is something that is being worked on, that we have already with a number of the public health units. In fact, 20 now are operating their own system that is going to merge with the public system when it becomes available on March 15. We are testing the system so that it's not going to collapse, as it has in other jurisdictions.

We have a robust plan. We have developed categories based on age, of course, but also people that are at risk, and this plan is going to be made available very shortly to yourself as well as to members of the public.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary.

Mr. Stephen Blais: So their plan for high-risk chronic conditions is that they have a plan, and they will talk about a plan and they will release a plan very shortly, after months and months of talking about making a plan.

Mr. Speaker, advocates for disabled adults living in group homes are very concerned that this government has forgotten about them when it comes to COVID-19. There is evidence that people with intellectual disabilities and developmental disorders are three times more likely to die of COVID-19 compared to patients without these conditions. Despite this, Mr. Speaker, we've seen hospital executives and administrative staff get vaccinated before these high-risk Ontarians.

While congregate settings are supposed to be included as part of phase 2 of the vaccination program, this phase lasts for nearly one third of the year, and there's no clarity where in the prioritization members who live in these congregate settings will fall.

Mr. Speaker, when will the government provide clarity to these residents on where exactly in phase 2 vaccinations they fall?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Well, there is a plan, and it is rolling forward successfully. We have already administered 754,000 vaccines in very short order. What we lack are vaccines themselves. We have the ability to triple, quadruple the number of vaccines we can administer in mass vaccination clinics, which is what we're going to do, but we need the vaccines to come in. We do have more regular shipments of Pfizer and Moderna coming in right now. We will start receiving AstraZeneca next week, and hopefully J&J is going to be approved in Canada, as it has been in the US.

But we are certainly basing the priority on age. That is the primary risk to people for hospitalizations and, unfortunately, deaths. But it's also based on people at risk. You're absolutely right that there are many people with physical or mental disabilities who are at higher risk, and that, I can assure you, has been taken into consideration when developing priorities for people to receive the vaccine, and this is—

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

The next question.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: My question is to the Premier. This government can no longer deny that Ontario's vaccine rollout has been sluggish and ineffective at getting to our most vulnerable Ontarians. Ontario is seventh in the country for per-capita vaccinated.

It's now March, and the majority of my constituents still have no idea when they'll be able to access their vaccine shot. It's a tremendous concern for those battling

cancer; a tremendous concern for parents who have spent the last year in isolation anxiously awaiting this news. Mothers like Deb, whose son has a dual diagnosis with being developmentally handicapped as well as living with a degenerative disease, are tired of being kept in the dark.

She wrote to me: “I’ve been literally holding my breath for an entire year. I’m really frightened for my son, as a common cold and flu can end in death for my son, so he has no chance at surviving COVID should he be infected.”

Some 500,000 doses of AstraZeneca arrived in Canada today; 444,000 doses of Pfizer will arrive in Canada this week. Many of them will expire. We need shots in arms 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

When will this government give peace of mind to immune-compromised Ontarians and their families, stop ignoring them and provide concrete details on when and how they’ll be vaccinated?

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

Hon. Christine Elliott: I would say to the member, through you, Mr. Speaker, that we absolutely know that people are anxious to receive the vaccines and we’re anxious to give them the vaccines, but we have to receive them. We are receiving Pfizer and Moderna. AstraZeneca is arriving in Canada. We don’t know exactly when it’s going to be arriving in Ontario or how many vaccines that we are likely to receive. Probably it will be within 38% to 40%, because that’s the population of Ontario, but we don’t know that yet.

We would like to know as much as the people of Ontario would, because we have the ability to give those vaccines. We have the set-up established for that with mass vaccination clinics. We’re going to make sure that they’re in the hands of primary care providers and that pharmacies will be able to deliver some of the vaccines, but we need to get the vaccines first and foremost.

In terms of the plan, the plan is based primarily on age, but also at-risk populations, including people with disabilities, including people with special health conditions. All of that has been taken into account by the vaccine task force. It is going to be distributed to the public very shortly.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): There being no further business this morning, this House stands in recess until 3 p.m.

The House recessed from 1132 to 1500.

REPORTS BY COMMITTEES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON REGULATIONS AND PRIVATE BILLS

Mr. John Fraser: I beg leave to present a report from the Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills and move its adoption.

The Clerk-at-the-Table (Ms. Meghan Stenson): Your committee begs to report the following bills without amendment:

Bill Pr39, An Act to revive Robe Investments & Consulting Services Limited;

Bill Pr40, An Act to revive Castleform Developments Inc.;

Bill Pr45, An Act to revive 1825821 Ontario Ltd.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Shall the report be received and adopted? Agreed? Agreed.

Report adopted.

PETITIONS

CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: This petition is entitled “Support Conservation Authorities.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Ontario’s 36 conservation authorities have developed a deep understanding of local ecosystems and have implemented a range of non-mandatory programs to best protect them; and

“Whereas these non-mandatory programs include water quality monitoring and improvement, tree planting and woodlot management, curriculum-based environmental education, trail development and outdoor recreation, support for local environmental initiatives and more; and

“Whereas it is unnecessary and prohibitive to require conservation authorities to secure MOUs with every municipality in their watershed in order to continue non-mandatory programs; and

“Whereas we are deeply concerned that stopping non-mandatory programs will adversely affect the health of our environment;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to support the continued delivery of the full range of programs and services that have been developed by conservation authorities, including programs and services that are not mandated by the province.”

I certainly support this. I will be affixing my signature to it and giving it to the Clerk.

CAREGIVERS

Mr. Joel Harden: I have a petition this afternoon entitled, “Stop Banning Concerned Family Members Visiting Seniors and People with Disabilities”—Support Voula’s Law. It reads:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas some retirement homes, group homes and long-term-care operators have banned family members from visiting using the Trespass to Property Act;

“Whereas these bans have been issued when family members have raised concerns about their loved ones’ living conditions;

“Whereas it is cruel and unfair to punish seniors, people with disabilities and their loved ones for speaking out on their behalf;

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

“The Ford government should provide clear direction to operators that the Trespass to Property Act does not permit them to issue trespass” orders “to exclude substitute decision-makers and guests of the occupants of retirement homes, long-term-care homes, and other congregate ... accommodations when they raise concerns about their loved ones’ living conditions.”

I want to thank Warren Jones from Nepean and the many others who have signed these petitions. We’ve had over 500 of these signatures online, Speaker. I’ll be signing this and sending it to the Clerks’ table.

DRIVER EXAMINATION CENTRES

Mr. Michael Mantha: I have a petition from the good people of Gore Bay, M’Chigeeng, Kagawong and Mindemoya, on Manitoulin Island.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas northern Ontario residents and businesses experience a historic and significant shortage of DriveTest centre services;

“Whereas DriveTest centres in northern Ontario have been significantly understaffed and underfunded;

“Whereas winter clinics are rarely scheduled during the winter months;

“Whereas motor vehicles are the only means of transportation in many of the smaller, rural and isolated areas of northern Ontario; and

“Whereas DriveTest service shortages and disruptions gravely affect the lives of families, workers, seniors and students in northern Ontario;

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

“—To call on the Ford government and the Minister of Transportation to expand DriveTest services, Travel Points and clinics in northern Ontario;

“—To demand the Minister of Transportation and DriveTest offer more hours and locations of service in northern Ontario;

“—To provide Travel Point clinics all year round, including the winter months; and

“—To call on the Minister of Transportation to re-evaluate its assessment of services offered to northern Ontario communities that has led to current cuts in services and staff shortages.”

I agree with this petition. I affix my signature and will bring it down to the Clerks’ table.

PUBLIC SECTOR COMPENSATION

Ms. Marit Stiles: I’m pleased to present this petition on behalf of Valerie Thompson of Alliston.

“Petition to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas the Ford Conservatives’ cuts represent an all-out attack on municipalities, health care, schools, universities and social services; and

“Whereas the Ford Conservatives’ cuts are harming families, children and the most vulnerable across Ontario, making the services we all rely on less accessible and accountable;

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

“That the government of Ontario stop dismantling our social infrastructure, properly fund our public services, withdraw Bill 124, and support communities, not cuts.”

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

NORTHERN HEALTH TRAVEL GRANT

Mr. Michael Mantha: I want to thank the good people of Espanola, Blind River, Spragge, Serpent River and Algoma Mills.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas the Northern Health Travel Grant is supposed to even the playing field so all Ontarians can get the medical care they need, but it is failing too many northern families;

“Whereas successive Conservative and Liberal governments have let northerners down by failing to make health care accessible in the north;

“Whereas not all costs are covered, and reimbursement amounts are small compared to the actual costs, northern families are forced to pay out of pocket to access health care, which is a barrier for seniors and low-income working families;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to fix the Northern Health Travel Grant so we can ensure more people get the care they need, when they need it.”

I agree with this petition. I affix my signature and present it to the usher for the Clerks’ table.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

PROTECTING ONTARIO ELECTIONS ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 SUR LA PROTECTION DES ÉLECTIONS EN ONTARIO

Resuming the debate adjourned on March 3, 2021, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 254, An Act to amend various Acts with respect to elections and members of the Assembly / Projet de loi 254, Loi modifiant diverses lois en ce qui concerne les élections et les députés à l’Assemblée.

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

Mr. Taras Natyshak: It is, as always, an honour and a privilege to stand in this House to represent the

constituents of Essex and to debate the bills which this government sees as a priority before the House.

Comme toujours, c'est un honneur d'être ici comme député pour ma circonscription d'Essex pour faire débat sur les lois présentées par notre gouvernement provincial. Aujourd'hui nous avons un projet de loi, appelé 254, Loi de 2021 sur la protection des élections en Ontario.

1510

Bill 254, Protecting Ontario Elections Act: Speaker, I've been a member of this House for 10 years. I'm honoured to serve. I've learned a lot. I've been honoured to be a part of amazing discussions and debates around bills that are comprehensive, that are impactful, that have real, tangible effect in our communities. Today, on March 3, I stand here before you to tell you that this bill, at this time and this moment in the history of Ontario, could not have come at a worse time. I have never in my career here in the Ontario Legislature seen a bill that is so out of touch with the needs of the province of Ontario than what has been presented here today, in the third week of the session of this year, 2021—so much so that it should be renamed the “we are completely out of touch with the needs of Ontarians” bill.

Let me contextualize where this bill is coming from. It's quite well known that we are in the midst of a global pandemic that has now gone on for nearly a year. We have variants of concern that are multiplying exponentially in our communities. We have overcrowded hospitals and front-line workers who are broken, frankly. If you took the time to speak with any of our front-line workers in our communities, in any aspect—whether they are working in emergency rooms, whether they are dealing directly with COVID-19 patients, whether they are working in our schools, whether they are working in our front-line commerce and small business, people are at a breaking point. They are looking towards their government, as people should do and are expected to do, for measures of support, of hope, of direction in all aspects.

Every day I know that my colleagues in this House—I know that your phones are ringing with questions that you, frankly, can't answer, because we are met with a moment in time that is fluid, that there are no answers to. And for that, I have given, personally, a lot of latitude to the government—not only the provincial government, but governments of all stripes—to deal with issues on the fly. I have given them latitude to develop policy as it comes, because this is a novel coronavirus. It is brand new. We don't know how it acts, although we are gaining a lot of information on how it acts, how to protect ourselves, how to support our communities and how to deliver that information.

So in that context, you would think that a government, knowing the challenges that our communities face, would do all that it could, would put its best effort forward, because the province has all of the resources—if they don't have the resources at their disposal, they can get them—to deliver the best information, to develop the most poignant policy, to support our communities. That's my hope. That's what I want to see.

New Democrats on this side have tried to do that. We've offered various policy ideas. We've tabled them as motions in the House. We've asked for expediency in passing them, because we know through precedent, we know through actions of other governments—because those are our best references as to how to deal with this pandemic—we know that's what we should be doing.

Let's put our best foot forward—things like paid sick days; things like making sure that people, if they are symptomatic or asymptomatic or have tested positive, can afford to stay home and not endanger the lives or the health of their colleagues and their co-workers. In this House—for those watching at home—members of provincial Parliament have that luxury. We can stay home. In fact, we don't get sick days in this House. There's no provision for sick days. We can just stay home. That's the reference that we have. But in the real world, outside of the bubble of this building, where people work and provide for their families for a living, they don't have access to paid sick days. They have to go to work to pay for their homes, to pay their bills, to make ends meet.

Knowing that that is the reality on the outside, you would think that this would be a government that would acknowledge we can help here. Here's something we know we can help with, because we, in fact, take advantage of it ourselves.

Interruption.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Very good. Thank you to my whip for the note.

Speaker, you would think you'd see a bill with the impetus of helping people, helping constituents, doing everything that we could to support Ontarians. Today's bill in front of us—and I alluded to it this morning in question period. I didn't get anywhere close to a comprehensive answer as to how this bill helps people on the ground in the real world.

This bill, ultimately, is about money. It's about accessing more money from donors through the party apparatus. Today, the limit for a donation as an individual is \$1,600. The government saw fit in this bill—in the midst of a pandemic, this is their priority. This is what's taking up the time in this House, in this chamber—not discussing sick pay; not discussing how we make schools safer; not discussing how we make the environment safer; not discussing a comprehensive economic recovery plan for small and medium-sized businesses; not discussing a manufacturing strategy to put us at the forefront; not discussing a procurement strategy whereby the province of Ontario would not destroy personal protective equipment by the millions and could in fact call on production of personal protective equipment to make sure that we never get here again; not discussing our capacity to build and to create our own homemade vaccine and pharmaceutical capacity—none of that.

