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CONTENTS / TABLE DES MATIÈRES

Monday 8 March 2021 / Lundi 8 mars 2021

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BUSINESS / AFFAIRES D'INTÉRÊT PUBLIC ÉMANANT DES DÉPUTÉES ET DÉPUTÉS

Internet access / Accès à l'Internet

Mr. Michael Mantha	11833
Mr. Jamie West	11835
Mr. Sol Mamakwa.....	11835
Mme France Gélinas	11835
Mr. Dave Smith.....	11836
Mr. Mike Schreiner.....	11837
Mr. John Vanthof.....	11838
Mr. Michael Mantha	11838
Vote deferred.....	11838

ORDERS OF THE DAY / ORDRE DU JOUR

Protecting Ontario Elections Act, 2021, Bill 254, Mr. Downey / Loi de 2021 sur la protection des élections en Ontario, projet de loi 254, M. Downey

Mr. John Vanthof.....	11839
Mr. Norman Miller.....	11840
Mr. Jamie West	11840
Mr. Robert Bailey	11840
Mr. Ian Arthur.....	11840
Mr. Will Bouma	11841
M. Michael Mantha.....	11841
Second reading debate deemed adjourned	11842

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS / DÉCLARATIONS DES DÉPUTÉES ET DÉPUTÉS

International Women's Day

Ms. Jill Andrew.....	11842
----------------------	-------

International Women's Day

Mr. Stan Cho.....	11842
-------------------	-------

Walter Gretzky

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky	11842
-------------------------	-------

COVID-19 response

Mr. Lorne Coe.....	11843
--------------------	-------

International Women's Day

Ms. Jennifer K. French.....	11843
-----------------------------	-------

Sexual violence and harassment

Mr. Stephen Blais.....	11843
------------------------	-------

International Women's Day

Ms. Goldie Ghamari.....	11844
-------------------------	-------

COVID-19 immunization

Ms. Doly Begum.....	11844
---------------------	-------

Human trafficking

Mr. Mike Harris	11844
-----------------------	-------

International Women's Day

Ms. Jane McKenna.....	11845
-----------------------	-------

Walter Gretzky

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky.....	11845
------------------------	-------

QUESTION PERIOD / PÉRIODE DE QUESTIONS

COVID-19 immunization

Ms. Andrea Horwath.....	11845
-------------------------	-------

Hon. Doug Ford	11845
----------------------	-------

Hon. Monte McNaughton	11846
-----------------------------	-------

COVID-19 immunization

Ms. Andrea Horwath.....	11846
-------------------------	-------

Hon. Monte McNaughton	11846
-----------------------------	-------

Land use planning

Ms. Catherine Fife.....	11847
-------------------------	-------

Mr. Parm Gill	11847
---------------------	-------

International Women's Day

Mr. Mike Harris	11848
-----------------------	-------

Hon. Jill Dunlop.....	11848
-----------------------	-------

Land use planning

Ms. Jennifer K. French.....	11848
-----------------------------	-------

Mr. Parm Gill	11848
---------------------	-------

COVID-19 response

Mr. Roman Baber.....	11849
----------------------	-------

Hon. Jill Dunlop.....	11849
-----------------------	-------

Broadband infrastructure

Mr. Mike Harris	11850
-----------------------	-------

Hon. Laurie Scott	11850
-------------------------	-------

Education funding

Ms. Marit Stiles.....	11850
-----------------------	-------

Hon. Stephen Lecce.....	11851
-------------------------	-------

Personal support workers

Mr. John Fraser	11851
-----------------------	-------

Hon. Christine Elliott	11851
------------------------------	-------

Pipelines

Mr. Mike Harris	11852
-----------------------	-------

Hon. Paul Calandra	11852
--------------------------	-------

COVID-19 response

Ms. Sara Singh	11852
----------------------	-------

Hon. Jill Dunlop.....	11853
-----------------------	-------

Ms. Jill Andrew.....	11853
----------------------	-------

COVID-19 immunization

Ms. Mitzie Hunter	11853
-------------------------	-------

Hon. Christine Elliott	11853
------------------------------	-------

COVID-19 immunization

Mr. Faisal Hassan.....	11854
Hon. Christine Elliott.....	11854

Child care

Mme Lucille Collard.....	11855
Hon. Jill Dunlop.....	11855

Housing

Ms. Jessica Bell.....	11855
Hon. Doug Downey.....	11855

Private members' public business

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott).....	11856
------------------------------------	-------

DEFERRED VOTES / VOTES DIFFÉRÉS**Internet access**

Motion negated.....	11856
---------------------	-------

**REPORTS BY COMMITTEES /
RAPPORTS DE COMITÉS****Standing Committee on Estimates**

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott).....	11856
Report deemed received.....	11856

**INTRODUCTION OF BILLS /
DÉPÔT DES PROJETS DE LOI****Battle of the Hatpins Day Act, 2021, Bill 258, Mr. Bourgooin / Loi de 2021 sur le Jour de la bataille des épingles à chapeau, projet de loi 258, M. Bourgooin**

First reading agreed to.....	11856
M. Guy Bourgooin.....	11856

Viewer Discretion Act (Images of Fetuses), 2021, Bill 259, Mr. Armstrong, Mr. Kernaghan, Ms. Sattler / Loi de 2021 sur les envois sous pli discret (images de fœtus), projet de loi 259, Mme Armstrong, M. Kernaghan, Mme Sattler

First reading agreed to.....	11857
Mr. Terence Kernaghan.....	11857

Stopping Harassment and Abuse by Local Leaders Act, 2021, Bill 260, Mr. Blais / Loi de 2021 visant à mettre fin au harcèlement et aux abus commis par les dirigeants locaux, projet de loi 260, M. Blais

First reading agreed to.....	11857
Mr. Stephen Blais.....	11857

**STATEMENTS BY THE MINISTRY
AND RESPONSES / DÉCLARATIONS
MINISTÉRIELLES ET RÉPONSES****International Women's Day**

Hon. Jill Dunlop.....	11857
-----------------------	-------

Pipelines

Hon. Bill Walker.....	11858
-----------------------	-------

International Women's Day

Ms. Laura Mae Lindo.....	11859
--------------------------	-------

Pipelines

Ms. Peggy Sattler.....	11859
------------------------	-------

International Women's Day / Journée internationale des femmes

Mme Lucille Collard.....	11860
--------------------------	-------

International Women's Day

Mr. Mike Schreiner.....	11860
-------------------------	-------

PETITIONS / PÉTITIONS**Internet access**

Mr. Percy Hatfield.....	11861
-------------------------	-------

Abortion images

Mr. Terence Kernaghan.....	11861
----------------------------	-------

Workplace Safety and Insurance Board

Mr. Dave Smith.....	11861
---------------------	-------

Human trafficking

Mr. Will Bouma.....	11861
---------------------	-------

OPPOSITION DAY / JOUR DE L'OPPOSITION**Workplace safety**

Ms. Andrea Horwath.....	11862
Ms. Jane McKenna.....	11864
Mr. Michael Coteau.....	11868
Mr. Faisal Hassan.....	11868
Mr. Mike Schreiner.....	11869
Ms. Andrea Khanjin.....	11869
Ms. Doly Begum.....	11872
Mr. John Fraser.....	11873
Mr. Kevin Yarde.....	11873
Ms. Sara Singh.....	11873
Mr. Ian Arthur.....	11873
Ms. Rima Berns-McGown.....	11874
Mr. Terence Kernaghan.....	11874
Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens.....	11874
Ms. Suze Morrison.....	11875
Ms. Peggy Sattler.....	11875
Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong.....	11875
Mr. Jamie West.....	11875
Mr. Percy Hatfield.....	11876
Mr. Tom Rakocevic.....	11876
Ms. Laura Mae Lindo.....	11876
Miss Monique Taylor.....	11877
Mr. Michael Mantha.....	11877
Mr. Gurratan Singh.....	11877
Mme France Gélinas.....	11877
Ms. Andrea Horwath.....	11878
Motion negated.....	11878

ORDERS OF THE DAY / ORDRE DU JOUR

Concurrence in supply

Hon. Paul Calandra.....	11878
Ms. Catherine Fife	11879
Mr. Michael Parsa.....	11885
Mr. Wayne Gates	11887
Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto	11888
Mr. Stan Cho.....	11889
Votes deferred.....	11892

Protecting Ontario Elections Act, 2021, Bill 254, Mr. Downey / Loi de 2021 sur la protection des élections en Ontario, projet de loi 254, M. Downey

M. Michael Mantha	11892
Mr. Norman Miller	11892
Ms. Catherine Fife	11893
Mr. Mike Harris	11893
Mr. Wayne Gates	11893
Mr. Will Bouma.....	11894
M. Gilles Bisson	11894
Second reading debate deemed adjourned.....	11895

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Monday 8 March 2021

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Lundi 8 mars 2021

The House met at 0900.

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

Prayers.

PRIVATE MEMBERS'
PUBLIC BUSINESS

INTERNET ACCESS
ACCÈS À L'INTERNET

Mr. Michael Mantha: I move that, in the opinion of this House, the Ford government should develop a COVID-19 Internet strategy that focuses on rate relief for increased Internet usage in northern and rural communities, removes the provincial portion of the HST from residential and small business users, and helps ensure that no Ontarian loses access to Internet service during the pandemic.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I am pleased to recognize the member for Algoma–Manitoulin to lead off the debate. You have 12 minutes for your presentation.

Mr. Michael Mantha: It is always an honour to take my place and speak on behalf of the good people of Algoma–Manitoulin, particularly on today's discussion, which will bring faster, reliable and affordable Internet.

Today, I am bringing forward a motion that focuses on three main themes. First, I'm calling on this government to develop a strategy that will offer rate relief for increased Internet usage in northern and rural communities. It's no secret that we don't have many options when it comes to Internet providers, and services can be very limited depending on where you live.

It wouldn't be so bad if prices were competitive. But unfortunately, some people have to pay hundreds of dollars a month in Internet costs—and that's not an exaggeration. Costs were already high before the pandemic, but now that people have no choice but to use Internet to continue working or studying, it becomes very difficult not to be forced to spend that extra money.

Some members in this House must be thinking that I'm exaggerating, but I am not. I have seen those bills, and many of those calls and concerns come through my office. Throughout this year, my office has regularly received calls and emails from people with insane Internet bills.

In many other parts of the province, where you have healthy competition between telecommunication companies, you can find a good deal for unlimited Internet. You can easily find it for under \$100—some as low as \$70. But

for too many people in northern and rural communities, that's just an impossible dream.

It's actually very frustrating to see this government constantly re-announcing broadband funding. Some announcements are even recycled from the Liberal days—not surprising, but yes, frustrating.

My colleagues and I from the official opposition keep sending all those letters asking many questions and highlighting those high costs, and nothing really comes of it. This government keeps repeating how committed they are to connecting Ontarians to Internet, but again, nothing happens. People can't wait any longer—not my constituents, and I can wait no longer, Speaker.

The CRTC in 2016 said that high-speed Internet was essential—2016, Speaker. That's quite a while ago. Communities on the north shore of Lake Huron and on Manitoulin island are developing their own local network. Wiikwemkoong First Nation is doing the same. The Dubreuilville project is also well under way. There's also a group out of the Ottawa region, EORN, that is also pushing Internet connectivity in their area.

But why has it become the responsibility of municipalities to connect their residents and communities to Internet? Why have both federal and provincial governments failed people in northern and rural communities? Why is it the responsibility of underfunded communities to support their citizens in that way, and why are they already doing a better job than the province? Again, I'm not shocked.

The increasing need for better Internet connection is nothing new, and consecutive Liberal and Conservative governments knew telecommunication would not invest in rural and northern communities because there's not a critical mass of customers that would justify making the important investment. So why didn't the government step up, knowing all of that? New Democrats have been asking for broadband investments for many, many years now, Speaker.

Not having proper broadband is a brake to the economic development of northern Ontario communities and rural communities. We are much more in a remote area and isolated. We need Internet to renew our communities and keep businesses alive. This Conservative government agrees in principle that broadband is an essential service, and I'm glad we can agree on that. They've actually voted in favour of the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane's bill, the Broadband is an Essential Service Act. But that was last fall, and it moved to the committee stage, and right now nothing is happening and it's collecting dust on a shelf.

Why is the government moving so slowly? Is it not urgent enough? How do we—after waiting long enough to receive the same basic service that urban centres and southern Ontario have enjoyed for probably over a decade now. New Democrats believe Internet is an essential service, and therefore it is the responsibility of the government to ensure that all people have access to affordable and reliable Internet service in communities that have not been included in the expanded broadband network.

This need is more real than ever with the pandemic still raging on. After multiple lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, people are frustrated not to have basic Internet and at an affordable cost. People have no choice but to use overpriced Internet services that are lower quality. People have to continue to work, study, see their doctor and connect with family and relatives. That's why I'm calling on the government, in the spirit of equitable access to essential services, to develop a strategy aimed at rate relief for people in northern and rural communities who are paying far too much for Internet right now because they have no other option, Speaker.

We've seen many other similar programs being developed throughout the last year since the pandemic started with people. This government has even adopted a similar strategy that was copied from the Liberals before them to keep hydro rates artificially low. Rate relief would help people afford their Internet costs, because right now, too many families have to limit Internet consumption not to pay too much. Obviously, unlimited Internet is almost never an option in rural and northern communities. Would you really want to limit your Internet consumption when you have two children at home who have to do e-learning because of an outbreak in their school or because we had to go into lockdown once again? Would you really want to limit your Internet consumption when the only way to keep your business afloat is to transfer operations online? Would you really want to limit your Internet consumption when you fall ill and the only way to see your doctor is online? I don't think anyone here wants to worry about how much it's going to cost them at the end of the month, in the middle of a pandemic, to ensure they keep having Internet.

0910

Speaker, in addition to rate relief, my motion also calls on the government to take out the provincial portion of the HST on Internet bills. This would allow for an immediate 8% reduction on rates, which many people in this province really need. This government could offer rate relief overnight if they wanted to. Considering that Internet is an essential utility, we don't think this is a wild idea. We've asked for similar measures in the past, with natural gas and with hydro.

Immediate help: That's what people are looking for. I'm glad that the Minister of Infrastructure presented a new bill supporting broadband and infrastructure expansion, but that's not going to help anyone right now. I'm glad we've pushed the government enough on broadband issues that it's still enough on their mind to present legislation, but that should have been done years ago. This should have been done in the first bill that they would have

introduced, instead of remodelling Toronto city council or paving through the greenbelt.

I want to share with this House the story of the Maltais family from Goulais River, just outside of Sault Ste. Marie. Their primary Internet usage is for work and for school. They try to keep personal and social media use to a minimum and use WiFi outside of their home when possible. They have also resorted to purchasing movies and television series on DVD and Blu-ray to avoid using their Internet data. All in all, they try to keep a very careful eye because they know their Internet is very limited and going above their limit will actually cost them. Their options: There's a Bell Mobility hub; there's also a Rogers wireless Rocket Hub; there's the Xplornet satellite Internet; and there's the Starlink satellite Internet—all in the hundreds of dollars, all with overrun charges, and all with HST costs in addition to their monthly bills. These options are very limited, and they will all end up costing a lot of families and businesses who need Internet now more than ever.

Since January, they were able to secure new, affordable cell phone plans, adding 28 gigs per month on top of the 60 gigs per month they have with their provider, and thankfully, their two boys are old enough to understand the limitations they have to implement while saving their gigs. During the month their two boys were doing e-learning from home, they often ended up paying an additional \$20 to \$50 a month on top of their fees, plus HST, to compensate for the overcharges on their Internet. These overcharges were incurred despite the fact that they frequently walked down to their schoolyard, which is approximately two kilometres away from their house, to access the WiFi from their schoolyard. The unfortunate reality is that some people just can't afford to keep paying these crazy Internet bills. Month after month, the costs keep going up.

The third and final part of my motion is that the government needs to help ensure that no Ontarian loses access to Internet services during a pandemic. Just as no one should have lost their hydro or received a disconnection notice in the middle of winter, no one should lose their Internet connection in the middle of a pandemic because of our reliance on the essential services that it provides to each and every home and to our businesses. To be able to work or study or stay in touch with people these days, you need Internet. It's not a luxury. When families like the Maltais—and they're not the only family across this province who experience these forces, these challenges and these hardships in order to keep their kids to continue e-learning from home; to continue with their business; to continue with their employers, working from home.

Speaker, I hope this House understands the importance of this motion. I want to take the time to reiterate the points of the motion: It's to deal with the higher Internet costs and to develop a strategy for northern and rural communities, to provide overall rate relief. People need help at this time. This government can step up and take the immediate HST off of home Internet use. That's an immediate 8%, and also that we stop and we make sure that Internet connections continue for people while we're

in a pandemic. Speaker, we can do something today. Let's do it.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Jamie West: I want to thank the member from Algoma–Manitoulin for this motion. It's a very important motion, as he had explained.

I want to talk for a minute—I was looking at different stats, and I know I can't pull the page up because it would be a prop, but I was looking at broadband Internet coverage availability across Canada. It shows the broadband availability on a heat map, and Ontario basically looks like somebody with a 5-o'clock shadow. All along southern Ontario, there is a large dark colour showing lots of broadband opportunity and connectivity. In northern Ontario, as you go farther north, areas like Sudbury are fairly good because of the large urban centre, but as you go farther north, basically you can't see any colour at all. That's the reality for northern Ontario, that you don't have those choices.

As an example, Speaker, this morning, Nicole from my office just sent me a text: "We don't have Internet today." Last week, we didn't have Internet for two days. I can hit the ISP with a tennis ball from my office. We lost Internet for two days; I don't know how many days today. We lost Internet about six times since October, and that's not unusual in the north.

Last summer, Speaker, I had Zoom meetings. We had over 300 Zoom meetings with non-profits and businesses. I did it from our camp in southern Ontario—those are cottages—using my in-laws' Internet. I had one three-hour Zoom meeting. I used their capacity for the full day. I spent over \$60 of their money in one Zoom meeting, and we had to pay in to get more gigs for it, and that's not affordable.

Right now in Sudbury, Collège Notre-Dame is closed because of COVID cases. They closed down the school to protect the students—the right move. Many of those students, though, will bus in from more rural areas such as Noëlville, where our camp is. How do these parents afford to have their kids in school? How do they afford the connectivity? If one three-hour Zoom call used up your entire quota for the month, how will you have your kids be in school for two weeks remotely? And those are the people who have access to Internet; there is a bunch of people who have no Internet at all.

The final thing I want to talk about, because I want to give time for other speakers, is business. Very often here, the sort of buzzword is that we "move with the speed of business." Imagine if one Zoom call were to shut you down after three hours. Imagine the cost to your business. Imagine not having any Internet at all. Imagine having unreliable Internet like at my office, where it keeps shutting down. Imagine how fast business moves when you can't compete with other people, because you don't have any connectivity at all. That's the speed of business.

I 100% want to thank the member for Algoma–Manitoulin for this really important motion that we need to ensure that northern Ontario has access to reliable Internet

and to high-speed Internet. It's just the reality of the world. It is an essential service and we have to make this happen, Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I'm pleased to be here this morning to speak on my colleague's motion to lower Internet bills for people across the north, and to improve Internet service.

I think we have to be honest that we've learned lessons over the past year that we've been living with COVID-19. The first is that nothing is more important than our collective health as people. The second is, it's really hard to work and learn remotely without proper Internet. I know it's very clear in the riding of Kiiwetinoong, because we have been attempting to work and learn without this infrastructure for years.

I have written to the Minister of Infrastructure as recently as October about Internet to First Nations in the Kiiwetinoong riding and the severely limited Internet connectivity that is very common across northern Ontario.

0920

I know that reliable and affordable Internet is essential to ensure students can access virtual learning, and it is especially important to the delivery of telehealth in fly-in communities, such as the 23 First Nations in Kiiwetinoong that can only be accessed by plane or winter road. That's a reality in our communities.

One of the things the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us is the divide in rural and northern communities. It has shone a light on how inefficient and unaffordable Internet is outside urban areas. Access to affordable Internet should not be a privilege; it should be an essential service to our everyday lives.

I believe this motion is a good opportunity to demonstrate your government's commitment to ensuring the delivery of affordable and reliable connectivity to all fly-in First Nations communities in the north. The health and the success of our schools, health centres, businesses depend on it.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

M^{me} France Gélinas: I am so proud of the motion that my colleague from Algoma–Manitoulin brought forward. I live in a northern rural area, so I decided to bring my Internet bill for your enjoyment this morning.

Where I live, you have a choice of Xplornet, which is through the satellite—they put this great big dish on your roof. I used to have Xplornet. After too many people went on it, the service was just horrible, so we gave that up. We're back to Bell through the phone line. Bell through the phone line will cost you \$69 a month for 25 gigs. I was able to buy an extra 40 gigs for \$5, but if I go over those, then the fees are astronomical.

Let me walk you through: \$69.95 will give you 25 gigs. That's an average of \$2.92 a gig. I'm able to buy an extra 40 gigs for \$5. So those extra 40 gigs cost me 13 cents a gig to buy. But God forbid you go over what you're able to buy. Then Bell charges me—charges everybody—\$4 a gig.

For the month of January, when there was a shutdown in Sudbury, I worked from home for the whole time. I used 24.46 extra gigs, versus what I pay for, and it cost me an extra \$97.84 for 24 gigs. That's \$4 a gig, for a total for that month of \$189.60 for my Internet, and I was really, really careful not to use too much. Nobody watches Netflix or Crave or anything like this in my house, because you can't afford it because of the surcharge.

What we're asking is, if Bell can sell me an extra 40 gigs for 13 cents a gig, why is it allowed to charge me \$4 a gig when I go over? The Premier has talked about stopping gouging. This is Bell gouging every single northern and rural resident, and the motion from my colleague would stop this. I hope you'll all agree.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm happy to rise today on International Women's Day and talk about something with respect to the Internet, because most people wouldn't recognize this. You've probably never heard this woman's name before: Elizabeth Feinler. The Internet as we know it today would not exist had it not been for this woman.

There are probably some of you watching this streaming right now on the Legislative website, ola.org. Why do I bring that up? Elizabeth Feinler was the director of network information systems for Stanford University in the 1980s. Her centre is responsible for domain name resolution, that protocol that takes a simple, common name and translates it to an IP address. Can you imagine having to type in 151.101.138.133 to get to www.ola.org? Most people wouldn't be able to do that, because you wouldn't remember that. If you want to send an email to my Gmail account, davesmith@gmail.com, without Elizabeth Feinler, it would be davesmith@172.217.1.5. Elizabeth Feinler is someone, a woman in technology, who made the world better for all of us, with the Internet.

When I took a look at the member's motion, I thought: This is almost like French Impressionist art, something that may have come from Monet. From a distance, it's very, very elegant. It looks great. But as we get closer and closer to the details, we realize that it's much more blurred and it's not as easy to see.

What the member is asking for is something that is completely outside of the jurisdiction of the Ontario government. We all know that the CRTC is the federal government agency that oversees Internet, phone, TV and broadband service rates, so to ask for changes, for the Ontario government to make changes to those, knowing it is completely outside of our jurisdiction—it's not something that we're able to do.

I understand that broadband Internet is something that is very important to a large number of people. I, myself, represent a riding that has an urban and a rural component to it. I live less than five minutes from the city of Peterborough, and yet I do not have stable high-speed Internet, nor do I have stable cellphone service. I have three cellphones: my personal cellphone, my constituency cellphone and my ministry cellphone. They're with different providers. If I'm standing on the deck at the front of my house, my

personal cellphone works. If I go to the backyard, my personal cellphone no longer works, but my constituency cellphone works. Nowhere in my home does my ministry cellphone work. I do not have Internet access with my ministry cellphone; I do not have cellphone access with my ministry cellphone. I understand the challenges.

The member brought up the EORN project. This is something that I have been involved in, in a number of meetings. We are doing what we need to do as the province of Ontario to support that high-speed Internet being brought to eastern Ontario. He mentioned that it was for Ottawa. It covers a lot more than just Ottawa; it goes all the way to Lindsay and slightly beyond. It goes up north to Apsley, to Bancroft. It's eastern Ontario. It's basically from Ottawa to Oshawa and north—755,000 people. It's something that we are actively working on right now, to provide high-speed Internet, broadband Internet, to all of those people. We are actively working on it.

The member has brought up as well that we need to be taking the provincial portion of the HST out, which is really interesting, because "HST" stands for "harmonized sales tax," and it is administered by the federal CRA. It requires a negotiation with the federal government to remove anything from it, because it's actually the federal government that administers that tax. It's the federal government, then, that would have to be responsible for making any changes to it. It's not something that the Ontario Legislature can stand up and say, "We're just going to do this," because we do not have the power unilaterally to do that.

0930

Our government continues to call on the federal government, though, to step up to the plate and fully fund broadband here in Ontario. The federal government has a universal broadband component to it. They're offering \$1.4 billion to all of Canada. Here at the Ontario Legislature, though, we're offering \$1 billion to improve high-speed Internet across all of Ontario, and we've stepped up to fill the funding divide.

We're providing funding, as I said, to EORN and to SWIFT, and we've started our own province-wide broadband program called ICON. We're looking for better ways to deliver what really is a federal government responsibility, because we can't sit back and wait. We've taken that initiative. We started that initiative last summer. We went out to different areas of Ontario and we said, "We know that we need to have better Internet. We need to have high-speed Internet. We can't just rely on satellite technology from other jurisdictions." We have to make sure that we're providing the infrastructure that the people of Ontario expect, and that's what we've been doing. We've committed to investing \$143 billion in Ontario's infrastructure over the next decade, and that includes broadband connectivity, because we know that if you do not have broadband connectivity, you're behind.

Back in the early 2000s, Oracle had a campaign that said that if you weren't in e-business, you'll be out of business, and what we're seeing during the pandemic is just that. There is a divide; I freely admit it. Those who have

Internet access and those who are able to have e-commerce have been able to get through this pandemic better than those who do not.

We have offered up many supports for it: the main street program, for example, to bring those small businesses that did not have an Internet presence into the digital world, and providing them supports for it. We've been able to help a large number of businesses, a large number of small mom-and-pop companies that wouldn't otherwise have been able to do this. We've put our money where our mouth is because we firmly believe that high-speed Internet is something that all of us require.

That's why we introduced, just last week, the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021. If passed, this legislation would help connect communities to reliable, high-speed Internet sooner. We recognize that the federal government—although it is their jurisdiction, although it is their responsibility, they've dropped the ball. We need to make sure that we're accelerating the deployment of provincially significant broadband infrastructure across Ontario, and that is exactly what we are doing.

We're taking decisive action immediately. We didn't wait; we started immediately. We started with more than \$300 million back in the summer, and then we increased that to \$1 billion because we recognized that the only way Ontario is going to be able to move ahead, the only way that Ontario businesses are going to be able to conduct business, post-COVID, effectively, is by having that effective, high-speed Internet across all of Ontario. It's not something that can be fixed overnight. It's something that has been lacking for a number of years. But we have started that action.

We've made proposed changes to how we would run fibre optic. Right now, it's cost-prohibitive for a company to enter into an agreement with Hydro One to use their existing infrastructure to put in lightweight fibre optic. In our proposal, we're changing that, because we recognize that if you're replacing heavy copper with lightweight fibre-optic, you're actually extending the life of all of those assets. Less weight means less wear and tear.

Why does that make a difference? Have you ever been in a storm before and seen trees waving, or seen telephone poles or hydro poles waving? Less weight is less strain. We know that lightweight fibre optic is not only the future, but it is the technology of today, and it's high-speed and it's expandable.

We know that heavy copper has its limitations. DSL, when it first came out, was something that was remarkable, because you could run it across telephone lines and it was an upgrade from dialup. I'm sure that there are many people watching today that remember those 56K modems, or the 28.8K, or the 14.4K, or even the 1,200-baud modem. That worked on copper. When DSL came out, it advanced Internet technology for all of us.

Now we're at the next stage, where we're talking about fibre optic and running fibre optic to everyone, and that is exactly what we are trying to do. We're doing it with partnerships—partnerships with EORN, partnerships with SWIFT—because we recognize we cannot do it alone. We

have the ability to provide financing for some of these projects, but the Ontario government does not have that expertise. We are leaning on and partnering with those who have the expertise to make sure that we can provide high-speed Internet, broadband Internet for today, tomorrow and every day in the future, for every single person in Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: It's a pleasure to rise today to speak to the motion from the member from Algoma-Manitoulin on such a vital issue as ensuring that people have access to broadband services. I fundamentally believe that broadband is an essential service. It should be recognized as an essential service and we should have a strategy in place in this province to make it an essential service.