Today's debate is about making sure that when party members and MPPs pick up the phone to their deep-pocketed donors, they can ask for \$3,300 rather than the previous limit of \$1,300—

Interjection.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: I don't want \$1,600. I think it's egregious. At this point in time, in the midst of a pandemic, when people are suffering, when they're losing their jobs, when they're losing their homes, that you would pick up the phone—and you think that this is the priority of this House, that we should be able to ask for more money?

Interjections.

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

First of all, I'm going to ask the government side to allow the member for Essex to make his points.

I'm going to remind the member for Essex to make his comments through the Chair. I've listened to his presentation about his view on the context of the bill upon which it's being presented, and I would ask him to begin speaking about Bill 254 directly.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Thank you very much, Speaker.

The member intervened by stating that I'm just mad that I can't get donors to donate \$1,300, let alone \$3,300.

My goodness, I'm reluctant to ask anyone for any money, because I think that this job is one that should be done out of a sense of public duty, a sense of honour—and not funded by those who can cut the biggest cheque to me.

But I understand that the government thinks that this is a priority at this moment in time—not to give families on ODSP a raise, who are struggling to make ends meet; not to develop a strategy around affordable housing in our communities.

We're at an epidemic level in affordable housing. There is not enough stock in our communities—rural, urban communities—where people can find affordable housing.

In fact, this morning, I turned on CP24 and the headline was that the average cost now for a single-family home in the Toronto area—today, March 3, the day this government is introducing a bill to increase how much it can get from donors—is a million bucks. It's \$1 million to live in Toronto if you want a single-family home. And the priority of this government is to make sure that the Election Act reflects their need to recover as much money as they can.

1520

Speaker, I just find it reprehensible. I find it so out of touch. It's as useful a bill today as if they were to introduce a bill to turn licence plates from white to blue and then back to white again. If a government did that, you would think, "These guys are out of touch." We are in a pandemic. We've never seen suffering in this province, across the country and internationally as we have today. This is the bill that you bring forward to this House?

I've sat with many of you in this House for a long time, over a decade. The class of 2011—there is a connection there. We've seen a lot of bills come through this House. If the Liberals had tried to pull this in their tenure, the opposition would be apoplectic. I remember those days. This would never pass the scrutiny of members of the now government when they were in opposition.

These aren't Conservative values. In tough times, you should be looking for ways for efficiency, to maximize economic development and impact. These are things that

we would hope we would see—a thoughtful approach to policy from the government. What do we get? A bill that focuses on increasing the donation limit from—I don't even know. What's the top donation?

Interjection.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: From \$1,600 to now \$3,300. I don't know anyone in my constituency who, at this moment in time—I would actually urge people in my constituency: If they have an extra \$3,300, donate it to a charity. Give it to someone who is dealing with homelessness, poverty, food security or mental health supports.

Here's what their priority is: This government, the Doug Ford government, the Conservative Party of Ontario, has brought forward a bill in this House today, March 3, in the middle of a pandemic, with a focus on increasing personal donations to politicians. This is not the Conservative Party that I thought I knew. I would not and could not have expected that this would be the bill that we would see today. Others are shocked, as well.

There was an article in the National Post by Chris Selley dated March 1, 2021, two days ago—it's a four-minute read. The title is "Doug Ford Made a Promise to 'Respect' Taxpayers. He Just Broke It." Chris Selley said, "It won't go down as Ontario Premier Doug Ford's most memorable or important broken promise. It hardly even made the news last week. But the Progressive Conservative government's decision to not just maintain the per-vote subsidy for political parties, but also to increase it from 55 to 63 cents, certainly ranks among the tawdriest."

That's interesting as well, because folks in the general public might not know—or they may know—that this House developed a policy of a per-vote subsidy rather than relying solely on political donations from donors. That was born out of the previous Liberal government's penchant for throwing these lavish \$10,000- and \$20,000-a-plate dinners that saw their biggest donors, and those who were going to benefit the most from the policies of the Liberal government at that time, just sign cheques like it was nobody's business. It was quite ostentatious. It was incredible to see that at the moment.

Speaker, in anticipation of this debate, I should have dug up some of the old Hansards from the PC opposition at that time, because I can remember Tim Hudak sitting in one of those chairs, and a couple of the other members, I'm sure—the member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, my goodness, he would throw down what he called the guillotine. He'd make his arm like this, and he would chop his desk in dismay and disgust at how this government was acting. I can hear the desk just vibrate right now from those times, when we caught the Liberals having these \$10,000- and \$20,000-a-plate dinners.

We raised enough concern that they had to backtrack. They had to reform the elections act to make sure they weren't getting these huge donations from big-pocketed developers and those who were deeply embedded into the party apparatus, who benefited from various policies, whether it be a gas plant here or a gas plant there, whatever it may be. We caught them in the act, and that was because of an effective opposition.

Today, we're seeing a little bit of a reversal. They're doing a little bit of backpedalling here, saying, "Well, we've got some folks who are well off, and we could probably hit them up for a couple of thousand dollars. So let's raise the campaign limit"—not only the donation limit, but also, interestingly enough, the per-vote subsidy that replaced that unwritten rule, or the lack of regulations around donations that we saw under the Liberals. A per-vote subsidy is something that in all respects could be equitable, could be something that makes sense in terms of getting big money out of politics. That's what we should be focused on—getting deep-pocketed donors out of politics for their own benefit, making sure that this is an accountable and transparent process. But we're seeing a reversal of that today.

On March 3, 2021, when we see a pandemic still ripping through our communities, variants of concern that have mutated—we don't know what the eventual effect will be—and a slow rollout of a vaccine to ultimately protect people, this is the priority of the government. I can't believe it. I am shocked that I'm standing here debating this type of bill. There are so many other bills, I have confidence, that the government could propose that we could find some common ground on—very much, even me, I'm optimistic, in the sense that there are a whole lot of other ideas and problems we could be solving. What this signals to the House today, as members in this House—what it signals, more importantly, to the broader public on March 3, 2021, is that this government is all out of ideas on how to help Ontarians. Now they're focused on ideas on how to help themselves, and to see it any other way—to see that this bill could be some measure of democratic protection or institutional progress—is to look at it with blinders on, because it is clearly stated in this bill that they're looking for more money. They're open for more money. I couldn't think of a worse time to introduce this bill.

Shame on the members who will stand in their place to speak in favour of this bill and those who will then eventually vote—and let me suggest something, Speaker. We will probably see the least amount of government members in the House to stand in their place to support this bill come time to vote for it. That's just my guess. Which one of them is going to take the fall? Who's going to want to be on record as supporting, on March 3, 2021, in the midst of a global pandemic, a bill that gives politicians more money? It is so out of touch—it is stranger things. It is a documentary that is unfolding right before our eyes, in real time, that I can't believe.

1530

You only have to look at communities around this province that are facing the challenges of their lifetimes; municipalities that are looking down the barrel of budget deficits that they could never have accounted for; non-profit organizations that have exhausted their reserves, that are absolutely essential to providing support for communities; institutions like mental health support and hospitals that have been so overwhelmed with the lack of capacity that they have to support people, with the lack of

support that they have to actually provide that—that they're working on a razor's edge. You would think that a bill to deal with any of those problems would have seen the light of day in this House, but yet today we get Bill 254, the Protecting Ontario Elections Act, 2021.

Speaker, here's another really interesting provision of this act on the per-vote subsidy: the changes to the payment schedule for the subsidy, so the payment for the second quarter of 2022—the parties will get all the remaining quarters of that year, plus quarter 1 of 2023 at the same time. So they're giving themselves a payday loan. It's an advance. Now the government have turned taxpayers into payday lenders for their political campaigns. It is unprecedented. It's novel. It's quite the scheme. I have never seen anything like this.

You're saying, "We're in 2022. Look at how great of a job we've done. Give us a little advance. Give us a little bit more. Give us what we know we're going to get there later." What is that all about?

When people are facing calamity—let's be frank: They're losing everything. They're leveraging everything.

Mr. Wayne Gates: They're dying.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: They're dying. They can't see their parents. They can't see their family members. Mental health issues are at an epidemic level here in this province. All the metrics you could measure in terms of a civil, cohesive society have been disrupted by this pandemic. You can argue whether I'm overstating it or not; I don't know. But it's just what I'm seeing on the ground in my own community. And if you aren't seeing the same things, you're not paying attention.

Speaker, I would expect that a bill to address some of those issues—even one of them. Let's talk about mental health. Let's make sure that our youth in schools, who are dealing with such disruption and such anxiety and so many questions that have not been able to be answered and the support that is just not there in our small communities, in our small rural schools—they don't have the capacity. Teachers are not equipped to provide mental health support, yet we're relying on them to be able to comfort and provide guidance on really detrimental issues that will lay out a pathway for our students into the future. We need them to be healthy. We need them to understand that there are coping mechanisms and there are skills and there are methods to be able to deal with the anxiety they're feeling right now. Each and every day that goes by in our schools, kids fall through the cracks because those services aren't there. They weren't there pre-pandemic. They aren't there during the pandemic. And today we see that with Bill 254, the "we've run out of ideas" bill, there is no measure of mental health support built into this bill. There a measure of support—it's an increase in the campaign donations to political parties, not to students in our schools.

I make that contrast because, for the life of me, I can't understand why, at this moment, on March 3, 2021, in the midst of a pandemic—when we have stay-at-home orders still in place; when we have colour-coordinated schedules; when people don't know where they can go, what they can do, who they can see, how they can interact—this is the priority of this government.

I look forward to—I truly do, because as a member of this House for nearly a decade, you get to a point where you want to understand the motivation, the impetus of the government. What are they identifying in society that prioritizes, that makes them—because this government here, as a majority government, holds all of the levers, Speaker, and you would know it. There are legislative tools that allow them to introduce bills and to ultimately—we've talked about the process. They have the votes, as a majority government, to win every vote. It gets passed, it gets royal assent, and it becomes a measure of law. It's a really integral part of our democracy.

So they have all the tools to be able to pass whatever bill they want, and ostensibly, we would imagine, this is one of their priorities. This is a bill that will become law. How does this become the priority on March 3, 2021? How is this something that—as a caucus, you got around the table, or as a cabinet, your ministers got around the table and said, “On Wednesday, March 3, 2021, we're going to table a bill. It's going to make sure that people can increase their campaign donations to politicians.” I would laugh. If I was at that cabinet table, I would think it was a very bad joke if it was coming from—actually, I would quit, as a cabinet minister. I'd resign if that was the priority of my government.

Interjection.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Seriously, if that was the priority of my government, to make sure that political parties could be more financially stable leading up to an upcoming election—get out of the game. You're in it for the wrong reasons.

There are people in our communities who are in crisis. If you don't know that, walk outside. Take a walk down any one of the streets in downtown Toronto, or any one of the streets in your own community. Knock on a door and ask people how they're doing—a very, very easy way to gauge what your priorities should be. Knock on a door and say, “Hey, we're thinking, as a government”—today or tomorrow or any given day—“that it might be important for us to increase campaign donations from”—what's the limit again?

Interjections.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: It's \$1,600. “To help you get through this pandemic, we're thinking of increasing the campaign limit that you can donate to politicians from \$1,600 to \$3,300.” I'll even go with you—like a bipartisan approach to knowledge-seeking. Invite me to your communities. I'll knock on doors with you to see how many people in your communities think that warrants time in this House.

Time in this House is a finite thing. You don't get much time in this House. You only have a certain amount of time to try to help the people of this province. And today, this government has shown what their priorities are: to make sure that, come the next election, they can tap into the deepest pockets that they can, to extract the most amount of money possible.

I heard the Attorney General this morning. I asked him a question about this. It was very frank: “Why are you

doing this? Why does this make sense? How can you do this today?” He said, “We're just bringing ourselves to the median where other jurisdictions are.” He talked about the Atlantic provinces, Alberta, and I don't know what; he rambled on. He said, “We could go to \$5,000, any number. It doesn't really matter. We're just coming in line with other jurisdictions.”

Look, fair enough, if that's how you want to justify it, but look at your timing. Look at when you're doing this. Look at yourselves. Take a look at your efforts as elected members in this House, as people that your constituencies have entrusted with this enormous responsibility, especially in times like this, to step up and to be selfless.

1540

We regard people in our communities who put others above themselves as heroes. You and I know them, Speaker. We can name them. We've met them. We love them. We can't wait to meet them and talk to them and hug them again. You know them; I know them. They make a difference. They understand that putting others and the needs of others above themselves—ultimately, you know what it does? It benefits everyone. It's just the way it works. It's the lessons we've learned in every aspect of society.

If you're fortunate enough and privileged enough to have the role that we have as members, you buckle down, you grind it out, you find out where you can make a difference and you do that work. I know my colleagues, especially the ones who I've sat with for a long time—I know my colleague from Sarnia. Do you know what? The guy does that work. I appreciate it of him. I'm far enough into my career that I can see it, recognize it and acknowledge it. I know it when I see it, and so do you, Speaker, and so do all my colleagues. We know that.

I know this hurts coming from me to tell you that this bill is not a bill that should be debated today. It's not timely. It's one that I would suggest and I would offer and argue in good faith to my colleagues across the way that you should ask your government to pull. Take it away. Get it out of here. Talk about it another day. There is a light at the end of the tunnel here. We see brighter days ahead. We will get out of this pandemic. But today, on March 3, 2021, in the midst of a pandemic, we're here debating a bill that allows politicians to get more money, to fundraise more, to ask for more money and ultimately to receive it. I don't know, Speaker; I've never thought that it was a priority. Shame on me, I guess, for not seeing that as something that was integral to politics or to the good functioning of the Legislature. I can't believe that this is the time that we're allocating to this.

There's no rationale around admitting that you made a mistake. There's no reason why a government can't stand up and say, “Look, we made a mistake.” I would again surmise that if this government did that today and said, “Look, this probably isn't the time. We should probably focus on other issues,” they might actually have more support in the general public, in the broader public. They may actually resonate. It might actually give people in the real world, outside of this room, outside of this bubble, a

sense of competency that their government actually is understanding what their needs are.

I'm giving you a pro tip here. This is free advice to the government. Pro tip: Listen carefully. Go to your caucus meeting, go to your ministers and say, "Look, Natyshak is making a lot of good sense there." I know it sounds crazy, but this is the time. If there was ever a time for us to actually resonate with the public and to show that we care, March 3, 2021 is the day we should do that. It takes political courage. They write books about politicians who have political courage. They don't write books about politicians who don't show political courage; they write op-eds like Chris Selley wrote: "Doug Ford Made a Promise to 'Respect' Taxpayers. He Just Broke It." That's what you get.

The member from Kitchener–Waterloo—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): I just want to remind the member that even though you might be reading something that may name the Premier by name, I would ask that you refer to him in here as Premier, and then you can say his name—but Premier. Thank you very much.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: I so appreciate that intervention, Speaker, because it allowed me not only to know the rules and understand them once again, but to take a drink of water, which is timely.

Again, this is a bill—you know, not much in terms of content. There's a couple of changes to schedules: schedule 1 of the Election Act, schedule 2 of the Election Act, and 3 and 4, so four schedule changes. But ultimately—well, here's another one. Not only does it increase the individual contribution amount that a candidate or politician can recover and seek, it increases the amount that a leadership candidate can donate to themselves, from \$25,000 to \$50,000. So if you're running for leadership, those of you across the way who have aspirations to climb the ladder of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, you can now donate to yourselves—previously, it was \$25,000, but I know you've got an extra \$25,000 sitting around that you wish you could give yourself, so you'll now be able to donate \$50,000 to yourself for your own leadership campaign.

Again, let's put this into context, Speaker: March 3, 2021, in the midst of a pandemic. There are stay-at-home orders across the province. The largest city in the country, Toronto, and much of the GTHA are in a stay-at-home order. Schools are shut down. Small businesses have had not only to shut down, but close and cease their operations. Their investments, their savings have been exhausted. They have either declared bankruptcy or are on the brink of bankruptcy. We see storefronts that are closed. The main streets of our small communities in rural Ontario look like ghost towns. And this is the bill we're debating, to increase the donation limit from \$1,600, which is already a good chunk of change.

You've got to have some gall to say, "Hey, look, you can give me 1,600 bucks, so buck up, because I want to win this seat." I don't have that skill, Speaker. I'm not a fundraising guy. I can't do that. And it's terrible in politics.

It probably is not a good attribute. I can't ask people for \$1, let alone \$1,600. But now the government has decided that—maybe, I guess, the people that they're asking for \$1,600 are so excited, and have so much extra money at this time, that they want to give more. They want to give \$3,300.

Speaker, I am not talking to those people. I don't have them in my constituency. Maybe I do, but they're not knocking on the door to give me money. We know that this is the nature of politics. Big, deep-pocketed donors—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Developers.

Mr. Taras Natyshak:—developers, those who are going to benefit the most from a Conservative government that has a top-down approach to economic development—they're going to get the spoils.

Again, I've spent 40 minutes talking about this. I can't imagine we would have spent one minute talking about this. This is a bill that should never have seen the light of day in this House, and I've seen a lot of them. I've seen hundreds of bills. I would surmise and I would argue that this is perhaps one of the worst bills, at the worst time, that I could have ever, ever seen pass through the floor of this House.

Speaker, you know the mechanics of getting a bill tabled and the effort that goes into making sure that it is in order and that all the legal attributes are attended to. This doesn't come just as a throwaway bill; they put some work into this thing. There were government resources that were used—the legislative library—to make sure that it was in order. I can only imagine the discussions at the legislative library. If I was one of them and I was reading this, I'd be saying, "What are they doing? This is what's happening?" It's a use of resources that I just have to call into question.

1550

That's our job, as members of the opposition—it is actually the job of members of the government—to say, "Really? Are we doing this at the right time? Are we doing this for the right reasons? Is there another way that we can help the people in the middle of a pandemic?"

Correct me if I'm wrong, Speaker—and I hope to be corrected by members of the opposition: I have not ever seen a health care professional, a virologist, an epidemiologist, anyone who is an expert in transmissible diseases and viruses and the vectors of the virus talk about the fact that we need to increase campaign donations to beat back the virus—crickets.

So in all good faith, as a conscious person, I cannot support this bill. I can't see a rationale around it. I can't see how it helps my community of Essex. I can't see how it helps your community. I can't see how it helps anyone's community to make sure that politicians can ask for more money. All I can see is that it is a mistake that the government has made in their infinite wisdom, that they should immediately pull back and withdraw. That's a free tip to members in this House at this time. It could be probably the best decision and course of action that you've ever taken.

Rest assured—as members of the opposition, it is our job to inform the general public of what the actions of this

House are on any given day—at the end of this bill, when we finalize it and the members stand in their place and vote for it, I will remind members of my community that in the midst of a pandemic, the government was focused on themselves and not on the fortunes of the people in our community.

I have exhausted as much as I can offer on this subject. I wish I didn't have so much to talk about. I know that my colleagues on this side of the House would probably like to take a shot at it as well. So with that, I'm going to share—

Interjection.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: No? I'm not going to share? I'm just going to collapse this thing?

Mr. John Vanthof: You're just going to sit down.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: I'm just going to sit down?

Interjections.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: They want me to sit down. But now that they want me to sit down, Speaker, I don't think I can. I think 15 minutes is just about enough time left on the clock for me to make sure that the government members know how egregious this bill is. If they haven't gotten the point so far, I am happy and ably skilled to transfer that information to you.

I've talked to a lot of businesses in our communities, and from the outset of the pandemic—the pandemic hit in March 2020. We all recall watching news releases where we saw something happening, and we didn't know what to do. But there were experts who were saying, “Get ready. Be ready. This is real. This is happening.” And there were warnings in the past to all jurisdictions to start to prepare for this. That's why we had a stockpile of PPE—millions of N95 masks that were ready for distribution to our health care facilities, to our long-term-care facilities to make sure that they could deal with an emerging novel coronavirus, or a novel pandemic.

But what we saw was a government at that time that stammered and staggered to respond, and none the more clearer than in their response for small businesses in our communities who, in March and April of last year, were saying, “Look, we're going to do everything we can. We're going to take government direction to shut down, but we need support.” At that time, New Democrats offered a plan. We gave you the political runway to leverage all the resources of the province to support our small businesses. We had a plan called Save Main Street. At that time, it was around a \$10,000 monthly grant to support small businesses in our communities to maintain a footprint.

That's the type of bill that we would have expected to see come out of this government: 10,000 bucks. I think \$10,000 makes a lot more impact in our communities, supporting small businesses that have struggled for the last year, nearly, than \$3,000 in the pocket of a politician, which this bill talks about. This bill increases the limit from \$1,600 to \$3,300; pardon me, Speaker.

When it came to priorities, last year New Democrats were talking about how we could help; how we could make sure that our people, our friends, our communities

are taken care of; how we can exhaust all options of this House—and they are many. This is where we create law. This is where we create policy, if you haven't figured that out by now. But the policy that we see here today on March 3, 2021, supports politicians in acquiring and accessing deeper, larger donations.

I don't even think I saw an initiative like this come out of the Trump administration, in the four years that he was the President of the United States. I don't even think we saw anything that egregious during that term. It is so incomprehensible, how out of touch this is, that I think every Ontarian should know, from coast to coast, from corner to corner, about what this House—taxpayer dollars are being used to debate today. Did that escape any of the conversation? That's my question.

Do we get a question and answer on this one, on the one-hour?

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, we do.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Oh, I can't wait.

Speaker, through you: Did any members of this House say, “Wait a second here. What are we doing? Is this really what we're doing in the midst of a pandemic? Are we changing the election law?” This has been highlighted as a priority of this government, to make sure that we can ask for more money prior to a campaign and during a campaign, and if we run as leadership candidates, we can donate more to our own campaign. These are the laws that you've focused on.

Speaker, I can't imagine that there has been a bigger waste of time. Where is the precedent, as well? Again, to contextualize it: during a pandemic.

Here's another question for you: What other provinces and territories have decided to use their time, in their various Legislatures, to make sure that they have increased the donation limits? I couldn't find any. If you can find one, fair enough; shame on them, too. But I can't imagine. I think Ontario stands alone in using the time that it has to make sure that they can increase the donation limit.

There are non-profit organizations in our communities, Mr. Speaker: United Way, Hiatus House—I'm looking to my colleagues.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Women's Place.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: The Women's Place

Mr. Joel Harden: The Causeway.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: The Causeway.

Mr. Will Bouma: Nova Vita women's shelter.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: The women's shelter. Give me another one.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Salvation Army.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: The Salvation Army.

Mr. John Vanthof: The Pavilion Women's Centre.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: The Pavilion.

Interjections.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: This is good. We're working together. How many other charities? Give me other non-profits.

Guess what they don't have access to. They don't have access to the same tax deductions that politicians have. They're limited. When they ask for a donation, they're

limited in the tax credit that they can offer people who donate. But politicians, in their infinite wisdom, have made the donations to politicians among the most generous.

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Interjection.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Why wouldn't you? Because, my honourable colleague from Sarnia, there are a lot more important people out in the real world, other than you, sitting here, debating how to get more money. That's my opinion.

But I'm telling you, I see a lot more good work happening in our communities from non-profit organizations that are supporting people with autism, supporting the homeless and filling in the gaps where this government has failed time and time again. Yet at the same time they're going to cash in—let's throw a bone to the non-profit organizations out there that are dying. Their donations have dried up. People are at their wits' end. People have lost so much. You would think that that's a point they might want to consider.

It doesn't talk about non-profit organizations being able to incentivize more donations for the good work that they do in our communities. This is strictly focused on politicians. It's something that I, in retrospect, had hoped I would never see in my career, because it reinforces the stereotype that the general public have of politicians, where they say, "You guys are all out for yourselves. You're just looking out for yourselves." Have you ever heard that before?

Interjection.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: You haven't talked to anybody, then, because that's what people say, and today you're proving it. You're putting it on the books. You're going to turn it into law. You've embedded it. This is your history. This is your legacy. You've codified it. So when we look back, in the midst of the pandemic, when we've suffered the greatest job losses in the history of this province, when the tenure of the Progressive Conservative Party sees the largest debt and deficit in the history of the province, when we see the largest amount of small business closures in the history of the province, under your tenure, these are all undisputable numbers—indisputable. You can't argue what I'm telling you.

Interjection.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Indisputable. Je parle en français des fois. Je « mix » mes mots. But it's indisputable. Your track record is pretty horrendous.

How do you deal with that? How do you try to fix that? What are your actions? Bill 254, the Protecting Ontario Elections Act, which makes sure that politicians can recover and receive \$3,300 as an individual donation limit, rather than, previously, the \$1,600, because \$1,600 wasn't enough. You have a pool of people—this is what I'm summarizing—that you can see you can tap into for a little bit more. That well is deeper than the law will allow, and now you're making sure that you can drop the bucket right to the bottom.

I've been around, again, 10 years. I don't see how that supports kids in schools. I don't see how it enhances ventilation in our schools. I don't see how it limits class sizes. I don't see how it adds educational assistants. I don't see how it adds mental health supports. I don't see how it supports people in long-term care. I don't see how it delivers the four hours of mandatory hands-on care that this government promised in 2025—not today, March 3, 2021. That's something for down the road. Our seniors, who have paid their taxes their whole lives, who have run small businesses, who have contributed to our society—many of them have served in our military, many of them have served in public service—are going to get help in 2025.

But politicians are getting help today, March 3, 2021. That's the priority of the Conservative government of Ontario on this day. And let it be forever known that the members in this House will stand in their place and support this government bill, regardless of the lack of help that it provides for their communities—but they have an option, and I've laid it out. I've given them a brighter, better path. I've given them an escape route. I've given them an emergency brake. They can put the brakes on this thing. It takes political will. It takes a conscience. It takes selflessness. It takes putting others above oneself.

Et je vous dis, monsieur le Président, c'est quelque chose dont nos communautés ont en besoins. Ils nous demandent que, dans cette Chambre, chaque jour, on pense à leurs besoins, qu'on pense à notre peuple, les besoins qu'on voit, qu'on connaît vont les aider et qui vont faire améliorer leurs vies.

That's what we can do. That's what we can choose to do.

That's what I wished the hour that I had to stand up and talk about today would have been—a bill that delivered support for folks who are disabled, for the marginalized, for folks on Ontario disability support, ODSP, for folks with intellectual disabilities, for our Community Living organizations. I would have loved to have seen a government say, "They need more help." We've identified people in our community—it seems like they've run out of people who they've identified who need help. It's unimaginable that they look out the door and look out the window of this building and don't see anyone who could use a hand, but they see themselves reflected in this legislation.

It's politicians who are going to get the hand. Instead of \$1,600 as a donation, they're going to get \$3,300 to support their elections campaign. Who's to say that once they get \$3,300 and if they get re-elected as a majority government again, the next bill that comes out of this government won't be bill 299 that says that we can increase the limit to \$7,000? Why not? Other places do it. They can do that. They have the power to do that. That's why we see this bill. But they also have the power to not do it. And my goodness, wouldn't it send a signal to our communities, who are in desperation, who need so much more and deserve so much more—wouldn't it send a message that we're here to help, we're doing the work that you sent us here to do, and we're focused on your

priorities? That's what I want to see. That's why I came here. I think that's what the members who are lucky enough to sit in this chamber came here to do.