Ontario has a digital divide; there is no doubt about it. Most people who live in cities have access to reliable broadband Internet—not always affordable, but mostly reliable. A lot of people in rural and remote parts of this province do not even have access to reliable service, let alone affordable service.

Speaker, this motion actually doesn't say the government has to deliver it right now. It says it has to deliver a strategy right now, and in some cases, that strategy might actually be working with the federal government. I know the members opposite, oftentimes when we have this debate about broadband services, hide behind the federal government, but that does not mean the province does not have a responsibility to ensure that we take care of our jurisdiction and the things that are within our jurisdiction, and that we develop a strategy that deals with the federal components of jurisdiction. That's very common, for us to actually develop strategies like that. I don't buy into this notion that somehow, because it's regulated federally, we don't have a role to play here in developing a strategy, and specifically developing a strategy to ensure that people in rural and remote communities have affordable access and are not cut off.

I want to talk about it in three key areas, Speaker. First of all, education: We have a public education system in this province that says that everyone should have access to public education. It's pretty hard to have access to public education during a pandemic, when things have gone remote and you don't have access to Internet, and so if we are going to ensure that people have access to the public education they're entitled to as Ontarians, then we need to ensure they have access to affordable Internet, to access the education that they're entitled to as citizens, residents of this province.

Secondly is health care, Speaker. We have a universal public health care system that is funded by the public and is accessible to everyone in this province through OHIP. Much of that health care has moved online due to the pandemic. It's understandable why. It's especially the case in rural and remote communities. If you don't have access to the Internet, you don't have access to health care in many places right now, and so it's vital that we provide it.

0940

The third point is small businesses. So many small businesses in this province have been asked to close to help contain the virus and support public health measures. When you've been forced, by government mandate, to move online, if you don't have access to the Internet and the tools you need to conduct business online, it's pretty hard to do what government is asking you to do to meet public health measures.

And so for all three—there are many other reasons, but I think those three are just vital in the limited time I have, Speaker. I can tell you from serving on the SCOFEA, the finance committee, over the summer that looked at economic recovery—and we heard from hundreds of people and thousands of hours of testimony—the number one issue that was brought up, probably—go back and look at the remarks that people made, but I'd say probably the number one issue was Internet: unreliable, unaffordable and inaccessible in many parts of the province. So I think it's incumbent upon us to listen to what those people said at committee—many of them small business owners but also a number of them non-profits, educators and others who said that reliable, affordable access to broadband was vital to them getting through life, period, but especially through this pandemic.

I think it's incumbent upon us as a province to work together to ensure that we have a strategy to deliver. That's why I'll be supporting this motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. John Vanthof: It's always an honour to be able to stand in this House and today speak on the member for Algoma–Manitoulin's motion on Internet strategy for COVID.

The member's motion speaks to the overall NDP strategy on providing Internet for Ontarians. Earlier last fall, we put forward—under my name, but the NDP put forward—the Broadband is an Essential Service Act. The goal of that act is to make sure that, at the end of the day, everyone in Ontario has access to broadband.

the federal government and the province are both looking at ways to get broadband to most people. It is a huge issue. But we know that once most people have broadband, the initiatives will slow down and they will stop. And if people say, "Oh, no, that's not going to happen," I point to the member for Kiiwetinoong, who has people in his riding who don't have access to clean water in this province. It's the same issue: Once almost everyone has it, everyone forgets about those who don't, and that's what the Broadband is an Essential Service Act is meant to combat.

The member's motion is meant to address the issue of the digital divide, where there is access, but they can't pay for it. For school, for health care, it doesn't help if it's there but it's beyond your capacity to pay.

The member opposite says, "Well, this is federal jurisdiction." Okay, so the member's motion said the province should refund the provincial portion of the HST. "That's not possible." Actually, you could refund the equivalent of

the provincial HST. They could put that in one of their pieces of legislation. There are all kinds of things that could be done. Saying that it's not possible doesn't help the kids in ridings, even in the member opposite's riding, in my riding, in the member's who put forward this motion, who don't have access to education because, even where there is Internet, they can't afford it.

That's what he's trying to address. It's an essential service. Everyone should be able to access it and, equally as important, regardless of your income level, you should be able to afford it. Otherwise, you will always be second-class.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Back to the member for Algoma–Manitoulin for a wrap-up.

Mr. Michael Mantha: I want to start off by saying thank you to the member from Guelph. You actually took the time to read the motion, which is something that is very much a step in the right direction.

I want to thank the members from Timiskaming–Cochrane, Sudbury and Nickel Belt for your comments. You understand the issues that are being faced here, across the province.

The member from Peterborough–Kawartha: When you were talking, I could always hear this comment that I used to say or hear in this House in the previous government: "Liberal, Tory, same old story." You pass the buck off to the feds all the time: "Oh, it's their responsibility. It's too hard for us to tackle it. It's not our role, it's not our position." I sat with the member from Kiiwetinoong this morning. We had the same exact discussion, when it came to housing and water issues, and the member was here this morning in order to bring this debate to the floor.

To the member from Kiiwetinoong, thank you. You really enlighten me each and every day of my responsibility here in the House, to take on those responsibilities—not to pass the buck. There is a role for us to play, and we are going to take that role seriously and do it. There are so many things that we can do.

I want to reiterate to this government what the motion was. I started with explaining the motion at the beginning, I ended with it and I'm going to end with it again. It's to develop a COVID-19 Internet strategy focused on rate relief. We can do that. It's to take the HST off the bills for those that are using Internet. And it's also to ensure that we do not lose access to Internet services. The only thing missing is the will: Does this government have the will to develop this strategy and help Ontarians?

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): The time provided for private members' public business has expired.

Mr. Mantha has moved private members' notice of motion number 142. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed to the motion will please say "nay."

In my opinion, the nays have it.

Pursuant to standing order 101(d), the recorded division on this item of private members' public business will be deferred to the proceeding of deferred votes.

Vote deferred.

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 4, 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 Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. John Vanthof: Again, it's always an honour to be able to stand in this House and debate legislation that's brought forward by the government, in this case Bill 254. I read the bill, but I don't have it right in front of me. It's basically making changes to the Election Act.

There have been quite a few comments that there are other issues that are perhaps more pressing right now—*Interjection.*

Mr. John Vanthof: Oh, thank you very much. The act is An Act to amend various Acts with respect to elections and members of the Assembly.

There have been comments made on our side that there are more pressing issues, and there are—we are in the middle of a COVID pandemic—but elections are important. Any time that we have to look at changing how elections are done and what the rules are is always important, so I'm happy to be able to stand here and discuss it.

I like to bring things back to a personal level. Everyone sitting here, other than the staff, has been elected. That's the honour that we get to sit here and to represent our constituents. Our constituents and people across the province have to have faith that elections are freely and fairly held, and that's not an automatic. That's a tenuous—it's something you always have to look for. You always have to make sure that the rules are fair for everyone, and that's not easy. It's not an easy job for the Chief Electoral Officer. He has come out with a report on how to make things better, and there are some good points in that report. There are some points that are reflected in this bill, but some don't come from the Chief Electoral Officer, and we will get to that a bit later.

0950

In this bill, we increase the number of early voting days. Is that a bad thing? No, not at all. There is an issue—and this is something that I'm sure every riding, every member and every candidate has had issues with—we also have to make sure that where the polling stations are is equally accessible to all Ontarians, because that isn't always the case, and that is something that always has to be—so you can have more days, and that's good, but you have to make sure that, where possible, every neighbourhood has the same, that every person has—you won't have equal, but

equivalent access, because the idea to have more polling days is to make it easier to vote, and that is credible. I don't have a problem with that. We should look at, in everything we do, how to make it easier to participate. That's a good thing.

There are also provisions in this bill regarding third-party advertising. I would say everyone has had issues, on all sides—right, left, blue, orange or red—with the influence of third-party advertisers. We can name specific examples, I would say, and obviously it's my job to put emphasis on things that happened with the government. I would say that Ontario Proud is a third-party advertiser that influences and that has a certain bent that favours the right—I don't think that's a surprise to anyone—and there are other third-party advertisers that have a certain bent that would favour the other side.

The issue, though, now, with the changes to the act and that we will have to flesh out as it proceeds, is: Who is going to decide what is a legitimate third-party advertiser? Now, with long-term care, with the crisis that we've had, the tragedies in long-term care, I wouldn't be surprised if there are people who are going to want to talk about that in the year leading up to the campaign. Are their rights going to be removed under this legislation? I think that's a legitimate question. That's something that needs to be brought forward and needs to be discussed as this bill goes forward, because there's a difference between third-party advertising to get your political way, or a legitimate group who wants to bring something to the forefront that has been ignored across the years. There's a difference. And I don't think I'm the judge of that by myself; that's something that has to be brought forward legitimately through this process, something we need to do.

I'd say that the most controversial part of this bill—"controversial" is perhaps not the right word. A farmer I am; a wordsmith I'm not. The part of the bill that jumps out to me is—there are two parts: the financial part, so the increase in individual donation ceiling; and the changes to the subsidy parts.

When the public subsidies were brought in, the per-vote subsidies, they were brought in as a response to the Liberal government's attempt to try and take cash-for-access out of the system, because the Liberals had a big problem with cash-for-access. I don't think anyone would disagree with me. They had a big problem with cash-for-access. So the per-vote subsidies were put in and corporate and union donations, for example, were taken out. Okay.

The Tories, I believe, at the time when the government first came in, actually, put forward legislation to get rid of the per-vote subsidy. So that's changed. That's a marked change on their side. But they've increased individual limits.

Now, where that could cause some problems is—remember at the start, I talked about how everyone should have maybe not equal but equivalent access to the system? Well, when you make the individual donation limits high, you have a very large chance to make government for the 1%, not for the 99%. Because it's probably 1% of the people in Ontario who can afford \$3,600 times three, times

their family members. All of a sudden, those families and whatever organizations that they belong to, if they have the personal wherewithal to give those donations, could be perceived to have more political influence. I think you see that coming forward already in government legislation, and I think that's something that we really need to take seriously and we really need to address seriously as this bill goes to committee.

The government says, "Well, we're in the middle of the pack of the other provinces." I'm not so worried about being in the middle of the pack; I'm worried about getting it right. And I'm not sure that that's getting it right. Because the people who are the PSWs who are making \$15, \$16 an hour and all the front-line workers that this government claims to support can't donate \$3,600, but some of their bosses can, and that tilts the scales. That perception is very dangerous, and that's something that we should all be very cognizant of.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Questions?

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you to the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane for his comments on the bill. I gather from his comments that he's in favour of free and fair elections, and it sounded like he was supporting the five additional days of advance polling as long as it's flexible and able to get to the remote parts of our ridings, which I think is the intention. And he's supportive of rules on third-party advertising. Of course, you realize, you can still spend over \$600,000 for each individual organization in the 12 months before an election and over \$100,000 in an election, so there are substantial amounts of money still being spent.

My question, though, is about another recommendation of the Chief Electoral Officer, the administrative monetary penalties for things like exceeding spending limits, failing to register—are you supportive of that recommendation as well?

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much for that question. Just for the first time—COVID has changed us all—I spoke for 10 minutes with a mask; didn't even know it.

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We are in favour of a strong, robust system that everyone trusts, and that system would include regulations and penalties for people who don't follow them. That is part of the system. If you're going to have any kind of system—if you're going to have speed limits but no one enforcing them, the speed limits don't mean anything. So I think that's your answer. If you're going to have regulations, we need to be able to enforce them.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Questions?

Mr. Jamie West: Thank you to the member for his debate on this. The thing that stands out to me on this bill is raising the max donation—I've had more phone calls about this than anything else—especially in the midst of COVID-19, where businesses are losing their business, basically, and employees are being laid off. I believe it's going to go up to \$3,600.

It reminds me, Speaker, 10 years ago, I was in Washington on a tour and one of the senators talked about

how about 50% of his work now is fundraising. They have much higher limits in the south than we do here, but it is that slippery slope.

The member talked about cash-for-access with the Liberals. If you make minimum wage, you make about \$31,000. That's your gross, not even your take-home. The new access would be more than 10% of a minimum wage worker's take-home income.

I'm just wondering, to the member who spoke about this, how do you feel about this, and what has the response been in your community about raising the max donations?

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you very much to the member for Sudbury. I have gotten calls from lots of small businesses, as, I am sure, has every member in this House. I have had not one small business call me and say, "I need that individual spending limited raised."

Do you know what I have had lots of businesses call me about? They have called me and asked me, "So how come I'm closed and I sell the same products as Walmart, and how come they're open?" Maybe this legislation is one of those reasons.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Questions?

Mr. Robert Bailey: I'll take my mask off. I'm not used to speaking with it on.

I wanted to speak and ask questions, of course, to the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane. I enjoyed his remarks this morning, even with the mask on.

My question was in regard to elections. The suggestion by the Chief Electoral Officer that we set up a bipartisan commission made up of elected members of all the parties, independents, opposition and, of course, government as well: I'm just wondering what your comments are on that, and what you think could be derived from such a bipartisan committee.

Mr. John Vanthof: I thank the member from Sarnia—and now I'm remembering to take off my mask—for that question. I have had lots of discussions with the Chief Electoral Officer on elections, specifically about rural, because it's a very rural riding. I think a bipartisan committee that actually acted in a bipartisan way could be very beneficial, but it has to act in a bipartisan way, and not all committees in this Legislature do. But a bipartisan committee would be of benefit to talk about elections, which are in a weird way—they're the most political thing in the world, but they should be the least.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Questions?

Mr. Ian Arthur: It's an honour to rise and ask a question in this debate. I'm always interested, whenever I look at legislation, as to what's behind it. What are the motivations? Why is the government introducing this particular piece of legislation? Because few times does their rhetoric actually match what the intent of the bill is.

To quote one of my colleagues, the MPP for Waterloo, "You have to follow the money." When you look at a bill like this, you have to ask: Why is it so important for this government to raise the individual limits for political donations in Ontario? The member from Timiskaming–Cochrane brought up the Liberals' cash-for-access scandal. Well, we're creeping back towards that, Speaker. It

immediately makes me think of the issues that this government has around MZO's and the developers that are feeding money into the party. Suddenly, they are going to be able to actually feed a lot more money into it. It's my understanding that this party, the governing party, is actually still in debt, and the election is imminent.

Would the member for Timiskaming–Cochrane speak to why he thinks this legislation was introduced?

Mr. John Vanthof: I don't think I can specifically comment on why the legislation was introduced, because I didn't introduce it. The government did.

But we all know that cash-for-access, at the end of the Liberal regime, was a huge problem. Legislation was brought in by the Liberals to try and stop it.

Interjection: They were embarrassed.

Mr. John Vanthof: Yes, they were embarrassed—a heckle from the government side. They were embarrassed, but we're creeping back up to there. Because whether it's a corporate or union donation, or whether it's a very large personal donation to the riding association, to the campaign, to the party, you're talking close to \$10,000, and by many family members. Again, it seems the perception could be that the access to certain members of certain families—

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Thank you. Question?

Mr. Will Bouma: I'm glad I can rise and chat with the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane. Just going back to his speech: He made mention of the fact that he was disheartened that the government was extending the per-vote subsidy. As has been mentioned in the House, we understand the difficulty of parties being able to raise money, which is why we are extending this at this point.

So I was wondering, specifically, if I could ask him to directly answer, whether he is for or against the extension of the per-vote subsidy in these difficult COVID times.

Mr. John Vanthof: Thank you for that question. I think we are on the record. We believe that a per-vote subsidy eliminates some of the issues regarding cash-for-access. We have never been opposed to the per-vote subsidy.

The issue is, now that you are raising the individual limits, you're doing both. Often, members on the other side say that you can't have either/or. Well, it seems that, on your side, you're trying to have both. I'm not saying there is cash-for-access, but it's certainly the perception. It's starting to creep in that this is looking a lot like “Liberal, Tory, same old story” cash-for-access. That is something that, if I was on the government side, I'd be very worried about, because we saw what happened to the Liberal government when they did that.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

M. Michael Mantha: C'est tout le temps un plaisir de prendre mon siège ici dans la maison de l'Assemblée et puis de donner une perspective des gens de ma région d'Algoma–Manitoulin, surtout en regard de ce projet de loi que le gouvernement a apporté en avant, le projet 254, la Loi modifiant diverses lois en ce qui concerne les

élections et les députés à l'Assemblée. Ceci a été présenté en première lecture le 25 février, et on a commencé à avoir les discussions sur ce projet de loi le 6 mars de la semaine passée.

Ce qui est intéressant, c'est que dans le milieu d'une pandémie où les gens sont en train de poser les questions, « Quand est-ce que je vais avoir mon vaccin? Qu'est-ce qui se passe dans nos maisons de longue durée? Qu'est-ce qui est en train de se passer dans les entreprises où les gens sont en train de perdre leur vie? »—c'est ça les questions que les gens sont en train de poser. Mais ce gouvernement, dans leur position comme gouvernement, apporte ceci comme une priorité.

Je veux questionner la priorité, madame la Présidente, parce que si tu regardes quand on est revenu ici en Chambre, une des grosses priorités de ce gouvernement était de présenter une motion sur comment on fonctionne ici dans la maison. Une de leurs priorités qu'ils sont venus avec dans la maison était le fonctionnement des comités pendant que nous étions levés en maison, pendant que la maison était fermée. Ils voulaient continuer avec ça. Ils voulaient faire un amendement aussi que les mercredis, à la place de commencer à 3 heures de l'après-midi, qu'on commence à 1 heure de l'après-midi. Puis, une tâche que j'ai donnée aux greffiers ici c'était de me trouver le terme pour un « deferral slip », ce avec quoi ils ont eu de la difficulté, mais c'était une « demande de différer. » Et ça, c'était une des grosses priorités que ce gouvernement avait.

1010

Puis en suivi de ça, ils nous posent et nous présentent une autre priorité que ce gouvernement a, où ils vont augmenter les donations que les gens peuvent faire au système électoral—dans le milieu d'une pandémie.

Vous savez, madame la Présidente, ce qui, vraiment, me bouleverse? Ça me bouleverse comment le gouvernement—et puis je l'ai souvent utilisé: le gouvernement précédent, qui était les libéraux, ils avaient manqué la balle, comment ils n'étaient pas en bonne fonction ou comment ils n'écoutaient pas les gens, non seulement du nord de l'Ontario, mais de la province. Et puis nous voici avec un gouvernement conservateur: leur priorité, c'est d'augmenter les donations électorales pendant une campagne.

Savez-vous—ce n'était pas question, en effet, de comment on fait pour délivrer les vaccins un petit peu plus vite dans nos communautés, de comment on s'assure que les aînés de nos communautés vont recevoir leurs vaccins au bon moment quand ils en ont besoin, immédiatement quand ils en ont besoin. Ce n'est pas vraiment d'adresser les besoins des gens qui travaillent dans des maisons de longue durée. Ce n'est pas ça qui était leur priorité. Leur priorité, comme je vous dis, c'est d'augmenter les donations à un parti politique pendant une campagne électorale.

Vous savez, il faut qu'on regarde comment on s'est rendu à cette situation ici. Il faut qu'on regarde l'histoire. Oui, c'est vrai que c'est arrivé en dessous du gouvernement précédent, où ils ont vraiment développé—

il y en avait, de l'accès aux ministres, madame la Présidente; il faut que je vous laisse savoir. C'était incroyable. J'ai utilisé le terme « bouleversé ». Celui-ci, là, c'était de quoi de spécial. Il y avait des gens qui, pour avoir accès à un ministre, payaient jusqu'à 10 000 piastres, pour un morceau de poulet et puis deux ou trois morceaux de légumes pour avoir accès. Bien, une fois que c'était sorti, c'est certain que les libéraux se sont fait taper sur les mains et puis ont changé la structure. À la place de se punir, juste eux autres mêmes, ils ont décidé de punir toute l'Assemblée et puis tous les députés et puis tout le système électoral.

Mais maintenant, nous voici avec les conservateurs. Ils veulent augmenter, de 1 600 \$, la contribution à une campagne électorale et la doubler, en plus, à 3 300 \$. Trois mille trois cents. Je ne sais pas pour vous, madame la Présidente, mais moi, je n'ai pas, on va dire, « accès » à un tel montant d'argent. Mais je vais vous dire, ce ne sont pas les gens qui demeurent dans les miennes, mes communautés, qui ont accès à un tel montant d'argent. Et puis je vais aussi vous dire que ce ne sont pas les gens qui prennent soin des gens dans les maisons de longue durée qui ont accès à cet argent-là. Les gens qui ont accès à cet argent-là, ce sont de grands amis du gouvernement : des développeurs, des gens qui ont la capacité de faire de telles donations de tels montants, pas seulement de leur position, mais de tous les gens dans leur famille, pour aider le gouvernement conservateur à bâtir leur avenir. Ce sont les gens qui vont avoir accès à nous donner ce montant ici.

En plus, dans cette demande, un candidat peut augmenter sa propre contribution de 5 000 \$ à 10 000 \$. Bien, je m'excuse, ce ne sont pas tous les gens qui ont la chance de le faire, ça—

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): My apologies for interrupting the member. The time for debate is over. You will be able to finish your time the next time this bill is called.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Jill Andrew: Today, on International Women's Day, I recognize our St. Paul's women: You have disproportionately shouldered the brunt of this pandemic. It is why I am committed to a feminist recovery.

Our front-line health care workers: You have continuously shown tenacity and courage throughout this ordeal. Essential caregivers, again primarily women: I've spoken with you. I know the weight of your care work. Our seniors in our rental apartments: Many of you live alone. I thank you for our phone calls where you often remind me to dress warmly and keep fighting for you. I will.

I stand with women with disabilities in St. Paul's. Many of you are injured workers holding it down for your families, doing your absolute best. I stand with our single

moms desperate for child care; with women and children experiencing homelessness, who simply want the dignity of a stable place to sleep. I stand with women without children—you are no less important.

I give gratitude to our teachers and education workers for your tireless work. Our women business owners, essential workers, local farmers, artists and creatives: I am so deeply grateful for you. You bring St. Paul's to life. You give us colour, our feeling and our vibe.

To all of you, I will continue to fight for your right to housing, pay equity, paid sick days, your safety at work, your physical and mental health. On International Women's Day and beyond, I stand boldly in this House because of you and for you, and I am deeply thankful. Happy International Women's Day.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mr. Stan Cho: I rise today in honour of International Women's Day. Although women in Ontario have made great strides for equality in the boardrooms, political arenas and hockey rinks, they continue to earn less, face harassment, discrimination and, in the worst cases, violence.

Almost three years ago, a man drove a rented van down the sidewalks of Yonge Street in Willowdale, killing 10 people and injuring 16. This heinous, cowardly act of violence was a deliberate attack aimed at women in my community. One of the eight women killed that day was 31-year-old Anne Marie D'Amico. In the wake of the tragedy, Anne Marie's family created the Anne Marie D'Amico Foundation as a way to find light in the darkest of times and to honour her memory.

The Anne Marie D'Amico Foundation works tirelessly to create new spaces for abused women and children at the North York Women's Shelter. Of the 10 new spaces they created this past year, all were quickly taken by victims of domestic abuse—abuse that in many cases was made worse by the pandemic, where vulnerable women already living in unstable conditions were being trapped in a house with their abuser.

As we celebrate International Women's Day and the contributions made by women in our lives and communities, let us also acknowledge and thank organizations like the Anne Marie D'Amico Foundation for the work they have done for victims of domestic abuse, and let us all join the fight to end violence against women everywhere.

WALTER GRETZKY

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: How do you summarize the life of someone like Walter Gretzky in the short time that I have? My first thought is, you can't. But as my father-in-law pointed out, Walter's motto was, "There's no such thing as 'can't.'" And so, I will give it my best shot.

Wally had a deep love of the game of hockey—a love he passed on to not only his children, but other kids too. He encouraged and nurtured the love of the game by

instilling in others an ethic of hard work, determination and confidence in oneself.

Much like for hockey, Wally had a deep love for his community and his country. He was generous with his time, whether through raising money for the numerous charitable organizations he was involved in, serving meals to those in need at a local church, chatting with or singing to anyone nearby, both adults and children alike.

Wally opened up his home to anyone that knocked on the door, leading them into the basement to enjoy his sports memorabilia collection. He was honoured with the Brantford Citizen of the Year award, is an inductee to the Brantford Walk of Fame, a member of the Order of Ontario and a member of the Order of Canada. Wally carried the Olympic torch and received honorary degrees from three universities.

While he achieved much in his lifetime, one might say his most notable accomplishment was what he gave to others: kindness and the way he made others feel. Whether family or someone he had never met before, Wally always wanted you to feel listened to, included and appreciated, like you were the Great One.

1020

On Saturday, Wally was laid to rest, with a crowd of people in hockey jerseys and his kids tapping their hockey sticks lining the street outside the church to show their respect.

In my house, he was Uncle Walter; in Brantford, he was Lord Mayor; to many, he was Wally; to our country, he was Canada's hockey dad. His legacy will live on in every arena, backyard rink and memory of those who had the pleasure of meeting him. Every time we hear a stick tap on the boards it will be Walter Gretzky telling us, "There is no such thing as 'can't.'" Rest well, Wally.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. Lorne Coe: The government is working to support the health and well-being of Whitby seniors during COVID-19. The recently announced funding provided to Whitby Seniors Active Living Centres in downtown Whitby and Brooklin will help local seniors stay safe and socially connected through virtual and remote programs. This year's investment focuses on interactive telephone-based group programming and online educational programs such as tax clinics, technology assistance, health and wellness and COVID information.

Given the social isolation that COVID-19 has brought to many seniors, it's important that we look to programs that will keep them safe and connected. The government's significant investment in Seniors Active Living Centres will help Whitby's older adults stay virtually engaged with their friends, families and communities while combatting social isolation during the pandemic.

Whitby Seniors Active Living Centres programming will provide support for older adults and their well-being by keeping them active and socially connected within their own communities. What is clear is that the government

remains absolutely committed to the safety, independence and well-being of Whitby seniors.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Today is International Women's Day. I'm going to say, first, that women across this province deserve respect and appreciation for their work, care and sacrifice throughout this pandemic. We have seen women on the front lines across fields and jurisdictions, but we know many of the vulnerable and essential-worker jobs are predominantly female and many of those women are racialized and further marginalized.

Consider the never-ending work of caregivers and personal support workers: PSWs who have been on the front lines in long-term and seniors care or working with vulnerable neighbours in their homes, who can't get fair wages or adequate training and who work relentlessly without fair or safe staffing levels. We call our health care workers "heroes," but many of them are women and they have had to fight for PPE and respect from the beginning.

Education workers are predominantly female and we've seen how diminished, disrespected and exploited they have been by this government during this pandemic. Why? Because they cost money to employ. Also, they work in a field with children. We've seen how poorly regarded they have been over this past year.

Women work in every field, and we need to ensure there are clear paths to employment, training and fair compensation for them. We've heard that we are in a recession. There will not be the economic recovery we all need without a feminist recovery. This government has to reverse the cuts to shelters, rape crisis centres and women's services and programs. Skills training, accessible employment supports, pay equity, child care and paid sick days all must be a part of this government's plan if they really want to raise the status of women in this province—and that is hoping that they do.

On this International Women's Day, we must commit to ensuring a brighter and safer path ahead for all women.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

Mr. Stephen Blais: Happy International Women's Day.

Recently, the cities of Ottawa, Brampton and Barrie have all concluded investigations into serious cases of workplace violence and sexual harassment by members of council. In these cases, the most severe penalty that can be imposed is the suspension of pay for 90 days. Municipal councillors can have their seats vacated for poor attendance or for spending too much on their election night parties, but not for sexually harassing or inappropriately touching their employees or co-workers.

In Ottawa, the integrity commissioner found that a councillor committed "incomprehensible incidents of harassment" against staff over many years. In Brampton, the integrity commissioner found that a councillor engaged in "unnecessary, unwelcome, and unwanted sexual touching."

Despite these findings, these councillors remain in office. Brampton's integrity commissioner said she was displeased there was no avenue that allowed for the councillors' immediate removal from office. In Ottawa, city councillors passed a resolution requesting the government make these changes to allow for this. The minister's response was to reject the idea outright.

I've been working with stakeholders for some time and will soon be bringing forward a private member's bill that would allow a municipal council seat to be vacated in cases of workplace violence and harassment. I call on all members of the Legislature to support this proposal and pass the changes swiftly to bring greater accountability to Ontario's local leaders.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Today is International Women's Day. I want to wish all the amazing women and girls here in the Legislature, in my riding of Carleton and across the province, including my amazing staff as well as my mother, grandmother and sister, a happy International Women's Day.