I can't imagine that they're feeling any comfort with this bill; I look forward to hearing if they are. I really do look forward to hearing the rationale on the record. It will be great. I can't imagine that they believe that, at this time, on March 3, 2021, in the midst of a pandemic, this is the priority of this government; it can't be. It has to be different. We can do better. We need to do better. We owe it to our communities to do better. I know that the members across the way want to do better, and so I'm giving them that political runway to do that.

Take it back to your caucus and say, "Look, we've got to pull it away. It's the wrong way."

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

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you to the member from Essex for his hour-long speech on a couple of points—although he seems to have missed most of what is in the actual bill. Perhaps he missed the Attorney General's speech this morning that went through the various parts.

I'd just like to ask the member, because as part of this legislation—he was asking about timing. Well, perhaps he missed the special report of the Chief Electoral Officer on election administration in a COVID-19 time, where he is asking specifically for five more flexible advance election days.

Of course, you probably are aware that there's an election next June. So I would say the timing of this is important.

He also asked to have a committee that looks at technology in elections.

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Does the member for Essex not support the Chief Electoral Officer's request to make elections safer in the time of a COVID-19 pandemic?

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Yes, we could do that if it wasn't so egregious that you've piled in making sure that your campaign coffers, or any politician's campaign coffers, were overflowing because of the increase in donations.

Again, this is about priorities. This is about signals that you're sending to the general public. As much as you may think that you need to recover as much money as you can from people, as much as you think that your efforts are worthy, now is not the time. It is an egregious—

Interjections.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Order.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: —use of the time in this House. There are so many other measures that can increase participation, rather than increasing the donation limit.

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

Mr. Wayne Gates: I just want to know what's so funny, because right now in the province of Ontario, while we're debating this bill, people are dying in our long-term-care facilities—4,000 have died. You can agree or disagree with what I say, but they're our collateral damage, because we didn't protect them.

Take a look at the job loss. In my community, 40,000 people have lost their jobs, in tourism. Why aren't we talking about that? They have had to remortgage their homes. They've lost everything.

And what are we doing? We put a bill forward today to talk about raising donations for your party of up to \$3,300.

I ran four, five, six, seven, eight times. I lost seven times in a row. I know what it's like to raise money. But here's what I got when I raised money—I had 90,000 donors. Do you know what the average was from my donors? Twenty-nine dollars—

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

Mr. Wayne Gates: I didn't even get a question. That was quick.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Back to the member from Essex for your response to—

Mr. Taras Natyshak: I think I can parse out what the question is from the member from Niagara. The question is: "Really? Is this what they're focusing on, when 40,000 jobs in the tourism sector in Niagara and that area have been lost, without any measure of support from this province?"

We would love to see a bill that focuses strictly on tourism and the arts, which have been decimated during the pandemic.

What do we see? A bill that makes sure that politicians can ask for more money and receive more money from deep-pocketed donors. That's your priority. That's your legacy.

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

Mr. Toby Barrett: I know the member opposite really lamented the fact that we would take time to be debating legislation like this and really questioned why, during these times, we would spend time on democratic debate. I do remind the member, he actually debated for an hour.

You took that time. You took an hour to debate this legislation. I won't take an hour; I'll take maybe a minute.

I'm sure all of us have spent many elections as scrutineers. Elections can be fraught with fraud, with the allegations of rigging elections. The member for Essex need only look across the river—north, up the river. Take a look at Detroit. I remind you of what went on in Philadelphia.

My question is, would you not support any of the strengthening measures in this legislation to make our democratic process much more democratic as people—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you. To the member from Essex for the response.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: That's the first QAnon conspiracy question I've ever had to field in this House, Speaker, so I don't quite know how to answer it.

This Legislature does not deal with election laws in the United States or any jurisdiction outside of the province of Ontario. We only deal with issues in the province of Ontario.

Did I spend an hour talking about it? I spent an hour trying to convince my colleagues, through a democratic forum, that they're taking the wrong approach. They're

making the wrong decision. They should turn a corner, dump this legislation, and focus on helping people—rather than the focus that increases donations to candidates in elections.

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

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: I really want to thank the member for Essex for such an illuminating presentation. I think we all learned a lot from that.

I want to focus on one thing: Under the previous government, Conservative members railed against cash for access. They argued that money could control policy and it had to be scaled back. And in the midst of a pandemic, while people across this province are struggling, small businesses are struggling—when it comes to donations, 100 bucks is tough to put together—they're raising the limit for donations to \$3,300. And while people have struggled across this province, the richest among us—their base, their donors—have made over \$63 billion.

My question to the member from Essex is, what's going on? Why are they allowing the richest to put more and more money into politicians?

Mr. Taras Natyshak: This government prides itself on its big-ticket donors, big-value donors. They have not only been the beneficiary of some of the wealthiest people in the province, but they devised their policies around those interests. So I would say that's probably why we're seeing this.

I have to think about when we saw this government, last year, at the beginning of January, bring forward a bill to limit the increase of wages for public sector workers to 1%. So you get a 1% increase if you're a paramedic, if you're a nurse, if you're a teacher—if you're anyone who serves the public—who we now know are essential to the public safety of our communities. But it's okay to raise the limits that politicians can get almost 50%. That math doesn't work out for me.

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

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: I listened intently to the member's comments—I can't really say it was a debate.

I just want to say to the other member, who commented about laughing—as I recall, the only people who were laughing were the members and the leader of the official opposition, during question period. So I would remind the member to make sure their comments are on point.

Having said that, I think it is incredibly important that we are debating this piece of legislation. As an immigrant who comes from a terrorist government—a government that is an illegitimate terrorist regime; there is no democracy in Iran. It is one of our rights here in Ontario that we have a democracy. So to debate in this democratic Legislature the democratic process is so incredibly important. I find it insulting that the member is insulting this piece of legislation and saying that it's not important to debate democracy.

My question to the member is: Will the member support this piece of legislation, which strengthens the democratic

system in Ontario and makes sure that people who come here from other parts of the country have the—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Thank you. Back to the member from Essex for a final response.

Mr. Taras Natyshak: I thank the intervention and the questions from all of my colleagues.

Speaker, this bill, Bill 254, increases the donation to candidates for election in the province of Ontario—from \$1,600 to \$3,300. It increases the limit that leadership candidates can give themselves, from the current \$25,000 to \$50,000. It increases what the candidate can donate to themselves, from \$5,000 to \$10,000. All I hear about is the priorities of politicians in this bill. It's focused on politicians.

The question is, will I support this bill? I stand here today, Speaker, in front of you and all my colleagues—I have never been more proud to vote against a bill in my entire political career.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: As always, it's a pleasure to rise and speak on behalf of my constituents of the great riding of Davenport. Today, we're debating Bill 254, the so-called Protecting Ontario Elections Act.

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I have to say, Mr. Speaker, that when I ran in 2018 to be elected to this place, when I was making a decision about what I wanted to do as a next step in my life and my career and I really felt the need to serve my community, I could not have imagined that, of course, we would find ourselves in the middle of a global pandemic. But what I really find the most astonishing in this moment is that we would find ourselves in the middle of a global pandemic, with businesses in my community shuttered, with people being evicted from their homes and who lost their jobs in this moment, with thousands and thousands of people dying and sick, debating a bill, the main purpose of which is to increase the amount that wealthy people, let's be honest, can donate to politicians. I have to say that I would never in my wildest dreams have imagined that that's what we would be doing here.

I wanted to start there, because I do think that it's interesting that the other side is not putting up speakers. They don't want to talk about it, clearly. I think that's also very telling, because this government likes to talk about themselves, but on this issue, they don't seem to want to stand and defend their bill or speak to it at any great length, which I find bizarre. Also, it's strange because, clearly, there aren't a lot of pieces of legislation before us right now, so this bill really does speak to this government's priorities.

Let's talk about priorities. I was thinking, there was this quote, and I hate to quote grand things, but this is a quote from Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi said, "Action expresses priorities." In this moment, this government's actions—legislation like this—express this government's priorities in the middle of a global pandemic.

I have to say, I have rarely—and there have been some real doozies—seen this government, or any government,

really, so deeply out of touch with the priorities of the people of this province as they clearly are, by bringing forward this legislation. It is embarrassing. I am embarrassed to have to stand here and speak to this. I think it's appalling. I say that from the bottom of my heart. I would much prefer to be talking about a lot of other things, especially from the perspective of my constituents. Already I'm starting to get emails from people saying, "You've got to be kidding me."

What I don't understand about this government in this moment as well is that they really are feeding the cynicism out there. No wonder, because this legislation is about the most cynical and—I think the member from Essex said it—tawdry piece of legislation we've seen in here, and again, there have been some real doozies.

What is this legislation about? There was some mention over there on the other side about "Well, this is going to add a few extra advance polling days." Yes, that's true, absolutely. If they wanted to move that little piece along, I guess, sure. But to use this opportunity—what this really is doing here, the big bulk of this legislation, is to increase how many dollars the members opposite, the parties in the next election can access from donors, and they're driving it up from about \$1,600 to about \$3,300, so pretty much doubling it.

They're also increasing the amount that a candidate can donate to themselves. I have to say, I also was quite alarmed by that, and I'll tell you why. I have, throughout my political life, which—I was only elected in 2018, but for many, many years I was very deeply involved in volunteering and in community organizing, and particularly in trying to attract more women, more people from marginalized communities, more racialized people to run for political office. To increase the amount that a candidate can donate to themselves once again raises this bar. It says, "Wow. Do you know what? If you've got \$10,000 burning a hole in your pocket, this is the job for you." But it's going to be a whole lot harder for people who don't have that kind of cash to consider running, and I really do fear it will be a deterrent for many, many potential candidates. I find that really, terribly sad.

One of the other things that I've noticed, in just noticing that the government side isn't putting up any speakers here, is that this government seems to be eager to rush this through. When you talk about why put through legislation like this in the middle of a global pandemic, when people are dying, when businesses are shuttered, when—what was the number? I was looking it up the other day. Oh, yes, in January alone we lost 153,000 jobs in this province. At this moment, why would a government use this moment to put through such egregious legislation? And why would they not want to put up speakers to talk about that? Because it is indefensible. It is indefensible. They cannot defend it, and the reason they're doing this during a pandemic is because they want to slide it under so that maybe people won't notice, because people are so busy.

Yes, that's true. People are busy. They're busy trying to figure out how they're going to make it through, how they're going to pay their employees. They're worried

about how they're going to put food on the table. Many people who have been sick—and we don't talk about this enough, but many people who have been sick with COVID-19 have long-term health impacts, and we're going to be dealing with that probably for generations. And this government chooses, in this moment, to focus on election finances, and by the way, actually increasing the amount that people can donate, basically lining the coffers of their party.

This bill also includes some pretty, I would say, disturbing moves to silence critics, which has also been something that this government has attempted. And I get it: The Minister of Education likes to silence the youth voices who try to tweet at him and express their opinions about things. There's no consultation happening with any kind of legal stakeholders. The government likes to blame others. They don't like criticism, and they're prepared to shut that down in the most deeply undemocratic ways in this legislation.

We see the same sort of tendency happening, I would say, in Conservative governments across the country. I was reading this morning that that Mr. Pallister out in Manitoba is—I think it was 19 bills—bringing in 19 bills to be passed and not actually tabling them. So nobody in opposition and the public and the media can see the legislation. It's kind of hard to imagine that, Mr. Speaker, but their rules are allowing this, apparently. It's just so outrageous. They're using the excuse that they want to pass things quickly, so they don't want this debate about legislation.

Thank goodness at least we have the opportunity here to stand up and try to convince the other side and try to shed some light on some of the more egregious issues and concerns that we have. Because really, at the end of the day, that is what we are elected to do. We are not elected to just sit back and let government pass bad bills. We are elected to try to make things better for the people in our province. That includes having a fulsome debate. It includes raising the questions and concerns of the people of this province. I tell you, there are many, many issues in relation to this legislation.

Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Essex spoke a little bit about some of the issues that we could have been talking about in this Legislature. I want to reflect on that a little bit myself. People out there, as we've talked about here many times, are struggling. The NDP has tried to bring forward for all-MPP agreement some motions and some bills that would have given workers paid sick days, given long-term care residences enough staff to offer every resident four hours of hands-on care per day; motions that would have ensured that care home residents couldn't be denied access to their essential caregiver; motions that would have put eviction bans in place during an epidemic—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Excuse me. I appreciate the fact that mention is being made of what could have been in the bill, but I need to remind all members on all sides that the purpose of the debate this afternoon, today and always, is to debate what is in a bill—

not what could have been in a bill, but what is in the bill. I realize that there's a fine line. There's a fine line, so I will give some latitude to be fair, but I just want to remind the member, all members, of that as well, that we are debating the bill at hand, what's in the bill. Thank you so much.

1630

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So as I was saying, when we look at this bill and we consider what it is proposing to do, it's proposing to increase donations to political parties by quite a significant amount. What it could have been doing is looking, perhaps, at an equity strategy to put culturally appropriate plans in place to support disproportionately impacted communities in this pandemic. Perhaps this legislation could have considered how we might make schools safer, perhaps reducing class sizes or providing more in-school testing, and many other things.

The member from Essex mentioned as well that this legislation, this government, could be thinking in terms of priorities, perhaps about small businesses. I want to tell you about a business in my community, Houndstooth. The owner has recently learned after, gosh, two months waiting for a response on the small business grant that was supposed to be, he was told, maybe a couple of days—he's been waiting for two months. He just recently found out he's rejected because Houndstooth only opened in January 2020. He's wasted two months doing nothing but trying to track down where this funding and support was going to come from and what the holdup was. This is a business that will close. People will be laid off in my community, potentially.