I'd like to take a moment to highlight the accomplishments of some of the amazing women of Carleton this past year, including:

—Heather Larmer, who was recognized as one of five Canadian professionals under 40 by Canadian Defence Review magazine;

—Estella Aversa, who made a great video in honour of front-line workers;

—Liz Ellwood, who recently opened up her business, Maverick's Donut Company, in Stittsville;

—Katie Xu, who was the 2020 Special Olympics Ontario athlete of the year;

—Amanda Knox, who was a 2020 Ottawa Book Awards finalist;

—Brenda Miller, who won the Melvin Jones Fellowship Award;

—Charlene Burnside, who spent hours making fabric masks for her community of Richmond;

—Keira Dixon, who performed "It's Corona Time" on YouTube for episode 2 of Kids Around the World;

—Danielle Barabé-Bussi eres, who was the 2020 Canada's photographer of the year in the Craftsman of Photographic Arts designation;

—the South Carleton girls' curling team, who were the National Capital Secondary School Athletic Association champions in 2020.

Mr. Speaker, the list goes on and on, but unfortunately, I'm running out of time. It's truly an honour to represent such amazing women and girls in Carleton. The future of Carleton, Ottawa and Ontario is certainly bright.

Happy International Women's Day.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Doly Begum: Mr. Speaker, over the past month, I have raised the need for a faster, more comprehensive

vaccine rollout for Ontario and called on the Premier to commit to an equitable distribution of vaccines.

Today, I want to tell this House about a constituent of Scarborough Southwest in hopes that my call will finally be answered. Thomas Cooper bravely served with bomber command in the Royal Canadian Air Force as a member of the 408 "Goose" squadron. Bomber command faced a death rate of 46%. Mr. Cooper designed bearings for aircraft engines for SKF Canada and was involved in the Avro Arrow project.

His daughter Cathryn contacted us. She's worried for her father and has no central place to get information as to when her father can get vaccinated. While other parts of the province get vaccines, Mr. Cooper's family is left in the dark, feeling hopeless.

Cathryn asks: Why is Scarborough being so neglected? It has been a hotbed for COVID-19 infection. Surely if the desire is to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in this province, the people of Scarborough should be a high priority.

Mr. Speaker, individuals outside of Scarborough can get vaccinated. The former Premier can get vaccinated. That's great; they should be getting vaccinated. But so should Mr. Cooper and the many others who have been waiting patiently for months in Scarborough. As someone who served his country and answered the call at the age of 19, Mr. Cooper deserves better. Scarborough Southwest deserves better.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Mr. Mike Harris: Last week, I had the chance to virtually welcome the Solicitor General to Waterloo region for a round table with some of the organizations who combat human trafficking and support victims in my community.

While we may not see it, human trafficking is happening all across the province, in our small towns and our urban centres. It's a horrible reality, but my community is no exception, Mr. Speaker.

I want to thank all the attendees for sharing their feedback on our government's new bill, the Combating Human Trafficking Act, which is the first of its kind in Canada. It's a real honour to be part of a government that has made putting an end to this heinous crime and the protection of victims a priority. It was just last year that our comprehensive \$307-million anti-human trafficking strategy was launched, and we are now making changes to give law enforcement additional tools to prevent and deter human trafficking.

As I heard during our discussions, these new measures will build on the ongoing collaboration in my region, providing clarity and, importantly, raising awareness about the risks of human trafficking.

1030

As members of this House, we all have the responsibility to shed light on the fact that this is happening in our communities, to raise awareness about the prevention of this crime and to help the survivors and the people who

support them. I look forward to continuing this ongoing conversation with the experts in my community.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Jane McKenna: As we celebrate International Women's Day, I would like to recognize some of the incredible women in Burlington:

—local leaders like Colleen Mulholland, from the Burlington Community Foundation; Anita Cassidy, from economic development; Andrea Dodd, from our restaurant association; Carla Nel, from the Burlington Chamber of Commerce; and Judy Worsley, from the Aldershot BIA;

—in our long-term-care and seniors' homes, there's Sharon Bailey, from Burloak long-term care; Sheri Levy-Abraham, from Bethany Residence; and Maria Clarke, from Wellington Park;

—women who connect people with jobs, like Lisa Rizzato, from the Centre for Skills Development; Kelly Hoey and Michelle Murray, from HIEC; and Kelly Duffin, from Goodwill, The Amity Group;

—women supporting our kids, including Alison Brindle, from the Learning Disabilities Association of Halton-Hamilton; Cindy I'Anson, from Woodview Mental Health and Autism Service; Andréa Grebenc, from Halton's public school board; Lita Barrie, from Burlington's libraries; and Janice Robinson and Lynn Barker, from Halton children's aid; and

—women like Lisa Kohler, from the Halton Environmental Network; Lisa Lunski, from the Wellington Square Meal Bag Program; Amy Schnurr, from BurlingtonGreen; and Bridget Saulnier, from NUVO Network.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention my four children, Jennifer, Courtney, Meghan and Taylor. They bless me and inspire me not only today but every day. You amaze me with your intelligence, compassion, humour, drive and capacity for unconditional love.

WALTER GRETZKY

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): That concludes our members' statements for this morning. It is now time for oral questions.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: Point of order.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm sorry; I apologize. There is a point of order by the member for Windsor West.

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: I seek unanimous consent for the House to observe a moment of silence to pay tribute to the contributions and memory of Walter Gretzky.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Windsor West is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to observe a moment of silence to pay tribute to the memory of Walter Gretzky. Agreed? Agreed.

I'll ask members to rise.

The House observed a moment's silence.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. Members may take their seats.

I understand the member for Scarborough Southwest has a point of order.

Ms. Doly Begum: I seek unanimous consent to bring forward a motion requiring the government to implement paid sick days legislation to help protect workers in Scarborough and across Ontario from COVID-19, so no one has to make the difficult choice between staying home when sick and being able to pay the bills.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Scarborough Southwest is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to require the government to bring forward a motion. Agreed? I heard a no.

QUESTION PERIOD

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Andrea Horwath: First of all, I want to wish everybody a happy International Women's Day, not only my colleagues here in the House but also women and girls around the province.

My first question is to the Premier. I think, like all Ontarians, on Friday I was really excited to hear that we're finally going to get vaccines rolling into our province. I think that's something absolutely to celebrate, and, of course, also to celebrate those front-line health care workers, pharmacists and family docs who are going to be helping with getting those vaccines into people's arms.

I was also pleased that the government finally agreed to put front-line workers in hot spots, our COVID heroes, into the second-phase plan for the implementation of the vaccine for people in those workplaces and those neighbourhoods.

Speaker, my question for the Premier is, does he believe that it's the right thing to do to have people lose pay when they have to go and get their vaccine?

Hon. Doug Ford: First of all, Mr. Speaker, I would like to wish all the women in Ontario a happy International Women's Day. We have some of the greatest women in the world right here in Ontario.

Mr. Speaker, I don't believe that the front-line health care workers should have to get their pay deducted. That's my personal opinion. If they are within the hospital, within the health care system, and everyone else is lined up, they should be able to get a vaccination. That's the answer to the question.

The good news is, we're heading up towards a million vaccinations. We have a well-oiled machine. We have the infrastructure set up right across the province. Again, Mr. Speaker, all we're waiting for are the vaccines. As soon as we get those, they're going to be into people's arms. We continue to lead the country in vaccinations.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: The Premier will know that the Employment Standards Act doesn't cover people taking time off work without losing pay to get a vaccine. We

know that the federal program does not cover off the potential loss of pay for workers to leave work to get their vaccine.

I think it's really important that we don't put up barriers—or, in fact, that we actually take down barriers—that prevent people from getting the vaccine, especially, as we know, AstraZeneca has a very short shelf life. And so I would ask the Premier, will he agree to making sure people can take time off work to get their vaccine and not lose any pay?

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

Hon. Monte McNaughton: As the member opposite knows, we continue to advocate with the federal government for improvements to the sick pay program that they have. But I am pleased to announce today in the House that 245,000 workers in Ontario have now applied for or are receiving sick pay benefits across Ontario, and we continue to advocate to improve the program for all workers.

But I would strongly recommend to people right across this province to continue what you've been doing every single day since COVID-19 hit the province, and that's continue working together to get through this. It's great news that almost a million more vaccinations are coming to the province this week. We're going to continue to get needles in the arms of people to finally eradicate COVID-19 from the province of Ontario.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Speaker, this is something that experts actually agree with as well, that people shouldn't have to worry about losing pay to get vaccinated.

In fact, Dr. Michael Warner, director of critical care at Michael Garron Hospital, says this: "Essential workers aged 60-64 toiling in factories and fulfillment centres will not be able to take time off to head to their local/distant pharmacy to get the" AstraZeneca "vaccine" unless the government provides "paid vax time."

The question is, why would the Premier object to something that would make it easy for our front-line heroes in those factories and in those neighbourhoods to get vaccinated?

Hon. Monte McNaughton: We're not objecting to that. In fact, we continue to work with our federal partners. Obviously, these are clearly unprecedented times with COVID-19 here in the province, across Canada and across the world, but I'm proud to say we've made huge improvements when it comes to protecting the health and safety of workers, their families and the communities at large.

In fact, there is now one month of paid sick days for workers here in Ontario and across the country. Some 245,000 workers are either receiving sick pay or have applied for sick pay. There is \$700 million left in that bank account. We're going to continue to work with our federal government and work with all of our partners across the country to ensure that the health and safety of all workers is protected.

I believe that the overwhelming majority of people are excited to get their vaccinations and will show up to get vaccinations.

1040

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My next question is also for the Premier. Folks will know that the NDP actually has a bill that we've been trying to get the government to agree to. It was brought forward by the member from London West. We've debated it at least half a dozen times, if not more, here. We'll be doing it again today. In fact, that bill does contain a clause that allows workers to take time off to get vaccinated. But every time we raise it, the Premier shoots it down. So my question is, what's his plan to make sure that workers, front-line heroes, can actually go and get their vaccinations without losing pay?

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

Hon. Monte McNaughton: I'm proud of what this government has done to protect the health and safety of every single person in this province. In fact, the very first initiative that this government brought forward, supported by all members of this House, was job-protected leave, which told every worker in this province that if they're in self-isolation, if they're in quarantine, if you're a mom or a dad staying home to look after a son or a daughter because of the disruption in the school system, you can't be fired. Furthermore, we took action to eliminate the need for sick notes.

I'm proud of what this Premier and what this government have done on behalf of workers. Premier Ford led the charge in Canada to deliver \$1.1 billion worth of sick pay for workers. As I said a moment ago, more than 245,000 workers are now receiving that benefit. The opposition parties called for two paid sick days. The official opposition said seven, maybe 10. I'm proud to say that we've delivered one month of paid sick days for workers in this province.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: The government's rollout of the vaccine has been very slow. It's been very confusing. We know that we've now slipped to eighth when it comes to per capita vaccinations being achieved in the 10 provinces. The variants, we know, are picking up speed in terms of transmission. We know that AstraZeneca has a shelf life that we have to be concerned about. And we know that what we should be doing is everything we possibly can to encourage people to get their vaccines and to take away the barriers to doing so.

Why will this Premier not step up and make sure workers, our front-line heroes, can get their vaccine without losing any pay?

Hon. Monte McNaughton: We have been stepping up for workers every single day during this pandemic. In fact, I'm proud to say that 80% of the federal sick day program is directly deposited into workers' bank accounts within

three to five days. Workers in Ontario can now apply more than once.

We continued to advocate on behalf of workers. A few weeks ago, the federal government, to their credit, stepped up and delivered 20 days, one month, of paid sick days for workers. We're going to continue every single day to stand up for the working-class families of this province. We're going to stand with workers every day until COVID-19 is a distant memory.

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

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Well, we on this side of the House are ready to pass any kind of legislation or motion the government will bring forward to make sure people are able to continue to get paid even if they have to go get a vaccine. That's something we're prepared—it's been a year, Speaker. It's been a year and this government has not stepped up to protect the livelihoods of our front-line heroes throughout this pandemic.

It's about time that we do the right thing here. I mean, how hard is it to do the right thing by these front-line workers? I would ask the Premier and the government to make it easy for folks, to take the burden off, to make sure people don't have to worry about losing pay when they make their appointment to go get vaccinated. Will the Premier please do the right thing?

Hon. Monte McNaughton: We've been advocating on behalf of workers and their families in every community every single day during this pandemic. In fact, our government has invested more than \$45 billion, including billions in additional supports for the health care system, supports for individuals, supports for businesses.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier of this province worked with the Prime Minister and all provincial and territorial leaders to deliver over a billion dollars in paid sick days for workers. There is still over \$700 million left in that bank account. We're going to continue to work with Minister Qualtrough and the federal government to continue advocating on behalf of workers to ensure that all of us, working together, get through COVID-19.

LAND USE PLANNING

Ms. Catherine Fife: My question is to the Premier. This is a question about government ethics and accountability.

Last Thursday, the government tabled the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act. Normally, you would assume a bill with a name like that focused on expanding broadband. However, on Friday, leaked memos revealed that the true purpose of the legislation was to help casino developers in Durham pave over protected wetlands and avoid a court battle.

That's bad enough, Mr. Speaker, but a scan of Elections Ontario's records shows that just days ago the PC Party cashed in nearly \$5,000 worth of donations from the project's lead developers. Can the Premier tell Ontarians why his party is seeking big donations from developers

and then helping them pave over protected wetlands in the province of Ontario?

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

Mr. Parm Gill: I want to thank the member opposite for the question. Every single MZO issued by the minister on non-provincially owned land has been at the request of the local municipalities. Of course, as we all know, in this particular incident, it was requested by the city of Pickering. It was supported by the region of Durham. This is an important project for the region.

Mr. Speaker, to answer the question in terms of the political donations, I reject the premise of that question altogether. If the member opposite did a little bit more homework on that, she would find out that the same developers actually donated thousands of dollars to the members of the opposite party, including the former Premier's riding and the current leader of the Liberal Party.

Interjections.

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

Ms. Catherine Fife: Well, perhaps you should reject the donations, and then you would have some credibility in this House.

Ontarians aren't surprised by the Premier's relationship with big developers and especially that it's resulting in a loss of wetlands and natural spaces. But it's wild how brazen he's become while he thinks Ontarians are preoccupied with the pandemic.

On February 24, the developers filled the PC Party's coffers with nearly \$5,000. Next year, they're going to be able to donate \$10,000. But just eight days later, on March 4, the minister rushed out a regulation that effectively forces the warehouse to be built on top of a wetland while also putting related legislation into a bill that's supposed to be about broadband Internet, which is an issue that we all care about.