We have had ample opportunity in this Legislature to bring forward legislation. We have brought forward ideas. Where has the government been? Expand the criteria so that those businesses can actually qualify. Help those businesses out. Create a senior's advocate. There are a thousand and one things that this government could be doing that the people of this province are asking them, desperately asking them to move on.

How many other jurisdictions, in this moment, in the middle of this global pandemic, have focused on raising donation limits? I'm curious. I'm not aware of one. Do you know why? Because it would be shameful. Because they would be laughed out—laughed out—of government. It's outrageous. I'm embarrassed, as I said, to have to stand here and debate this.

Because I can tell you, I work every day with organizations in my community, organizations like Aangen; like the working women's centre; like Sistering Toronto, who help so many of the most marginalized women in our community; Horizons for Youth, that provides shelter space for youth, who have had to reduce the number of young people that they can find shelter for. Now they're down to a quarter of the children and youth that they can usually accommodate, and they are getting desperate calls from youth every day, saying, "I need a place, I need to get out of the situation I'm in." And there's nowhere to send them.

Is this what this government wants their legacy to be? Because I find that so deeply shameful. If I could do

anything, if I had the power right now to do anything to help support those kids and those youth, I would be doing it. I find it absolutely reprehensible that this government would use this moment of all moments—of all moments—to increase that donation limit, that that would be their focus, that it would be on how to raise more money off of their big-time donors.

I was reminded, and I was thinking along the same lines as the member from Essex that it was back in, what, March—in March 2015. July, March 2015 was when the issue of the cash-for-access Liberal fundraisers of the previous government came to a real fore. You'll recall—the members opposite might recall this; some of them were sitting then—Premier Wynne had eight guests paying \$10,000 each for exclusive face time. I remember that. Three months before that, 22 big spenders spent \$5,000 apiece to be entertained by the ever-entertaining finance minister, Charles Sousa—

Mr. Mike Harris: Chef Sousa.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Yes. Some 150 people attended a very intimate gathering by the Ontario Liberal Party as well for thousands of dollars. This is the norm over there, we know, but in this case, this was really—

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Wrong party.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Yes, it was the Liberals, and as I recall, it was all of us who spoke out about it, and the laws were changed because it was so embarrassing and disturbing. But what's happening right now is that this government is setting things up to be able to benefit exactly the same way.

Because who attends those fundraisers? Let me tell you: construction firms who have lucrative government infrastructure contracts; electricity companies; pharmaceutical companies who depend on drugs being listed by that government. That's who pays the big bucks: those owners, those folks who have also, by the way, profited from this pandemic—not the people in this province who have lost their jobs; not the people who have lost their loved ones in long-term-care facilities; not the people who have been evicted from their homes because they lost their jobs and this government won't extend the eviction ban; not the small business owners who had to shutter, who are laying off people, or the small business owners who own properties and have seen their insurance rates just skyrocket. This government has done nothing to support them. Those are the issues that people in our communities care about.

I have to say, the one thing about this—because I know this government is going to pass this legislation, rush it through and hope nobody notices. But I can tell you one thing: I can't wait for the next election. I can't wait to remind every single one of your constituents in your ridings that you made it a priority during a global pandemic, while they were losing their jobs, to line your party coffers—

Interjections.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Oh, yes, that's right: in Sarnia. That's right.

I would like to say again, Mr. Speaker, that I just think this is the most shameful and egregious piece of legislation, and like I said, there have been some doozies.

I want to mention, just before we wrap, that I have seen how this government deals with their donors and the gifts that are given to donors by this government. We've seen it in the government agencies committee every week. We've seen people like Dennis Matthews, who's a VP at Enterprise, who was yesterday appointed to a board by this government. He's a former communications guy for Stephen Harper; he made the ads for them. He worked for the Conservatives. Yes, it's no big surprise that that person would be appointed to a cushy role.

We saw it with Mr. Queija, who was being appointed as vice-chair of the TFO, a non-francophone. But guess what? In fact, he actually said—I have to share this, because it was so outrageous. He shared with us during that committee hearing that his experience with the francophonie amounted to the girlfriend he had in university who was a francophone. We said, “Wow, you are definitely highly qualified to be vice-chair of the TFO.” Luckily, he made a decision to step aside after that. It was so embarrassing—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Excuse me. I'm going to ask—in my opinion, that particular portion of the debate—although you can say whatever you want, my job is to ensure that comments are relevant to the bill at hand, not what may have gone on in other areas or committees.

Thank you, and I'll let you continue.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was mentioning, these are all donors to the Conservative Party of Ontario, which is why I am also addressing them in response to this legislation, because these are the kinds of gifts that this government presents to those big donors.

Mr. Speaker, I've got to tell you: Again, as I started in my comments, when I was elected in 2018, I did not imagine that we would be in a global pandemic, and I sure as hell did not imagine that we would be here in this moment, in the middle of a global pandemic, while our communities were suffering, watching this government make a decision to line the coffers of their party at the expense of the many important things we could be doing and debating in this House.

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

Mr. Robert Bailey: It's a pleasure to rise in the House today and have a minute to comment. I've enjoyed the remarks from the member from Essex and the member from Davenport. I did want to ask, to get back to the bill—although I found a lot of the remarks quite interesting; I couldn't help but laugh.

1640

Anyway, one of the points in the bill is about striking a bipartisan commission to look at electoral equipment for voting in provincial elections. We would have members appointed from all the various parties that are registered. I would like to know if the member or her party could support that in this bill.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I thank the member from Sarnia-Lambton for that question.

I actually think the advance voting days, for example, are not a bad thing for us to be talking about. I just can't

understand why we're doing it right now. Obviously, we need to update our election laws, but do we really think that this is the time to be doing this, in this moment?

I wonder why the member from Sarnia-Lambton isn't here talking about job creation; about how we're going to kick-start our economy; about how youth, particularly, in our communities are going to be affected for a generation; and what this government's plan is to actually address those issues. I would think that should be the priority issue that our government would be dealing with at this time.

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

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I appreciate the remarks from my colleague from Davenport.

To the member from Davenport: I know that Mr. Natyshak, my colleague from Essex, spoke during his hour at great length about what was missing in this bill—the fact that the priorities of this government are on padding their political coffers, as opposed to supporting those who are experiencing homelessness, addressing the numerous violations that have led to almost 4,000 deaths in long-term care that they didn't follow through on or enforce. There were many issues that Mr. Natyshak, the member for Essex, spoke to during his hour, and I know that the member from Davenport was trying to do the same in her remarks.

I'm wondering if the member from Davenport could talk about how this helps her constituents in the riding of Davenport, or even across the province.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you very much to the member from Windsor West. I do appreciate that.

People in my community—what are their priorities right now? It's knowing that their children are going to be safe and secure in school, when they go to school, and how those children are going to be able to keep up and be supported in schools going forward, and whether this government will actually pay for that. It's how we support those small businesses that are shuttered, that are closing—and people being laid off. The job losses are a major issue. The mental illness issue, the crushing anxiety that people are feeling—supports in our community to address those issues. And, of course, all of those folks in long-term care who died, all of those people who have been sick—also, the long-term impact of COVID-19 on so many people, in terms of their health and the health of our communities.

I really do believe that we could be talking about issues that are so much more important and are certainly priorities not just in my community, but across the province.

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

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Mr. Speaker, it's very easy for members of the opposition to stand there and talk about how they're so outraged by political donations. And yet, when you look at Elections Ontario, you have third-party organizations and numerous unions that have donated, in totality, over a million dollars to the opposition there. That is money coming from faceless groups, unions and other

entities. So it's very easy for those members to stand there and talk about donations, because they're using backdoor donations to get to where they need to.

We want individuals to make a decision based on what each party stands for and based on their record.

The question is simple: Does the member opposite think it is democratic for corporations, pop-up political action groups and unions to be able to spend unlimited sums of money for as long as they can currently? Yes or no?

Ms. Marit Stiles: I appreciate the member's question. I really like the way she started that talking about how easy it is in the opposition. I loved that because—I've got to tell you, Mr. Speaker, as I said in my comments, there ain't nothing easy about this, standing up here and wasting our time talking about changes to elections laws in the middle of a global pandemic. And this member opposite wants to talk about big, bad unions? I want to say—

Mr. Taras Natyshak: Some gall.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Yes, you've got some gall.

At the end of the day, the member should probably go back and talk to the folks in Vaughan who put out those great ads last year with all the teachers in them—

Interjection.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Yes, the same folks who are developers, who are benefiting from government contracts, who are now going to be coming forward to line the party coffers of the Conservative Party of Ontario.

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

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: I just want to put it out there to the government member across: There are union members who are getting us through this pandemic across this province. They're on our front lines, and they're standing up for us every day.

Speaker, burying questionable things in legislation is something we've seen from this government from the get-go. This legislation is no different.

There are barriers that exist for people in this province—barriers to education, barriers to housing, and yes, barriers in politics.

This legislation seeks to allow leadership candidates of major parties to double the amount of money they themselves could put in. Who does that advantage? That advantages the richest among us to take leadership of parties. Is this the right way to go?

Ms. Marit Stiles: I want to thank the member for that excellent question.

You're going to be shocked. I don't believe it's the right way to go. I agree with you. As you mentioned, the limits now are going to be doubled for those running in leadership contests—to be able to double the amount they can contribute to their own campaign. Even just your average candidate will now be able to donate to themselves, from what used to be \$5,000 to now \$10,000.

As I said in my comments earlier, I really believe that if we are going to increase the participation, for example, of women and people from racialized communities, so that we could actually continue to increase the diversity of this

place in every respect, we are going to need to make sure that more people can actually run.

This legislation makes it more and more difficult and increases the barriers to running in an election.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Diversity—hello?

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Order, please.

Further questions?

Mr. Mike Harris: The member from Davenport might want to forget that there is an election in a year from now, because I think she's probably a little bit worried that they're going to be bumped down to third-party status by the Liberals. That's probably why she doesn't want to talk about it too much.

The federal government, Alberta and British Columbia have all put in place a framework of administrative penalties to drive compliance with their respective elections legislation. Ontario's Chief Electoral Officer has asked for those same powers to ensure political actors comply with election laws here in Ontario.

Will the member opposite and their party support the work of Elections Ontario to enforce their laws, by supporting this legislation?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you to the member across the way for that question. Yes, I do find it interesting—I find it interesting that the member would raise the next election in this moment, because 4,000 people died in long-term-care homes in this province, under this government's watch. That's what this government should be focused on. That's what I'm focused on in this moment, and that's what my colleagues in the opposition are focused on in this moment—not in lining the election coffers.

I know that in the next election, I will be measured against my ability to push this government into action to reform long-term care, and so will you.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further questions? You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Joel Harden: To the member from Davenport: I asked the Attorney General this morning about whether he was upset with Ontario Proud's relationship with the PC Party, given what we now know about what they've done to our politics. I didn't get an answer. Do you care to comment?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you very much for that comment, the member from Ottawa Centre. I share those deep concerns.

I think if we were going to talk about anything in this moment politically—

Interjection.

1650

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Member from Carleton, come to order.

Response?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you.

To the member from Ottawa Centre, thank you for your question. I appreciate that. I am deeply concerned.

Interjection.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): I will show latitude.

Ms. Marit Stiles: It's hard to hear because the member opposite is screaming so loudly, Mr. Speaker.

I know that they get their backs up when you ask questions like that, don't they, member—because at the end of the day, this is exactly the direction that this party is taking things in. These are exactly the kinds of political allies this government feels comfortable with. And if this legislation is—

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

Being, apparently, the referee in here this afternoon, I show latitude, because I want to make sure that members are heard in debate. If I feel, as the referee, that other members may not be showing quite the respect that is needed for everyone to be heard, then I choose to allow some extra time—in which case, that is exactly what I did, in fairness. If it happened to anybody else, probably, looking at the situation, I would do the same, to be fair. Is everyone okay with that?

Interjections.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): I don't need applause, but it's okay. No, I'm just kidding.

Further debate?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: It's a real pleasure to stand today as the representative of the people of Ottawa–Vanier. With the limited time that I had to actually go out in my community and consult with them as to their views on this bill, I was quite surprised to see that the people took the time to quickly turn around and write to me to say that they wanted to be heard about what is being proposed in this bill. So my following remarks will be reflective of what I heard.

The first thing that I heard was, “Why now? Why is this a priority in the middle of a pandemic that we have not resolved yet? What is the government's agenda?” That's what I heard—and some other substantive comments that I'll share.

The fact that so many of my constituents reached out to me is an indication as to their interest in the matter. In fact, one of the most common conversations I've had on the street with the neighbours and people in general is about elections and how people have lost interest and are being cynical about politicians, and how it always seems to be about money.

Bien que je comprenne que les campagnes électorales coûtent de l'argent, je préférerais de beaucoup pouvoir consacrer mon temps avec mes électeurs à discuter des enjeux qui les intéressent, plutôt que d'essayer de les convaincre de financer ma campagne.

On to the principles we should be talking about—electoral integrity. Electoral integrity is a foundational principle of our democracy, and it should be protected. It ensures that the laws and policies that are important to the citizens are properly reflected in our work.

As we debate Bill 254, we must keep in mind the true meaning of democracy: a system of government by the whole population. Alors que nous débattons le projet de loi 254, nous devons garder à l'esprit le vrai sens de la démocratie : un système de gouvernement par l'ensemble de la population.