Speaker, does the Premier really think that Ontarians are that gullible, that there's no connection between the donations and what you're designing through legislation for developers, especially when this government bends over backwards to accommodate his big donors?

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

Ms. Catherine Fife: Withdraw.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The government can reply: the member for Milton.

Mr. Parm Gill: Mr. Speaker, the facts are important, and we all know the NDP and the Liberals always seem to be short when it comes to the real facts. As I pointed out, this particular MZO was requested by the city of Pickering. It was supported by the region of Durham. This is an important project for the region. This project would help create over 10,000 jobs and boost the economy in the region.

The proponent and the TRCA have also entered into an agreement that will ensure the creation of ecological benefit that meets or exceeds any loss to the natural system. Mr. Speaker, this will lead to a net benefit to the natural environment.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mr. Mike Harris: I have had many extraordinary women in my life who have helped shape me into the man I am today, from my mother to my grandmothers to aunts, teachers and even neighbours, women who have played a strong role in my upbringing. And I know that I am not the only one in this House who can say such a thing, Mr. Speaker. Now, I have my wife and my daughter to help shape me into being a more loving husband and supportive dad. Each one of us owes a lot to the women in our lives who have been there in the good and the bad times.

We know that COVID has impacted women at a higher rate than men. This includes both economically and their social well-being. Speaker, can the Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues tell the House what the government is doing to support women across Ontario, especially during the pandemic?

1050

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member from Kitchener–Conestoga for that great question and also for being a friend and supporter to myself and my caucus colleagues.

It is true that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted women. Women have been more likely to lose their jobs or leave work to care for kids, and the rates of domestic violence are on the rise.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, I have been working hard with sector partners and colleagues to put supports around women. Women's shelters have remained open. Additional funding has been given to help with infection and prevention control. Emergency child care has been given to front-line workers, a majority of those being women.

Our government has given wage increases to front-line workers like PSWs and those in the social services sector with, again, the majority of them being women, and we are investing into retraining those who have lost their jobs into things like skilled trades, which have many incredible opportunities that are well-paying and secure. These are just some of the things that we have done, with more to do so that women will not be left behind during this pandemic and beyond.

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

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you to the minister for that response. It's reassuring to know that our government is focusing on protecting those who have been impacted the most by the pandemic, and of course this includes women.

Speaker, the minister mentioned something that I think is important: Many of those on the front lines of this pandemic are women. These are strong, brave women who have been on the front lines, front and centre, risking their lives to support us. From nurses and doctors, to support staff at our local hospitals, to police officers and first responders: a heartfelt thank you. As I said before, we really owe a lot to the women in our lives, whether directly or indirectly. We should be celebrating them and thanking them every day, Speaker. It is even more true on International Women's Day.

Can the minister please share what we can do to thank all the women in our lives for the incredible work that they do?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you again to the member for that question.

We celebrate International Women's Day to highlight the success and leadership of women around the world, and the first place I would like to start is right here with the women in this chamber. Each one is a wonderful representative in their ridings and their community, showing strong leadership that women belong everywhere. While we may disagree on policy or politics, each one of us is working hard to represent our constituents while balancing many other responsibilities. It is an honour to serve in this House with each and every one of you.

I also want to take a moment to recognize the nurses, doctors, personal support workers, researchers, child care and early-years workers and other women on the front line of this pandemic, and to say a thank you to all of them. We already know how phenomenal women and girls are and the important role that they play in each one of our lives. COVID has only made it clearer that Ontario would not operate without the extraordinary women who have stepped in and stepped up to protect our province. That includes our Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, who has done an outstanding job to work hard for this province.

LAND USE PLANNING

Ms. Jennifer K. French: My question is to the Premier. Lower Duffins Creek in the Durham region is an environmental wetland complex that has been classified as provincially significant and is protected by law, yet this Premier and his minions—sorry, ministers—are pursuing its destruction at all costs. The community cannot understand why this government would prioritize a warehouse that could be built elsewhere over a provincially significant, irreplaceable, environmentally vital wetland. Ontario Nature and Environmental Defence have launched an ecojustice lawsuit against this government alleging unlawful use of a minister's zoning order, or MZO, allowing for demolition of a part of this protected wetland.

Speaker, this government just introduced Bill 257 that would retroactively make lawful what up until this bill would have been deemed unlawful. My question is: Is the Premier planning to rewrite any other laws to wriggle out of any other lawsuits?

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

Mr. Parm Gill: As I pointed out earlier, every single MZO issued by the minister has been at the request of the local municipality, unless the lands are provincially owned. In this particular case, the request was made by the city. It was supported by the region. This project is important to the region. It would create over 10,000 jobs.

Mr. Speaker, we have a responsibility to support our municipal partners. That is exactly what we're doing. The proponent in this case and the TRCA have entered into an

agreement that will ensure the creation of ecological benefit that meets or exceeds any loss to the natural system and will lead to a net benefit to the natural environment system. We're also committed to growing the greenbelt. We've launched the consultation, currently. We've made a commitment, unlike the Liberals, who carved out the greenbelt 17 different times.

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

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Again to the Premier: As CBC recently reported, an internal government memo warns that without these Bill 257 Planning Act amendments, there is a “moderately high risk that” this “MZO would be found to have contravened” that law. It also warns that without consultation with impacted Indigenous communities, there is a “high risk that a court would conclude that Ontario has not fulfilled its constitutional consultation obligations.” Wow. This government is going to remarkable lengths to follow through on this warehouse promise.

This weekend, hundreds of people in Pickering took a stand for the wetland and against this Premier's anti-environment agenda. The President of the Treasury Board, who is also the Minister of Finance, should be defending this environmental treasure in his community. Folks across the Durham region want to know why this MPP, the Premier and the Minister of Municipal Affairs are doggedly clinging to this particular project.

I would love to know who's really making the decisions for the Premier or for the province. My question is this: What will it take for this Premier to leave Duffins Creek alone and stop attacking the environment?

Mr. Parm Gill: As I continue to point out, facts are facts. Facts can't be changed. I know the members opposite are always, for some reason, short on facts.

As I mentioned, we made a commitment to protect the greenbelt. The minister has been absolutely clear that we will not allow any development into the greenbelt, period. As a matter of fact, we are working on expanding the greenbelt. We've launched the consultations.

Unlike the opposition NDP that supported the Liberals—the Liberal government carved out the greenbelt 17 different times. We believe it is absolutely unacceptable to be able to do that, especially to support their friends, to support the insiders. We will not tolerate that on this side of the House. We will continue to stand up for every single Ontarian.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. Roman Baber: My question is to the Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues. Minister, today we mark and celebrate International Women's Day. Like all of our colleagues, I'm astonished and saddened by the spike in domestic partner violence over the last year. I'm referring to a February 15 article by the Canadian Press regarding the continued rise in domestic violence. Canada's Assaulted Women's Helpline fielded 20,000 calls between October 1 and December 31, 2020, compared to 12,000 during the same period in 2019.

“Everything closed overnight, and our crisis lines lit up,” said Yvonne Harding, a manager at the organization. There were limited supports for women beforehand, but at least they had outlets. They had opportunities to leave the house to get help, such as daily trips to and from school. Less access to family and friends is leaving victims with fewer options.

Minister, instead of citing dollar figures and statistics as to what the government claims to have done to stop the rise in domestic violence, I'd like to ask if you'd agree with me that ending the lockdown would immediately help many women to be safer at home.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member for that question. I think it was about a year ago that I visited a shelter in your region with the D'Amico family, and thank you for the contributions that they have made. I'd also like to thank the front-line workers working in women's shelters across Ontario. Thank you to OAITH and Marlene and her workers. They have worked so hard to ensure women are kept safe at this time, because it's not always safe for everyone to stay home, and women and children who are at risk of violence need to have supports in place.

It's a critical time for residential service providers for people experiencing violence to have the security that they need to continue supporting vulnerable women. This year, our government is investing \$172 million in supports for survivors and violence prevention initiatives. This includes investments in emergency shelters, counselling, 24-hour crisis lines, safety planning and transitional housing. And as part of the COVID-19 Action Plan for Vulnerable People, we are also investing \$40 million in COVID residential relief funding.

I will have more to answer in the supplementary.

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

Mr. Roman Baber: Thank you, Speaker, but my question was if the minister agreed that ending the lockdown would help many women be safer at home. I submit that the answer is unequivocally yes, and therefore continue to implore the government to end the lockdown.

Minister, the effects of the lockdown on the economic well-being of women are profound and disproportionate compared to men. Last November, the Royal Bank said that tens of thousands of women have already left the workforce. According to the Canadian Women's Foundation, women accounted for more than 63% of jobs lost since March 2020.

The job recovery among men was much better than among women. As of the end of July, women recouped only half of the initial job losses and mostly in part-time work. So I ask the minister to please set aside what the Doug Ford government claims to have done.

1100

On this International Women's Day, would the minister agree that ending the lockdown and fully reopening the economy is the best thing to do for the well-being of Ontario's women?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member for that question. I agree that women need to be kept safe and have

supports in place. I also agree that women have been disproportionately affected during this pandemic. That's why this government is investing \$4.6 million in the Women's Economic Security Program and \$2.2 million in Investing in Women's Futures program. These are programs that are made available to provide crucial funding to organizations that support women who are in low-income positions to develop knowledge, skills and experience to transition into well-paying jobs.

I thank the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development for the work he has been doing to encourage women in the skilled trades by providing the funds available and necessary to take women who have lost their jobs and give them the opportunities to retrain for jobs of the future; jobs that are sitting empty, where we need women to fill those places.

I thank all of my colleagues, and thank you to all the women we have worked with at virtual round tables, hearing first-hand what the needs and concerns of the women in Ontario are. As we said, keeping women safe and supported is our number one priority.

BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE

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

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you again, Speaker. This time it's to the Minister of Infrastructure.

Even before the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, I received inquiries from many of my constituents in Kitchener–Conestoga who are struggling with unreliable broadband service. The pandemic has only amplified the problems of poor, inadequate service. Far too many people in our province lack reliable Internet and, in some cases, they have no connectivity at all.

I know our government has made historic investments to improve connectivity, and we understand the importance of this for our small businesses and the many families and students who rely on it to learn and stay connected. Yet despite all the provincial investments and the potential benefits of your legislation to remove barriers to building broadband faster, there are still some members of this House who claim the province has to do more, that we aren't doing enough and that there's more work to do.

Would you please explain to us exactly what it will take to get adequate broadband across Ontario?

Hon. Laurie Scott: Thank you to the member from Kitchener–Conestoga for his question and his advocacy for his constituents. The member is quite right: Our government has done a number of things to help close the digital divide. As the member points out, in the provincial budget presented last fall, we announced historic investments to broadband infrastructure.

But as I've pointed out many times before to the members of the Legislative Assembly here, broadband is a federally regulated sector. It is the CRTC that is responsible for establishing countrywide rates and standards for Internet and cellular connectivity.

However, despite this, Ontario is not standing still. Our government is taking steps to close the digital divide, and while we continue to call on our federal government to do its part and properly fund broadband, I would invite all members of this House to join us in that call.

Mr. Speaker, we are making historic investments and taking steps to improve and expand broadband connectivity to communities right across the province, and I'll have more to say in the supplementary.

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

Mr. Mike Harris: Minister, I'd like to read an email I received from Keith, a Conestoga College student from Elmira, taking online courses:

"Dear MPP Harris, when I finished high school, I never imagined that I would be taking college courses online because of COVID-19.

"If I had reliable Internet taking my courses would be far less stressful. I often have problems participating in my classes because of weak and unreliable connections, and sometimes I have to do my school work late at night or early in the morning to get a better connection."

Keith goes on: "With my mid-terms about to start, I'm really concerned that my lousy Internet will add unnecessary stress.

"With more and more people doing things online, when can we expect things to improve for people outside the city when it comes to Internet service?" I'd like to thank Keith for that message.

My question, again, for the Minister of Infrastructure is: When might students like Keith have access to reliable high-speed Internet?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I'd again like to thank the member opposite for his question. I want to say to Keith that I understand the difficulties he's experiencing. I live it, too, as many of the members of the Legislature do.

I understand that more and more people are accessing services online. Students are learning online, families are shopping online, and that's why we have a plan. That's why, for more than a year, our government has taken action to improve Internet connectivity for communities in Ontario that lack adequate service. We're making historic investments to improve Internet service in northern Ontario, southwestern Ontario, eastern Ontario and central Ontario.

Last week, I introduced legislation that, if passed, will help us bridge the digital divide, because now more than ever, we need a made-in-Ontario plan to help build infrastructure faster, strengthen our communities, and lay the foundation for growth and renewal and long-term economic recovery. We're taking action to remove barriers, and I expect this whole Legislature to support this legislation to increase broadband connectivity—

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

EDUCATION FUNDING

Ms. Marit Stiles: This question is for the Premier. Speaker, before the pandemic, students in this province

were already struggling with overcrowded classrooms and not enough one-on-one support. What did this government do? They tried to lay off 10,000 teachers. Parents, students, education workers and we in the opposition stopped the worst of those cuts, but we entered this pandemic playing catch-up, racing to hire the staff needed to keep our kids safe and learning.

This pandemic is far from over, but a new Ministry of Education memo is warning that school boards must prepare for staff layoffs for the year ahead. Apparently, the funding for COVID has an expiry date.

Speaker, why is the Premier looking to make deep cuts to education when our kids need more support than ever?

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I want to join the Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues in congratulating and acknowledging International Women's Day today.

I will note, Speaker, that there is no government and no Premier—pre-pandemic and during this pandemic—that has invested more in public education than this Progressive Conservative Party. Funding is up per student. Funding to school boards, over \$25 billion, is up. Funding in mental health more than doubled; that funding envelope is up. For special education, at historic levels, over \$3.1 billion—that funding is up. Funding to prepare students for STEM careers is up in this province. Funding to lift math scores, over \$200 million: That funding envelope is up. To support safe, reliable transportation, funding is up. Funding in the skilled trades and skills development to encourage more into apprenticeships and careers that we know we need: That funding is up. That funding will continue to remain up under this government because believe in public education.

We believe in lifting up, creating an opportunity society, where young people who work hard and get a good education get a good job. That is our mission, and we're going to continue to focus on lifting students up every single day in this province.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: Mr. Speaker, perhaps the Minister of Education didn't hear the question. Making class sizes bigger and laying off staff was always a terrible plan. But today, it is an even worse plan. Frankly, it's unconscionable.

Children have coped with trauma, loss and anxiety over the last year. Our school communities have shown resilience and creativity in the face of absolutely incredible odds, but this pandemic is not over. The disruption is not over. Every single expert in education is saying the same thing: Students and staff are going to need more support than ever.

Will the Premier assure anxious parents today that he will invest in the well-being, recovery and future of our students and take these cuts off the table?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Mr. Speaker, our government is going to continue to invest in public education.

I do note the ever-changing position of the member from Davenport. On February 5, the member said, "I've been asking where these mystery hires are for months." And yet today—today—she purports to believe that these hires were critical. So which one is it? Either they didn't happen for the last six months, as you attacked the government, or they did.

The fact is, Speaker, we know 3,400 more teachers were hired on a temporary basis to support lower classroom sizes, 134 more mental health workers and 1,300 more custodians working hard in our schools. The fact is, we know these temporary investments have made a difference to protect students and keep our schools open, a position contrary to the Liberals and New Democrats, who would have closed schools for a longer period.

We are on the side of parents who want investments going to the front of class. We're going to continue to deliver that while ensuring quality education, merit-based hiring and a curriculum that leads to more jobs in this province.

PERSONAL SUPPORT WORKERS

Mr. John Fraser: My question is for the Premier. Speaker, personal support workers are a vital part of care here in Ontario. COVID-19 has revealed just how valuable they are. The majority of PSWs are women. They have been working tirelessly on the front lines, battling this virus, putting themselves at risk and their families at risk, too many times without the proper protective equipment. They care for the people we care for most.

1110

I've heard the Premier thank PSWs many times, and I know that they probably appreciate his thanks, but what they need is his commitment.

The temporary wage enhancement is set to expire on March 31.

Speaker, through you: Can the Premier commit to providing PSWs a permanent wage increase?

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

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you very much to the member for the question.

We value the work that personal support workers do in all aspects of our health care system—in long-term care, home and community care, hospitals.

As part of the government's plan to deal with COVID-19, we have increased PSW wages—\$3 per hour for eligible workers in long-term care, \$3 per hour for eligible workers in home and community care, \$2 an hour for eligible workers in public hospitals, and \$3 per hour for eligible workers in social services providing direct personal support services to people in their community. This is something that we need to do in order to recruit and retain personal support workers.

We're examining all aspects of the issues relating to personal support workers, including the amount that they're being paid. There are many other issues. This is something that is under consideration right now by our

government, and we will take action as necessary on or before March 31.

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

Mr. John Fraser: I don't believe I got the answer that PSWs need to hear today. They need to hear about the government's commitment. They don't want to see another six-week gap between the pandemic pay and the next iteration.

It's critical that we raise these wages to stabilize the workforce, and it's the right thing to do. One of the challenges that we have right now is that it's becoming destabilized between home care and long-term care. We know that we need to raise those wages permanently and we have to pay people a decent living wage. Fewer home care PSWs will mean less care for seniors, which means it will put more pressure on long-term care; it will also not allow them to be where they want to be.

Advocates are calling on the government not only to standardize the wages across both sectors but also to raise the wages of PSWs to \$25 an hour in all health care settings.

Speaker, through you: Will the Premier assure this House that his government will standardize PSW wages to \$25 an hour?

Hon. Christine Elliott: We're certainly well aware of the issues relating to personal support workers, who provide a vital role in our health care system.

The member will also know that the issue isn't simply one of remuneration. That is part of it, for sure, but we also know that as we graduate personal support workers in Ontario, almost half of them leave within about a year, because in some cases, they don't expect the work they're actually going to be facing. So we need to take a bunch of actions, and one is to make sure that as they're trained, they have training within some of the places of work—in hospitals, in long-term-care homes, in home and community care—so that they can anticipate what the work is going to be.

We also need to recognize them as a profession. They're sort of the forgotten workers in the health care system, when in actual fact they are the foundation—especially in home care, where they're meeting very vulnerable clients.

All of these issues are being taken into consideration right now, along with the issue of remuneration, because we know we need more personal support workers within our health care system.

PIPELINES

Mr. Mike Harris: This time, I rise to ask the government about its position on the line 5 energy corridor, following last week's historic vote. This House voted to call upon the federal and provincial governments to fight against the closure of line 5, while at the same time recognizing the safety of pipelines as a way to transport energy.

Mr. Speaker, will the government House leader please stand and commit that this government will get behind this motion, protect Ontario's jobs and fight against the closure of line 5?

Hon. Paul Calandra: The member is quite correct: That was a very historic vote last week, for a number of reasons. Not only did the vast majority of this House agree that pipelines are safe and important for jobs and economic activity; we saw an historic shift, finally, from the NDP, who for decades have talked against pipelines, have talked against the safety of pipelines.

Earlier in the week, I know the leader of Her Majesty's loyal opposition had suggested that the line 5 debate was something that shouldn't even happen in the province of Ontario. They voted against line 5 twice. But finally, after the great work of the member for Sarnia–Lambton and a number of other members, he was able to convince the NDP that 50 years of NDP ideology on pipeline safety was wrong and that it is responsible for good jobs, it is safe, Mr. Speaker.

We will do all that we can to make sure that we work with the federal government to keep this line 5 going, as the House has asked us to do. I thank the NDP for their support of pipelines and those jobs.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary.

Mr. Mike Harris: I thank the government for its strong position on this issue, and I also want to congratulate the NDP for finally agreeing that pipelines are a safe way to transport energy here in the province. I know that the people of southwestern Ontario would have appreciated it as well if the Liberal members in this House would have also voted to protect jobs and save the line 5 pipeline.

Mr. Speaker, because this is such an important issue, can the government House leader stand and unequivocally affirm that the government here in the province of Ontario will fight for line 5?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, the member is absolutely correct, and I can assure the member, and all of those members who voted in favour of line 5, that we will do just that. We will fight to ensure that that motion is brought forward, that our federal friends and our friends down south understand the importance of line 5.

What is shocking, Mr. Speaker, is that in his first test of leadership, the leader of the Liberal Party failed the people of the province of Ontario. He failed workers. He failed all of those people that rely on jobs because of line 5. He has proven that he's not ready for the job. He's not up to the job. This Liberal leader is the same as the other Liberal leader, Mr. Speaker.

We will stand up for jobs. We will stand up for pipelines. We will stand up for the billions of dollars of economic activity that natural resources provide to the people of the province of Ontario. Even if the Liberals won't, Mr. Speaker, we will.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Ms. Sara Singh: Today we celebrate International Women's Day, and I want to wish all our sisters around the world a happy International Women's Day.

But, Speaker, while we celebrate, we must also commit to ensuring that we have a gender-based strategy to our economic recovery here in the province of Ontario. For the last year, as Ontario faced the biggest crisis it's ever seen, it's been women who have been on the forefront of the crisis. Without the sacrifices of these nurses, teachers, PSWs and front-line heroes, all mainly women, who knows where we'd be today.

But while women were working hard to keep us safe and keep our province moving, this government refused to give PSWs the raise that they promised. They sent teachers back to unsafe classrooms. They stood by while women lost their jobs and their livelihoods and were forced to close their businesses. And they keep voting against paid sick days here in Ontario.

My question to the Premier: Will the government commit today, on International Women's Day, to ensuring that all women will receive the supports that they need in this economic recovery and that they won't be left behind in this crisis as we move forward?

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

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member for that question, and happy International Women's Day to all women that are here.

In my ministry, we celebrate women every single day. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the many mentors that I've had in my life growing up, such as my mom, who is also a politician locally—and also the work that we need to do to mentor the next generation. I have three young daughters, and I hope that they will work hard to achieve all of their goals.

But I think it's also important that we're supported by men. I look to the men in my own caucus who are here to support us, our Premier who supports us as women in government. Thank you to each and every one of you. Everybody has a role in achieving gender equality, and that includes men and boys. We need to continue changing attitudes that prevent women and girls from achieving their full potential.

We recognize that women have been disproportionately affected by this pandemic, and women will not be left behind as this province recovers.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary? The member for Toronto—St. Paul's.

Ms. Jill Andrew: Speaker, based on this Conservative government's responses this morning, on International Women's Day, women are yet again not a priority. We need an intersectional feminist recovery, one that serves the women of St. Paul's and across Ontario, during COVID-19 and beyond.

Our local PSWs need a \$4-an-hour permanent pay increase, for starters. Our local women small business owners need no evictions. We need funding to keep our businesses alive. We need the funding this government promised us from Metrolinx to market and advertise our small businesses, especially those run by women and BIPOC community members. Our women artists deserve direct funding. Our survivors of violence deserve OSAP forgiveness.

1120

When is this government going to give women the same priority it gives to PC Party donors, developers and big corporate CEOs? If not on International Women's Day, Speaker, when? When are you going to get it right for women?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member for this question. We, in fact, support women each and every single day. This government has stepped up. As you said, you've talked to many workers across the province, as have I, as have all of members of cabinet. One thing that we hear from women many times is the need for child care.

I thank my colleague the Minister of Education for the work that he has done to ensure that we are providing affordable, accessible and flexible daycare for women and families across this province. In fact, we committed \$1 billion to build thousands of new child care spaces in schools over the coming years, in addition to the 16,000 spaces created in 2020. We provided Ontario with the CARE tax credit, in addition to the child care expense deduction, and will target tax relief in low- and middle-income families.

This government has stepped up. We are here to support families and women. Thank you to the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development for his investments in training women into well-paying jobs that are needed in the future. This government steps up every single day, not just on International Women's Day.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: Happy International Women's Day to all women. Today I wear green for hope.

My question is to the Minister of Health. Minister, Scarborough has been the hardest-hit community in Ontario when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospitals in Scarborough have had the highest COVID in-patient numbers, more than any other health unit in the province. For every 100 individuals infected, five end up in ICU in Scarborough.

The Ontario COVID-19 science table reports that a vaccine strategy that prioritizes both age and neighbourhood would prevent an additional 3,767 cases, 702 hospital admissions, 145 ICU admissions and 168 deaths from COVID-19, as compared to a strategy that prioritizes based on age alone.

Equal share of vaccines to all hospitals sounds fair, but it is not when you consider the positivity rates and the infection rates and the ravages of this virus over the last 12 months in Scarborough. Minister, will you prioritize the distribution of vaccines to Scarborough hospitals and clinics today?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you very much to the member for the question. This is a really important issue. We do have a vaccination plan, one plan that is being rolled out by the 34 public health unit regions across the province.

The allocations are based on the population in the area, but it's also looking at things like at-risk neighbourhoods and situations where there are a number of homeless

shelters, for example. There are additional vaccines that are allocated based on that, because we know that there are situations where there are some at-risk neighbourhoods where they have exceptional rates of both COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and, unfortunately, deaths.

We are taking both age and risk into account in both allocating vaccinations and setting up the clinics. As a matter of fact, I will be visiting a mass vaccination clinic this afternoon with the Premier in Scarborough.

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

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: I thank the minister for that. I would love to join you on that visit in Scarborough, because that is not what I am hearing from the health providers in Scarborough. We have not seen the number of allocations based on risk, and we know that Scarborough has been the hardest-hit community compared to anywhere else in terms of the infection rates, as well as the hospitalization rates. Therefore, they do require more vials of vaccine.

I can appreciate that other hospitals and areas in the province have extra vials so they've started to vaccinate those 80 and over in their communities. The Scarborough allocation has not even been enough to do the allocation of phase 1. They need more vaccines for the size of the problem that they have based on infection rates, based on positivity rates, based on death rates. We have the data, we have the science, we have the ethics to make this decision.

Will you provide the vaccines so that Scarborough hospitals can do the vaccinations to those over 80 in the community this week?

Hon. Christine Elliott: We are taking all of those factors into consideration. Every public health unit region across Ontario—all 34 of them—receives vaccines based on population, based on risk, based on at-risk neighbourhoods, based on the number of shelters and homeless people they have. All of that is being taken into consideration. Scarborough is no different than any other community.

What I would say is that some areas with smaller populations are now able to do the inoculations of people over 80 years of age. In some parts of Toronto, that hasn't happened yet because of the number of essential workers who need to be inoculated, the number of people in long-term-care homes and so on.

I can tell you that over the next several weeks Toronto's Pfizer allocations are going to be quadrupled, in addition to 17,000 doses of Moderna this week—with plans to increase future allocations to over 70,000 doses in future shipments.

I would also point out that, according to the COVID-19 science advisory table, due to swift action by our government, and in conjunction with our partners, our implementation of the vaccine rollout to the—

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

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Faisal Hassan: My question is for the Premier. My office has been contacted by many family members

confused about the vaccine rollout—who qualifies, where they go, and how their elderly parents or those with language barriers will be able to access the system.

York South–Weston is an identified hot spot and one of high risk, and is home to many essential workers, many of whom are Black and racialized. Residents who were previously neglected by this government, when a local COVID-19 testing facility wasn't even established until late September of last year, are fearful they are once again being left behind.

What can the Premier tell our community about the vaccine plan to address residents' concerns? And will our high-risk community have local vaccination facilities?

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

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you very much to the member for the question. This is an important issue. I know many people are concerned about when they will be receiving their vaccines. They're anxious about it, and we're anxious that they receive the vaccine as soon as possible.

We are vaccinating, based on age, of course—as the end of phase 1, people over 80. As we start moving into phase 2, it will be people between 60 and 79 years of age, and so on. But it's also based on risk, as I've indicated before. There are some at-risk neighbourhoods within Toronto that will be receiving additional vaccines. There will be some mobile testing clinics. There will be mass vaccination sites, as well.

The communications are very important. They have been translated into a number of different languages. That information is available on the website. In addition, as the local public health units are ready to start vaccinating different stages of age and risk, people in those communities will be notified in many, many languages.

We want everyone who wants a vaccine in Ontario to be able to receive one.

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

Mr. Faisal Hassan: Back to the Premier: A recent Toronto Star story outlining the more than 350 sites for COVID-19 immunization did not include a single location in a high-risk community like ours in York South–Weston.

I know this government wants to pass things off to local public health, but I urge you to take direct action and leadership and to work with Toronto Public Health to leave no one behind and to be vigilant when it comes to high-risk communities like ours.

I sent the health minister and Dr. de Villa a letter outlining a list of suggestions, like vaccinating entire seniors' buildings at one time.

Will the government listen to my suggestions, which include local access and accommodation for seniors and others who simply cannot physically stand waiting in long lineups, and create vaccination facilities in my community?