When we can change the rules surrounding elections, we must ask ourselves if the changes that we are proposing are objectively improving participation and representation in our electoral process. The fundamental question is very important, because we as legislators are tasked with shaping the rules that govern our own elections. This dynamic creates a responsibility for this government to only make substantial changes to our election laws after extensive consultation with the public and after being sure that these changes are valuable, important and meaningful to improve public participation.

La participation du public dans notre processus électoral, que ce soit au niveau de leur participation dans nos consultations alors que nous développons notre plateforme électorale, que ce soit en participant activement à une campagne électorale, ou simplement pour sortir voter la journée d'élection, devrait faire l'objet de réflexion profonde, une réflexion qui implique le public et surtout les jeunes, qui semblent avoir perdu confiance et sont désillusionnés par rapport à l'intention du gouvernement de véritablement adresser les enjeux qu'ils trouvent importants.

Due diligence requires public conversation. Are the proposed increases to maximum campaign contributions really the most effective way to draw the participation and the interest of the public? To know for sure, we should open up the dialogue.

Nous devons faire particulièrement attention à ce que les lois électorales, qui régissent la légitimité de notre démocratie, ne soient pas modifiées de manière aussi unilatérale. Cela donne clairement l'impression que l'opinion et les intérêts du public et de nos experts électoraux ne sont pas des considérations. Cela ne saurait être plus éloigné de la vérité. Je crains que ce projet de loi n'ait été déposé sans avoir fait d'abord l'objet de consultations publiques approfondies, car je ne pense pas que nous puissions être sûrs de trouver cet équilibre correctement sans entendre abondamment les intervenants publics, les experts électoraux et les groupes de citoyens qui représentent la pluralité de l'Ontario.

Étant donné que nous sommes toujours au milieu d'une crise de santé publique, nous devrions être particulièrement attentifs à offrir de réelles opportunités à ceux qui le désirent de partager leurs pensées, leurs préoccupations et leurs recommandations sur la façon dont nous pourrions améliorer de manière plus significative l'engagement du public avec le processus démocratique.

First and foremost, we need to develop a better understanding of our independent Chief Electoral Officer's suggestions about this legislation. When this bill goes to committee, and I hope that it will, I would request that the Chief Electoral Officer be given at least an hour to provide his thoughts on this bill as it currently stands and that we meaningfully listen to his concerns and recommendations.

I would also ask that the minister appear before the committee so that we can better understand how transparency, accountability and public engagement will be improved by these changes.

This should be followed by a broad series of consultations with public stakeholders at committee, where we take the time to truly understand public concerns and recommendations about where this legislation could be improved.

In short, we can't afford to rush this without listening to stakeholders and being confident that we are actually driving equitable and inclusive participation in our democratic process.

We should also use this as an opportunity to explore and consider other models of financing our elections, such as the per-vote subsidy model, and ask how we can better encourage people to participate in our elections in our democracy. This might include exploring how we can better bring elections to our communities—such as by allowing more advance polling options for Ontarians who must juggle their civic responsibilities with their personal priorities.

Given that democracy is not merely an occasional check of a box but an ongoing relationship between electors and legislators, we must also give due consideration to how we can better engage the electorate in our ongoing work here at Queen's Park. Ensuring proper and meaningful opportunities for the public to participate at committee and truly influence how we legislate is especially important for this very reason. The public should feel that legislation is not produced arbitrarily but rather as a result of their own policy concerns and priorities.

If this bill is rushed through without such consultation, it will send a strong and a wrong signal to Ontarians; that being that government doesn't really care about what they think and what's important to them.

A healthy and inclusive democracy requires equitable and transparent electoral laws that encourage the public to participate in our democratic process. These laws are central to the legitimacy of our work here at Queen's Park and should not be changed lightly or without full and extensive public input. It is important that we work in collaboration with each other and with Ontarians across the province's diverse communities to improve and protect our elections. This means that we must seriously and thoughtfully evaluate how the proposed changes will affect the transparency, equitability and public engagement in our elections. It is critical for the public's engagement and trust in our democratic process that we do so.

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

Mr. Jim McDonnell: There are a few comments that I'd like clarification on. I know the member opposite talked about the need to not make changes lightly. I'd remind her that these changes have been made on recommendations from the Chief Electoral Officer who, in the mid-term of each term, puts out recommendations for the next election. The next election is soon upon us, and it's only fair to the members of this House and the public to make sure the rules are well-known. Some of the changes we talked about—the lowering of donations—were really because the Liberals, in the last government, got caught with their

hand in the cookie jar, large corporate donations were being made, and a rushed job trying to make it look like it was everybody's problem.

1700

The question would be how they think that this is not—we're following the regulations or the recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer—why it's not appropriate to do that now?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I'm not sure I truly understand the meaning of your question. It's not very clear that the Chief Electoral Officer was consulted, and if he was, I would reiterate my request that he appear before a committee to confirm that and to hear about the extent of the changes that are proposed and whether they are sufficient in really addressing a meaningful way to improve our electoral system and process. Again, I just want to confirm that with him, because I haven't seen that anywhere. There's no trace of this, and I think he has to be an important piece of this legislation.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: I want to thank the member for Ottawa–Vanier for her comments. I found them quite helpful. I do want to ask whether or not the member thinks that this legislation, the increase in donation limits, is going to open the door for the same kind of cash-for-access events we saw under previous governments. I recognize that the previous Liberal government did address that eventually, but this is what we're trying to head off. I wondered if the member would comment on whether she thinks this opens the door for that kind of behaviour again.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you to the member for Davenport for this important question. Because it is an important question, it's not something that should solely be decided by this chamber. That's why I emphasized so much in my remarks that we need to go out and consult with the people: Is this right amount? Is this the right thing to do? Is this the right formula?

We've been hearing about people in the community talking about elections and how it is so controlled and that we're not listening to people, and there's just a disinterest because everything is about money; it's not about discussing policy. I would rather have the time with my constituents, going on the street and door-to-door, talking about policy and what's important to them, as opposed to trying to entice them to contribute to my campaign. I really wish elections were about something else than money, because that's what we're here for. We're here to talk about policy, to represent the people in our riding, not to try to make money.

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

M. Stephen Blais: Merci, à la députée d'Ottawa–Vanier, pour cette présentation et pour votre leadership dans la communauté d'Ottawa durant cette année très difficile avec la COVID.

D'après vous, dans votre temps comme députée, quelles sont les priorités les plus importantes que vous

avez entendues des résidents d'Ottawa–Vanier dans le contexte de la COVID-19?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Merci au membre d'Orléans pour cette importante question. Encore une fois, ça revient à ce qui est important. Les gens ne veulent pas entendre parler d'augmentations de contributions présentement, ou de changements au niveau du processus des élections. Ce qui est important c'est de sortir de cette crise sanitaire qui met tout le monde dans des situations difficiles. On a besoin d'adresser les besoins dans nos écoles, des gens qui sont sur le programme d'appui pour les personnes handicapées qui cognent à ma porte—pas physiquement, mais au téléphone, par courriel—pour dire qu'ils n'arrivent pas à vivre avec dignité. Il y a tellement d'enjeux qui sont reliés à la COVID qui nécessitent notre attention plutôt que de parler des élections.

Encore une fois, pour ceux qui ont pris la peine de m'écrire pour me parler de ce projet de loi-là, tout le monde me demande : « Pourquoi est-ce qu'on parle de ce sujet-là à ce moment-ci, alors qu'on n'est pas sorti de la crise? » Mettons nos efforts, notre temps et notre argent pour s'assurer qu'on sort de la crise.

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

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you to the member from Ottawa–Vanier for those comments. I enjoyed the debate this afternoon. One thing I wanted to bring up—no one has talked about it a lot, but I think it really affects a number of people in this Legislature—is the improvements we're going to make. It's something we've talked about in Ontario for a long time, and that's creating a more level playing field for all elected independent members. That's something that this legislation will do, between fundraising, constituency associations and voter subsidy. I think that's something that, in my opinion, the independent members should appreciate. I'd like to hear your comments on it.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you for the question. Of course, there is really good stuff in this bill, and actually, anything that can improve access or facilitate the participation of our electorate to elections and makes elections a fair field to play in, I will say, is a good thing. I didn't speak to this because I don't have any concern with that. What I spoke to are the issues that are of concern to me, and it's the lack of consultation.

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

Mr. Wayne Gates: I want to continue on the line from about an hour ago, and it was the Liberals that actually gave year-over-year funding to Niagara for our MRIs, which has been taken away by the PCs. We currently have 400 days' wait time to get an MRI in Niagara. That's what I'd like to be talking about.

What about the Moderna vaccine? Just the other day, one of the members in here called me a liar, even though public health, Niagara Health and everyone said that we were getting 5,600 doses of Moderna. That's what I'd like to be talking about today.

I know you want me to give a question, because I didn't get one out last time and I was very embarrassed by that. So I'll make sure I'll get one out.

This is to the Liberals. I know you're relatively new here, but were you aware that the Liberals, when they were in power, were having \$10,000-a-plate dinners, which I wasn't able to attend because I don't have \$10,000?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you for the question. I wasn't able to attend either because I don't have \$10,000.

But to be honest, I think that I might have overheard about it and it was noise to me, because at the time, I was a school board trustee, and my energy, my time and my focus was really about trying to make education a better system. So what was happening on that front was not my priority, and I think that the only people who do care and pay attention to those kinds of questions are just a particular group in the community.

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

Mr. John Fraser: Well, Mr. Speaker, there's nothing better than a good family feud. And like most family feuds, things are flying all over the place. It's like Thanksgiving dinner, and there are buns flying across—lots of stuff coming back and forth.

But at the end of the day, it's actually about trying to increase people's participation in elections, which we all know isn't what it should be. There are some measures in this bill that do that, but there are a lot of other measures that don't address that and may impact that adversely. I know the member mentioned having the Chief Electoral Officer come for an hour at committee. The government needs to make that commitment to do that.

But having said that, do you have any comments on the expansion of advance polling days and—

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): To the Speaker, please.

Mr. John Fraser: —maybe what else we could do to increase participation in elections?

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): I was missing some of your words, so I wanted to make sure I heard it all.

Back to the member for a final response.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Of course, this is also a very important aspect of how we can improve access to elections. If we want the youth and the people who are not so mobile and the people who maybe don't have an interest right now, we need to make sure that going to vote and taking part in elections is easy. Any means that we can improve to give them access is good. Maybe we should innovate and maybe consider online voting to make sure that we have a lot of people—I know that on my election day last year, almost a year ago today, there was a big snowstorm, so the challenge for people to get out and vote was very significant, and the participation rate was reflected. So anything we can do to facilitate the participation of the public is something to be considered in a positive manner.

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

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

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

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you, Speaker. If you seek it, you'll find that we have 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.

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PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BUSINESS

SAFER SCHOOL BUSES ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 POUR DES AUTOBUS SCOLAIRES PLUS SÉCURITAIRES

Mr. Harris moved second reading of the following bill:

Bill 246, An Act to amend the Highway Traffic Act /
Projet de loi 246, Loi modifiant le Code de la route.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Pursuant to standing order 101, the member has 12 minutes for his presentation. Then, at the end of the 12-minute opening remarks, the debate will proceed with members of the various parties speaking in rotation, and I will recognize members while remaining seated. Each party is allotted 12 minutes, and independent members are allotted five minutes in total to debate this item of business. The debate proceeds in a clockwise rotation.

Therefore, I now turn it back over to the member for your comments.

Mr. Mike Harris: It's a real honour to rise here this afternoon to speak to my private member's bill, the Safer School Buses Act. This day has been a long time coming for the school bus operators and safety advocates who I have been working with closely for nearly a year now.

I'm sure almost every member in this chamber knows by now that I have five kids. I talk about them a lot, and I know they're watching right now back home in Kitchener–Conestoga. They are always top of my mind. The number one responsibility as a parent is to keep them safe and healthy. As a government, child safety needs to be at the centre of all we do, so that parents like my wife and I can have the confidence that when our kids go off to school every day, they will return home safe and sound.

So when it was brought to my attention during a meeting with Student Transportation Services of Waterloo Region that there was a safer warning system for school buses that is being used—and this is astonishing, Mr. Speaker—everywhere else in North America except Ontario, I made it a priority to bring forward legislation that would change this.

Right now in Ontario, a school bus manufactured after January 1, 2005, is required to have an eight-lamp overhead system. When a bus driver is approaching a stop, they use those red signals to indicate that they are slowing down, and those lights then continue to flash when the doors open and the stop arm comes out. So even when the

bus is not at a complete stop, those red lights are flashing. This means if you're approaching a bus and stop like a responsible driver would, if the bus is not at a stop yet, it will drive right past you with its red lights on.

So let's say a commuter on their regular route home passes a school bus with flashing red lights approaching a stop at the same stop they stop at every day. They have it in their heads that despite the red lights, the bus is still going to drive past them, only today they meet at a slightly different spot on the road and the driver passes the bus with the red lights flashing. I don't think I need to tell you or anyone else in this House what that could mean if a child was getting off or on the bus.

For anyone who hears that scenario and thinks it could never happen, Student Transportation Services of Thunder Bay estimates there are approximately 30,000 driver blow-bys every day in the province of Ontario. In Waterloo region, Benoit Bourgault, general manager of our local transportation consortium, estimates that it's well above 100 a day just in Waterloo region, and unfortunately the vast majority go unreported. That's 100 times in my community where a child could have been on the road when a driver is passing that school bus.

This is quite obviously a problem, Speaker, and we have part of the solution before us in this bill today. Let's replay that scenario where the driver meets the school bus, only this time, instead of the bus driving by with red lights flashing, it passes with amber lights flashing, so they know the bus is slowing down and coming to a stop. Then, when they meet further up the road, the red signals are flashing, giving that driver a clear indication that the bus is now stopped and that students could be getting on or off that bus. It may be only the difference of a coloured light, Mr. Speaker, but it does mean a world of difference. This is how it works, like I said, in every other province and every state in the United States. Ontario is the only one still holding on to the old all-red system.

We've known for almost 20 years that the amber-red colour combination is more effective. In 2002, Transport Canada published a study comparing the all-red and amber-red systems. What they found was that the amber lights performed more consistently at slowing vehicles down and reducing stopping violations when compared to the all-red system. In fact, they were 11% more effective at slowing approaching traffic down and yielded almost a 2% reduction in driver blow-bys compared to using the all-red system.

To add, amber lights performed remarkably better when they were in multiple lanes of traffic, reducing speeds by 64%, over the 15% from the all-red system. That study back in the early 2000s recommended that all school buses in Canada use the amber-red system. Even back in 1983 and 1990, reports recommended that Ontario transition to an eight-lamp system that is consistent with the United States—which, of course, we've done, Mr. Speaker. Since 2014, all other provinces have gotten on board, with Newfoundland being the final one to make the transition.

One of the questions I've been asked repeatedly since introducing this bill has been, why has Ontario held out

with making the switch? I have to say, Mr. Speaker, I actually don't have an answer for it. I've spoken with operators, industry representatives, all of which are supportive of making this change and have been expecting it for years now. I've heard off-hand about operators even purchasing amber lenses for when that transition was going to come down the pipe. And yet, this is the first time we are seeing this legislation to make this change.

I want to take a moment to read a section of a letter from John Chapman, the president of Newry Coach Lines in my neighbourhood the member for Perth–Wellington's riding. John starts by calling this change long overdue and continues by saying, "Every day there are vehicles who pass a stopped bus somewhere here in Ontario. The bus drivers lose a little of themselves every time that they have a blow-by. We get attached to the children we transport every day, and we wish no harm to come to them. Simple effective opportunities to improve their safety should just be common sense and not take 20 years to implement." I thank John for those kind remarks, and I full-heartedly agree with him. Anything that can make kids safer today should not take 20 years to do, Speaker.

Bill Sharp, president of Sharp Bus Lines—I'm sure you've seen their buses on the road.

Mr. Will Bouma: They're in my riding.

Mr. Mike Harris: They're a major operator in my riding and, of course, the member for Brantford–Brant's, as he so eloquently pointed out.

He wrote me to say, "As the only remaining jurisdiction in North America without amber-red lights, it is time to acknowledge the shortcomings of the current system... We further consider any barriers to the implementation to be diminutive in comparison to the possibility of lives saved"—I think that's a pretty impactful statement, Speaker—"and the increased chance that students are delivered to and from school safely each day."

So what are some of those potential barriers? Let's talk about those for a minute: a mere \$200 per bus, including labour, to change a lens cap. That's all it is, Speaker: \$200 to make our kids safer, with Stock Transportation even estimating it could cost as little as \$90. There should never be a price when it comes to the safety of our kids, but even still, this is a minimal cost when you consider the safety improvements it could make.

There are over 800,000 students who take a school vehicle every day in Ontario; 31,000 of them take the bus in my riding and in Waterloo region. It would be unconscionable not to do everything we can to get them home to their parents safe every night. In fact, taking a school bus is indeed the safest way a child can get to and from the classroom, and we're talking about a new warning system that would make those buses even safer, Mr. Speaker, because accidents do happen. It happened in my riding back in 2012, when a young girl was struck getting off the bus outside of St. Agatha. It happened where I grew up, just outside of North Bay, in the small town of Mattawa. I imagine a few members here may be familiar with Let's Remember Adam. This campaign was established in memory of Adam Ranger, who was hit by a

driver who blew past flashing red lights 21 years ago—like I said, just outside the town of Mattawa. In his memory, his family have become fierce advocates for school bus safety and have been beating down the door on amber lights for years now.

To quote Adam's older brother Pierre: "Child safety should be everyone's number one priority. The kids riding these school buses are our children, grandchildren, siblings, nieces, nephews and friends. We need to make school buses safer. The amber system is part of the solution to make that happen."

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It may have taken us 20 years to make this change, but it is not too late. Acting today and supporting this bill means making the school buses safer for my son, for his friends and all students across this province.

This change has the support of law enforcement from across the province as well. I've had multiple conversations with local officers from Waterloo Regional Police Service. I've had conversations with several OPP detachments, and the Police Association of Ontario has even reached out to support this bill. This includes the Temiskaming OPP detachment, who pointed out that the drivers in Ontario are currently only required to stop when the red lights are flashing and the bus is at a complete stop, and that of course is under regulations under the Highway Traffic Act.

I want to touch on that for a moment because this has been used by drivers who have been issued a provincial notice of an offence for illegally passing a school bus who will say that the bus wasn't completely stopped when they passed it. The red lights might have been on, but the bus was still moving down the road. Unfortunately, this more often than not will get them out of those charges for passing a school bus, if you can believe it, Speaker. Passing this bill would ensure that drivers could no longer use that sorry excuse to not be held accountable for putting a child's life in danger.

There are so many more reasons that I can think of why the members of this House should support the Safer School Buses Act, but I want to close out by recognizing a few of the people who have been extremely helpful over the course of the past year while I put this bill together.

Locally, I want to thank again Benoit Bourgault, the general manager of student transportation services in Waterloo region; Acting Staff Sergeant Mark Hammer of the Waterloo Regional Police Service; as well, of course, as Pierre Ranger, North Bay OPP Constable Shona Camirand and Megan Odd of Nipissing University for sharing data, research and statistics that they've collected with my office; and all my local operators for making themselves available to meet and discuss this very important issue.

I'm going to wrap it up here just by saying that at the end of the day, this is the whole reason why myself and I'm sure many of us are here as members in this chamber: It's for our kids and the entire next generation, Speaker. We are all here because we want to make this province a safer place for them. We don't always agree on the best

way to get there, but we can all agree that keeping them safe should be our number one priority. If this bill can stop just one car in this province from blowing by a school bus, then it will have all been worth it.

With that, I look forward to the comments from all members here today.

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

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: It's always an honour and a privilege to rise in this House. More than 830,000 children in Ontario today rely on school buses to get them to school and back home at night, and we must do everything we can to keep them safe.

The issue is a very personal one to the countless parents and guardians across this province, including myself. This legislation would give school bus operators until September 2022 to install amber-red light warning systems on all school buses manufactured after 2005. These lights would warn drivers when a school bus is about to stop.

New Democrats have always worked with families and safety experts to advocate for measures to promote student safety, and I want to thank the member for bringing forward this important legislation and for making a strong rationale for why amber-red warning lights on school buses will help further promote children's safety. These warning lights are mandatory in most other jurisdictions in North America, and it would certainly make sense for them to be mandatory in Ontario as well. In fact, the Ontario School Bus Association has fought to make these lights mandatory for years.

Every day, in many parts of our province, school bus drivers pick up students on roads and highways where there are only two lanes and traffic moves at a high rate of speed. Drivers following behind are not usually aware of the locations where school buses will stop, so flashing the amber-red warning lights before the bus comes to a stop will let drivers know that the school bus is going to stop.

We, on this side of the aisle, support measures that will help keep our children and youth safer. We supported regulations to allow cameras on school bus stop arms to be used to catch and prosecute drivers who pass school buses while children were boarding or being let off a bus. When a private member's bill was introduced to make it mandatory for all students on school buses to wear seatbelts, we supported that as well, and I will be supporting this legislation.

There are also a number of measures that we've been advocating for that would help to make children, their families and all Ontarians safer during this pandemic. We have continued to advocate to reduce the number of children allowed inside school buses by 50% so that physical distancing can be maintained at all times.

Recently, my colleague the member for Davenport introduced a motion to establish a pandemic recovery school safety and advisory group that would include public health experts, students, teachers and education workers, unions and school boards. This motion would have ensured that the safety advisory group would be a part of a safe schools plan that fully implements the advice

and recommendations of our public health experts. This would include a plan for comprehensive asymptomatic testing in schools across this province. It would also include a plan for appropriate funding so class sizes could be capped at 15 students, and to ensure there is adequate ventilation in our schools and learning spaces.

Asymptomatic testing in schools will help us to understand where the cases are and will allow us to take preventive action to slow down further spread.

Just this week, a school in Scarborough was forced to close down because it reported at least four cases of variants of concern. Right now, more than 13% of Ontario's schools have reported at least one case of COVID-19.

After months of NDP advocacy calling for asymptomatic testing in schools, this government finally announced that they would be supporting this measure.

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: What does that have to do with school buses?

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: I think the safety of our children and many different factors are important to all of us. I hope the member across would agree. I have already said that I will be supporting this.

As of February 26, just under 7,000 tests had been conducted in all of Ontario. This is short of the government's stated target. Making sure our schools have proper ventilation can help to ensure airflow in our classrooms. This could also help to slow down the spread. Right now, in far too many classrooms, the only option to improve ventilation is to open the window. This is not a very good option, especially when temperatures are soaring below zero.

Speaker, I would also like to speak about the parents and guardians of these students. So many of them are essential workers who cram onto crowded buses on their daily trip to work to feed and shelter their families, in my community and in many others. Without paid sick days, many are forced to make the impossible choice between going to work sick so they can earn a paycheque to pay the bills, or staying home and wondering where the money to put food on the table or to pay the rent is going to come from. Many families in my community live in small, multi-generational households with school-aged children in these homes, and it is impossible to maintain physical distance.

Speaker, at least three different variants of concern have been confirmed to be present in Ontario. In their latest modelling data, the COVID-19 science advisory table reported that the next few weeks would be critical when it comes to understanding the impact the variants will have on overall case counts.

Many students in my community and across our province come from single-parent households. These parents may be essential workers who will have to miss a paycheque in order to stay home with their child if they are sick or if their school happens to be one of the 23 schools across our province that are currently shut down due to a COVID-19 outbreak. Paid sick days and care days must be made for families in such situations so they can

stay home with their children without having to worry about missing a paycheque.

Again, as I've said earlier, the safety of our students and of the residents of this province is certainly not a partisan issue.

I will be supporting this legislation, and I once again thank the member for tabling this. This will save lives, and I think this is something we can all be proud to support.

I would also like to encourage my colleagues on both sides of the House to support the other measures that I've mentioned here today. Public health experts have stated that all of these measures can play a critical role in protecting our children and ensuring that our schools can remain open safely.

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

Mr. Stephen Blais: I'd like to thank the member from Kitchener–Conestoga for bringing this very important issue forward to the Legislature today. He is absolutely right: As adults, our most important job in life is to make sure that our kids, the next generation, are properly cared for and kept safe.

So thank you very much, sir, for your work.

Road safety and the protection of school buses and those who ride on them has been a priority of mine for a long time, and it continues to be. In my previous life as a city councillor in Cumberland ward, I spearheaded the I Stop, You Stop campaign, which was specifically focused on targeting those who dangerously pass stopped school buses and put the lives of our children at risk each and every day. We led the way in Ottawa on deploying an innovative camera system—the first in Ontario to use automated enforcement to catch these violators. The system uses a system of sensors to detect when the school bus is stopped, its lights are flashing and the stop bar is out. The system uses four cameras to ensure that the violation is captured from many different angles, to provide absolute certainty of the violation and to ensure that it can be held up in a court of law. Much like a red-light ticket, the registered vehicle owner receives the infraction.

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During the last two months of the pilot project in Ottawa, a single bus captured an average of five violations each and every school day. That's one bus, in a city of one million people. Imagine that system deployed across the entire city in Ottawa. Imagine, if deployed across our biggest city, here in Toronto, just how many violations would be captured and, hopefully, just how many violations in the future would end up being stopped.

Of course, I'm not the only member of our Liberal caucus who has fought hard to improve school bus safety over the years. Ontario Liberals have a proven track record on the issue.

Just two years ago, my colleague from Don Valley West proposed Bill 56, the Keeping Students Safe on School Buses Act, which would make mandatory a three-point seat belt system on school buses. Bill 56, if passed, would make a big difference in keeping our kids safe. I'd

like to thank the former Premier for her continued leadership in pushing forward on this issue and all issues relating to children and safety. Unfortunately, the bill seems to be held up in committee. Given the government's renewed focus on the importance of school bus safety, I would hope that they would bring this bill to the attention of the committee and give it the attention it so deserves.

I certainly support the intentions of this bill and, again, congratulate the member for bringing it forward. He did address the economic issue related to the installation. I agree: \$90, \$200 on its own doesn't seem like a lot. But when we consider COVID-19 and the impact it has specifically had on many school bus operators—perhaps not the big ones, but the small, locally owned, family-run school bus operators, like ML Bradley in Navan, which services my riding in Orléans. With a fleet of dozens of buses, that cost can add up.

Should this bill pass—and I hope that it does—I hope that the government will consider a funding program to allow school bus operators to make this modification, as well as the modification to deploy the automated camera system across the province, to ensure that we can make our school buses safer for our kids, properly fine those who break this law and ensure that all of our kids can go to school and come home again as safely as possible.

Thank you for the bill.

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

Hon. Jill Dunlop: I'm honoured to stand in the House and support my good friend and colleague the member from Kitchener–Conestoga and his bill, the Safer School Buses Act, 2021.

I want to start off by saying a huge thank you to all the school bus drivers in Ontario. These are individuals who do not always get the recognition they deserve, but they do great work in keeping our kids safe every day. We need to help them in that effort to protect kids across Ontario, as well. Transporting children in all different weather to different communities and on different terrain is hard enough as it is, but we as drivers don't need to make it more difficult for them.

School bus safety is personal for me, as well, as we've heard from all members speaking here today.

I'm going to tell you a personal story. This story is about a little girl named Jill Dunlop. Jill was the fifth of six children born to Glen and Marie Dunlop. The Dunlop family owned a small plumbing business in Coldwater. Every school day, the bus picked up and dropped off five local elementary-aged children in front of the school on Highway 12, including Jill and two of her other siblings.

February 6, 1970, was a beautiful, sunny winter day. It was a Friday afternoon. Jill was just seven years old. That afternoon, her mother, Marie, left the store early to do the end-of-week banking in town while the other staff stayed behind to close the store later. Her father, Glen, was usually back early from doing service calls but was held up that afternoon. Some say that was the only Friday that Glen and Marie were not at the store together on a Friday afternoon.

Jill was the first child to exit the school bus that afternoon. A driver coming behind the bus didn't see the stopped bus until it was too late. Rather than rear-ending the school bus, he made the life-changing decision to go off beside the bus. The car struck Jill and took her life, there, in front of her siblings and a bus full of young children. Life was never the same for the Dunlop family again. This had a devastating impact on not only her parents and siblings, but on all the individuals, including the staff, who witnessed that event that afternoon. Five years and one day to her death, the first granddaughter to Glen and Marie was born, and her name is Jill Dunlop.

Speaker, 30,000 drivers illegally pass a school bus every single day. As we know, that could be your child, your niece, your nephew, your grandchild or a friend crossing the road when that happens. Reducing that number is important in making school buses safer and, ultimately, further protecting our children, and I think this legislation does exactly that.

If passed, this bill would transition the province to the amber-red dual-lamp warning system. As the member mentioned earlier, drivers already know what the amber and red lights mean when coming to stoplights. Making the change to an amber-red dual-lamp warning system is a common-sense step. All other provinces have changed their system. When it comes to protecting our children, our province should not be lagging. Ontario should join others to reduce the potential for stopping violations and, ultimately, protect more children.

I would also like to applaud the member for working with the Minister of Transportation and the Minister of Education. While this is a straightforward plan, it does require a collaborative approach, and I'm happy to see other ministers supporting this practical legislation. I am proud to be part of a government that is focused on protecting our children and keeping them safe, and this legislation is just one more example of our government doing just that.

Speaker, again, I want to say that I am proud to support this bill and the member for Kitchener–Conestoga's work to further protect children across Ontario. I hope all members will support this legislation.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: It's an honour to rise and join the debate on Bill 246, the Safer School Buses Act, put forward by the member for Kitchener–Conestoga. I'd like to start by thanking the member opposite for bringing this issue forward and by stating my support for this bill.

Safety in our schools and on school buses, road safety, has been top of mind for me and for many others here, I know, not only during this pandemic, but certainly since I arrived at the Legislature.

I want to stop, as well, and thank all the bus drivers out there, who work so hard—frankly, for very little. They work so hard for our kids, for our communities, for their safety, and we really do appreciate them and will continue to work really hard to advocate for more and better protection for them.

I believe that all members can agree that our students' safety is imperative. That's without question. Those in the official opposition have already and have always supported anyone calling for increased safety in school transportation systems, like the Ranger family and those from groups like the Ontario School Bus Association.

This bill brings forward an important policy change that will make our roads safer for the children who use our school bus system. We know that the amber-light system is a good step in ensuring safety, and this change is definitely long overdue. As advocates for this change have said all along, the amber-light system is more intuitive, as it resembles the stoplight system. It makes it more apparent to drivers when a student is on the road and when it's safe to go. With Ontario being the only jurisdiction in North America without the amber-light system in place, there really should be no question that this change is something that we need. As we see incidents of distracted driving and people rushing on the road, we should be taking all steps necessary to prevent accidents of this nature. The amber-light system gives drivers a clear indication of when it's safe to pass—an important step in protecting our students, certainly. That's why I am supporting Bill 246—because it will bring an important safety measure finally into legislation.

However, I would be remiss if I did not note that this bill also sheds some light on the most significant of issues, which are the funding structures within our school transportation system. Since the start of this pandemic, students have had to take overcrowded buses to overcrowded classrooms, risking their safety and causing infection to spread throughout our school system. There has been an unfortunate lack of funding and initiative from this government and from previous governments to ensure that our students remain safe.

Ontario's student transportation funding is just simply not based on need; it's decided on historical data and information for each board. That means that the funding model does not account for important factors such as enrolment, such as geography, such as the number of special-needs students or safety hazards that are related to transportation.

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Even before this pandemic hit us, the funding that we had in place for our schools and our school transportation systems had been stretched super-thin. It has jeopardized, I believe, student safety.

As a former school board trustee, I can speak from experience of the issues that boards have to grapple with and the difficult choices they have to make, which I think ultimately come down to inadequate funding from the province.

When we look at student safety, we need to look at the whole picture and stop taking these piecemeal, stopgap measures.

That said, I'm going to support a piece of legislation that increases safety for our students, 100%, but I'd like to see more. That's why I have called on this government many times to cap capacity on our buses during this pandemic. While I support this bill and agree that it's an

important step, I want to see the government step up and show that they care about our students' safety.

This government should show its commitment to this issue through Bill 56. It may seem like 2018 was a lifetime ago, but I remember debating the bill that was brought forward by the member from Don Valley West, the Keeping Students Safe on School Buses Act. It was unanimously passed in this House, but we are still waiting on this government to bring that bill to committee. Both Bill 56 and Bill 246 call on this government to take real action to ensure the safety of our students, and I'd like to see these changes in our legislation. I don't want to see them sit and wither away, never get to committee, never get back here and never become law.

While these policy changes are on important step, as I've said on numerous occasions, they need to be backed up with a commitment to funding increases so that they can be implemented without any kind of compromise. Otherwise, what we continue to do is throw more responsibility onto school boards, and school boards that are already stretched incredibly thin are left to make other more impossible choices. So anything like this has to be accompanied by a significant commitment to funding and, I would argue, a rethink of how we fund student transportation.

We also need to address safety on our buses in this moment. I do want to end my comments today by reiterating our calls to reduce the capacity on buses during this pandemic. I have heard from many, many bus drivers over the last year—certainly, since the fall, as they were getting ready to start moving students around in the middle of this pandemic. I've heard from drivers who will talk about how confused they were. They were looking for clarification, because they were getting all these directives but no real clarity about whether they were supposed to come up with the measures, the PPE etc. themselves, as individuals, and how they were going to do that and how they were going to afford that—where they were being forced to make decisions about how to lay out the students in their buses.

We know, as well, that there was a rise in the number of profiting companies that put in place little taxi programs and stuff so that those who could afford it could hire private transportation for their kids to get to school, so they wouldn't be on those buses. That's really no choice at all, Mr. Speaker.

Again, I'm happy to support this legislation. I'd like to see the government take this a few steps further. Otherwise, we risk the safety of these remarkable students.

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

Mr. Will Bouma: Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise in support of the private member's bill that my friend and colleague from Kitchener–Conestoga has brought forward today.

I have running through my mind the speech that our colleague from Simcoe North brought. The problem when you're in the emergency services, Mr. Speaker, is that these stories put pictures into your own head, and they

come back. I shouldn't be this emotional, so I apologize to the House.

But I am struck by the fact—and I heard it from the member from Humber River–Black Creek, and I heard it from the member from Davenport and I heard it from the member from Orléans—that we have the opportunity to really change things here in the province for the better, especially when we all work together. That's why I love private members' business so, so much: because we can bring those issues forward that are not just important to our constituents, but we can bring forward issues that are important to every single person in the province of Ontario. That's why I commend my friend from Kitchener–Conestoga for bringing forward this little piece of—it's just a little thing. We have heard it's not enough; maybe it could be more. That's fine. We have to say those things. Those are the places we put ourselves into by our party affiliation and where we sit in this House. Yet we have the opportunity to just do something good here this afternoon, something simple, so that one more family doesn't have to have another funeral.

I've been there. I've been there with 2,400 gallons of water sitting behind me, with the red lights flashing, trying to stop a transport truck and having to jump out of the way. He just blew right on by me. There was an accident up there in the fog—and getting on the radio and saying, "Hey, there's an 18-wheeler headed right for you guys. You'd better get him slowed down." People have difficulty paying attention to those simple things, which is why we now have blue lights on our fire trucks in the county of Brant, just to give that extra little bit of colour.

My friend quoted the statistics. It's really, really simple. This is what the rest of North America does. We can do this here. In fact, you told me all buses were manufactured with amber lights on them, and they actually have to be taken off and have red lights put on them for the province of Ontario, because we're the only jurisdiction that doesn't. For just 90 bucks a bus, we can fix it. My friend Bill Sharp says, "Let's just get it done," and he's happy to do it—Sharp Bus Lines from my riding.

I know the Minister of Education wanted to say a few words yet, so I'm going to cut it off, but I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to hear the debate on this bill. Let's just do this little piece of good together.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Further debate? I recognize the Minister of Education.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you very much, Speaker. I appreciate it.

I want to rise and thank the member from Kitchener–Conestoga for his leadership not just as a parent, but also as an activist and advocate for the safety of children in this province.

In this role as minister, but also as a parliamentarian, representing many young people in York region, I will say that support for the Safer School Buses Act is critical at this time.

It was over 21 years ago that we heard about the story of Adam Ranger, hit by a truck and killed as he stepped off a school bus. That tragedy, I think, has informed many of us and rests with us, knowing that his legacy continues

through the work that his family carried on through the Let's Remember Adam campaign, calling for enhanced school bus safety.

The Ranger family is making a positive difference through their advocacy—as, I believe, is the member from Kitchener–Conestoga—but Speaker, they are still living with the loss of Adam. In the words of Adam's brother Pierre, “I often wonder what kind of man he would be, what he would do for a living, what his job would be. But I'll never ... find out, because someone didn't stop for the bus lights.”

Every day 800,000 students across Ontario ride a bus to go to school and come back. Shockingly, every day, 30,000 drivers illegally pass a school bus. It's frightening. In the words of Adam's mother, Debbie Ranger, “If you run a school bus light, you can be 100% certain there's a pedestrian there. And not only a pedestrian there, but a child.”

Speaker, I want to be clear that school buses have an excellent safety record in this country. Statistics from the National Collision Database show that children going to school by school buses are 72 times safer than those travelling to school by car, and 45 times safer than those who walk or cycle. Every day in Canada, over 50,000 school buses transport over two million children to and from school, resulting in an estimated 792 million trips. Nearly all of those trips pass without incident, thanks in part to the hard-working men and women who serve the needs of families by driving our school buses, and we're grateful to them.

But we owe it to the Ranger family and to every family to do something within our power to make school buses safer: safer for our children and for the parents who send their kids to our schools. Very simply, my colleague's bill would require school buses manufactured after 2005 to be equipped with an amber-red dual-lamp warning system that would provide motorists with more notice that would help them stop and better indicate that a student is on the roadway.

Pierre Ranger strongly supports the reform. I think that's important, in the context of keeping the legacy of his brother alive.

In the context of our funding for transportation, it's so critical that we continue to be there for rural and remote and urban communities across Ontario. I'm proud to be part of a government, this government, that has the largest increase in transportation funding: well over \$1 billion, the highest investment in transportation for schools in Ontario history; \$70 million more in the pandemic for cleaning and safety; an additional almost \$45 million for our school bus staff in the driver retention program. But as we've noticed, and as we note, every other province has made this switch. While we may lead in investment, they've made this switch from red to amber and red lights. There's absolutely no reason for us not to adopt such a sensible precaution.

Speaker, this bill is a common-sense approach to making our roads safer and protecting what matters most, which is our children, the future of Ontario. Improving road safety for students and motorists makes sense. I

believe it's time to make it happen. Let's take some action to prevent future accidents by passing this bill.

I again want to thank the member from Kitchener–Conestoga for putting students first in this Legislature and through this legislation.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): There being no further debate, the member from Kitchener–Conestoga has two minutes for a reply.

Mr. Mike Harris: I didn't know this was going to conjure up so much emotion here this afternoon. I just wanted to give a wholehearted thank you to everybody, obviously, that has participated in the debate here today. I also want to give a big thank you to my staff, who worked very hard on getting this bill together. We've done almost a year of consultation with all of the different folks and organizations that I mentioned earlier, so thank you for everything you guys have done to put this together. I couldn't have done it without you.

Speaker, this is something, honestly, that should have been done a long time ago. We're the only jurisdiction in North America that does not use a dual amber-red system. I don't think we need to belabour the point here anymore, but this is something that we need to get done, and I assume that we're going to see this pass second reading here today. I'm just really looking forward to really doing some good things. As the member from Brantford–Brant said, it's not often where we can work together bi-partisanly and really do some meaningful things for the people here in the province of Ontario.

I also wanted to thank you, Speaker, for your advocacy as well in helping move forward and advancing everything that you've done with the stop-arm cameras. You've been a big advocate and were a large part in getting that through, so we're looking forward to continuing to work with municipalities to see more and more of those cameras. I know the town of Mattawa, where the Ranger family is from—I believe they have all their buses now outfitted with stop-arm cameras.

I'm going to cede my time now. I just wanted to say thank you wholeheartedly again to everybody who has helped put this together.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): The time provided for private members' public business has now expired.

Mr. Harris has moved second reading of Bill 246, An Act to amend the Highway Traffic Act. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? Carried.

Second reading agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): Pursuant to standing order 101(i), the bill is referred to the Committee of the Whole House, unless the member has another committee he would like to send it to.

Mr. Mike Harris: Justice policy, sir. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Rick Nicholls): The member is directing it to justice policy. Is that the pleasure of the House? Agreed.

All matters now relating to private members' public business having been completed, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock.

The House adjourned at 1754.

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