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

Hon. Christine Elliott: I thank the member very much for his suggestions. I'd be very interested in reviewing them, because we want to make sure that everyone who wants a vaccine will be able to get one.

We are working with Dr. de Villa. I know that Dr. Williams, our Chief Medical Officer of Health, speaks with Dr. de Villa almost daily. That is really important, because we want to make sure that we're going to have access sites for people to receive vaccinations in all parts of the province and in many locations. Some will be mass vaccination clinics. Some will be in pharmacies. Some will be at primary care providers. Some will be even mobile test units for some of the communities at risk.

1130

We are working with Dr. de Villa. We are working to make sure that all of the information is translated into many languages. We don't want language to be a barrier for people to be able to receive access to vaccines. We will take every step we need to take to ensure that everyone who wants a vaccine will be able to get one.

CHILD CARE

M^{me} Lucille Collard: My question is for the Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues. On International Women's Day, I too want to ensure that we don't miss the opportunity to recognize the disproportionate impact that this pandemic has had on women in particular. It's worth repeating that 10 times more women than men have fallen out of the labour workforce. Which women were hit hardest? Youth, visible minorities, newcomers and many moms. Twelve times as many mothers as fathers left their jobs to care for toddlers and school-age children. Most of us likely know at least one woman, if not more, who is part of these alarming statistics.

Mr. Speaker, I'm asking this question on behalf of all women of Ontario who are struggling right now to stay afloat and continue to be a pillar to their family: Can the minister explain how child care will be made more affordable and accessible and explain how and when women can have access to the supports you have referred to to ensure that they can truly be part of the economic recovery?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member for that great question. As I said, not a round table goes by from any sector but that we talk about child care and how necessary it is, not just for moms but also for families.

Thank you to the Minister of Education. We participated and heard from numerous women across the province on what we can be doing to ensure that we have affordable, accessible and flexible child care. Child care centres are not always possible for women who are working in agriculture, women who are working in skilled trades. We need to ensure that we have that flexibility when moving forward, which is why this government has the CARE tax credit to ensure that. We've also committed a billion dollars to build thousands of new child care spaces in Ontario—as I said, 16,000 spaces created in 2020 alone.

We are working as well with our federal, provincial and territorial counterparts to ensure that we have child care spaces available for women because we know it is such an important piece. I look forward to the supplementary.

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

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Having to sustain such economic hardship doesn't come without emotional and mental challenges. We haven't spoken to that yet, but so many women are almost expected to be superwomen. The reality is, we're just human. You know that.

While some women can benefit from the support of their family, not everyone does. Single moms are struggling, and so many who were already in challenging positions before the pandemic don't know where to turn for help. My question is, what is the government doing to actively offer mental health support to women?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you again to the member for that question. I, too, have heard heartbreaking stories from women in this province about the struggles they have had during COVID. We know that women have been disproportionately affected because they are overrepresented in areas such as hospitality and tourism, the restaurant business, retail businesses. These are all issues that we need to take forward and hear first-hand from those women, but also hearing the solutions as well.

I understand that mental health has been an issue for everybody—for our young people for whom we're providing supports in post-secondary for mental health but also for those who have lost their jobs, have lost their business. I work with the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions and the great work that they are doing on our Roadmap to Wellness and the Minister of Health as well to ensure that we're providing mental health supports across the lifespan of people, ranging from young to adults and seniors.

Thank you for your concerns.

HOUSING

Ms. Jessica Bell: My question is to the Premier. At 12:01 a.m. today, the stay-at-home order was lifted and the mass eviction of tenants has begun again in Toronto. Fourteen thousand Ontarians have already been evicted from their homes during the pandemic. These people have been forced to find emergency shelter, look for apartments or crash with family and friends in the middle of a pandemic. Many of these people have lost their income, their job or their business through no fault of their own because of COVID-19.

Evictions are very clearly putting people at risk of catching and spreading COVID-19, and with new, more aggressive COVID-19 variants spreading in our community, people must have a safe and secure place to call home at this time.

Premier, you said people who can't pay their rent during COVID-19 will not face eviction, so why are you lifting the eviction ban?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Again, I'll remind the members to make their comments through the Chair.

The Attorney General to reply.

Hon. Doug Downey: As the member knows, the Landlord and Tenant Board is an adjudicative tribunal that resolves disputes between landlords and tenants, independent of the government. And as the member opposite knows as well, the emergency order was issued to protect

public health: to help people stay at home and prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The enforcement of evictions was temporarily suspended in those areas that were locked down, and now that the lockdown has been lifted, normal processes will resume. There is discretion, and the sheriff's office has its own directive.

We will continue to put the safety of individuals at the forefront of everything that we do.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BUSINESS

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I beg to inform the House that pursuant to standing order 101(c), a change has been made to the order of precedence on the ballot list for private members' public business, such that Ms. Begum assumes ballot item number 63 and Mr. Rakocevic assumes ballot item number 93.

DEFERRED VOTES

INTERNET ACCESS

ACCÈS À L'INTERNET

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): We now have a deferred vote on private member's notice of motion number 142, as moved by Mr. Mantha.

The bells will now ring for 30 minutes, during which time members may cast their votes. I will ask the Clerks to prepare the lobbies.

The division bells rang from 1137 to 1207.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The vote on the motion for private member's notice of motion number 142 has taken place.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 18; the nays are 36.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion lost.

Motion negatived.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): There being no further business at this time, this House stands in recess until 1 p.m.

The House recessed from 1208 to 1300.

REPORTS BY COMMITTEES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 66(c), the supplementary estimates 2020-21 of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry before the Standing Committee on Estimates are deemed to be passed

by the committee, and are deemed to be reported to and received by the House.

Pursuant to standing order 65(c), the supplementary estimates 2020-21 of the Ministry of Transportation and Treasury Board Secretariat, not having been selected for consideration, are deemed to be concurred in.

Report deemed received.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

BATTLE OF THE HATPINS DAY ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 SUR LE JOUR DE LA BATAILLE DES ÉPINGLES À CHAPEAU

Mr. Bourgouin moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 258, An Act to proclaim Battle of the Hatpins Day /
Projet de loi 258, Loi proclamant le Jour de la bataille des
épingles à chapeau.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Would the member care to explain his bill?

M. Guy Bourgouin: En cette Journée internationale des femmes, j'ai le grand plaisir de déposer ce projet de loi visant à proclamer le 7 janvier de chaque année le Jour de la bataille des épingles à chapeau et à honorer le rôle remarquable des femmes franco-ontariennes dans la lutte pour les droits des francophones en Ontario.

La bataille des épingles à chapeau du 7 janvier 1916 est un symbole durable des droits des francophones en Ontario. Des mères, armées de rouleaux à pâtisserie, de casseroles en fonte et d'épingles à chapeau, ont affronté les agents d'exécution du tristement célèbre règlement 17 et repoussé leur tentative d'empêcher l'enseignement en français à l'école Guigues d'Ottawa.

La passion pour l'éducation qu'ont démontrée les soeurs Béatrice et Diane Desloges pendant la bataille des épingles à chapeau a inspiré et continue d'inspirer les francophones à revendiquer l'enseignement en langue française en Ontario, à faire valoir les droits des francophones dans la province et à se battre à cette fin.

VIEWER DISCRETION ACT (IMAGES OF FETUSES), 2021

LOI DE 2021 SUR LES ENVOIS SOUS PLI DISCRET (IMAGES DE FOETUS)

Mr. Kernaghan moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 259, An Act to regulate the mailing of images of fetuses /
Projet de loi 259, Loi réglementant l'envoi
d'images de fœtus par la poste.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll invite the member to explain his bill briefly.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It gives me great pleasure to co-sponsor this bill with the member for London West and the member for London–Fanshawe.

This bill provides that no one shall send a graphic image of a fetus by mail or otherwise distribute such an image unless the image is contained in an opaque envelope, the exterior of the envelope includes a description of the contents and the exterior of the envelope clearly identifies the sender. The penalty for violating this prohibition is a fine of \$100 per image.

STOPPING HARASSMENT AND ABUSE BY LOCAL LEADERS ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 VISANT À METTRE FIN AU HARCÈLEMENT ET AUX ABUS COMMIS PAR LES DIRIGEANTS LOCAUX

Mr. Blais moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 260, An Act to amend various statutes with respect to workplace violence and harassment policies in codes of conduct for councillors and members of local boards /
Projet de loi 260, Loi modifiant diverses lois en ce qui concerne les politiques en matière de violence et de harcèlement au travail prévues dans les codes de déontologie des conseillers et des membres locaux.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Would the member care to explain his bill?

Mr. Stephen Blais: On International Women's Day, it's an honour and a privilege to introduce the Stopping Harassment and Abuse by Local Leaders Act, 2021.

This bill amends the Municipal Act, 2001, and the City of Toronto Act, 2006, to require that codes of conduct for municipal councillors and members of local boards include a requirement for those councillors and members to comply with workplace violence and harassment policies.

The amendments also permit municipalities and local boards to direct the Integrity Commissioner to apply to the court to vacate a member's seat if the commissioner's inquiry determines that the member has contravened the code of conduct by failing to comply with the workplace violence or harassment policies.

STATEMENTS BY THE MINISTRY AND RESPONSES

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Speaker, today is International Women's Day. This global event is a day to celebrate the

achievements and leadership of women across the world. It also reminds us that there is still work to be done when it comes to advancing the status and empowerment of women in Ontario.

This year, the United Nations theme for International Women's Day is "Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future in a COVID-19 World." The theme acknowledges that this year it is particularly important to celebrate women's achievements, given their immense contributions on the front lines and in providing leadership throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaker, the contributions of women during the ongoing pandemic have been front and centre. For example, the daily sacrifice of the 81% of women who make up the health care and social assistance workforce; the foresight and leadership of women in senior roles in public health; the researchers at our post-secondary institutions who make groundbreaking achievements in our fight—our Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, Christine Elliott, has been one of those leaders, working day and night with incredible staff, many who are strong women, to steer our government's response; and the selfless contribution of women caregivers, paid and unpaid, who make personal sacrifices each day to care, school and support those who cannot care for themselves. These are the women in every community across Ontario who have made it possible for our province and country to meet the tremendous challenges posed by COVID-19. We owe these women a debt of gratitude, but we cannot stop there.

We must also recognize the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on women.

A report by the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board released last November cited the pandemic for pushing women's participation in the Canadian labour force to a 30-year low. Many Canadian women with young children had to choose whether to continue paid employment or leave the workforce because of increased family responsibilities.

Women also continue to be under-represented in senior decision-making roles in some of the high-productivity sectors in our economy.

Speaker, these developments, left unchecked, are alarm bells for our economy, so let us continue to work together.

1310

Our government is determined that no woman will be left behind as Ontario reopens. We want to build a province where every girl and woman is empowered to succeed, because promoting women's full economic participation supports Ontario's continued growth and prosperity.

Even before COVID-19, advancing women's economic empowerment was a passion of mine and a focus of this government and Premier. That task is all the more urgent now. Success will involve creating workplaces that welcome and support women's entry and advancement. It will also involve guiding and supporting young girls and women into pathways that lead to good jobs, that allow them to have economic security for themselves and their families. This is why I work with my colleagues, like the

Minister of Finance, Peter Bethlenfalvy; the Minister of Colleges and Universities, Ross Romano; the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development; the Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce; and others on this initiative.

Success means increasing the number of women on boards and in senior management positions. It means supporting training programs that focus on employment, pre-employment, pre-apprenticeship and entrepreneurship specifically for women. It means increasing women's representation in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as science, technology, engineering, math and the skilled trades. Increasing the participation and diversity of women in the labour market, including leadership roles, will ultimately lead to a more productive, innovative and inclusive economy.

Speaker, one of the conditions essential to achieving greater economic empowerment for women is their personal safety and security. The risk of domestic and sexual violence is one that girls and women live with every day in this province, and it has only increased during the pandemic. This threat is a tremendous worry and burden, and its removal should be a priority for all Ontarians. Our government and our Premier have zero tolerance for violence against women in any form. To that end, in the last year we have taken further action to combat human trafficking. Exactly one year and two days ago, we announced our five-year, \$307-million anti-human trafficking strategy, the largest investment of its kind in Canada.

Despite the pandemic, we were able to make progress and achieve milestones in combatting human trafficking under some very challenging circumstances. Further progress was made two weeks ago today when my colleague and friend Solicitor General Sylvia Jones introduced legislative proposals to more firmly cement our anti-human trafficking strategy in law to strengthen our actions to fight this crime, help victims and survivors, and better protect children and youth. We are determined to fight this crime everywhere: in the Legislature, on the front lines, in our schools and courtrooms, and through the support we extend to victims and survivors to help rebuild their lives.

Speaker, as we leave 2020 behind and look cautiously and carefully to reopening our economy, I pledge to continue my passionate advocacy for women's economic empowerment and their personal safety and security. Our post-pandemic goal is to create an equal future for all women in Ontario—a future where women are leaders, decision-makers, entrepreneurs, politicians, and where they are equally represented across all sectors of our economy. This is the future we are building for Ontario.

PIPELINES

Hon. Bill Walker: I'm honoured to rise today on behalf of the Premier and our government to inform the House about our government's work in support of line 5 and of the people whose jobs, families and communities depend on the continued safe and responsible operation of this pipeline.

Our government recognizes that line 5 represents a vital piece of North American energy infrastructure. It ensures the safe transportation of oil, propane and other energy products and delivers access to affordable energy and economic benefits for millions of people and hundreds of communities across the country. That is why the threat to shut down line 5 made by the governor of Michigan demanded swift and resolute advocacy from all levels of government, including this House.

As the Associate Minister of Energy, I'd like to thank all of my colleagues who spoke in support of line 5 during the take-note debate on February 25. In particular, I would like to extend my thanks to the Ministers of Natural Resources and Forestry; Labour; Government and Consumer Services; and Education; as well as the MPPs for Barrie–Innisfil; Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry; Chatham–Kent–Leamington; Flamborough–Glanbrook; Kitchener–Conestoga; Durham; Ajax; Haldimand–Norfolk; Northumberland–Peterborough South; and Peterborough–Kawartha, the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Energy, Northern Development and Mines.

Of course, I want to give special recognition to my friend the MPP for Sarnia–Lambton for his long-standing and dedicated advocacy on this important issue. He has been an absolute champion for the people in his community, and we commend him for working tirelessly to advocate for a united front in the fight to save line 5.

I also want to take this opportunity to recognize the members of the official opposition, who, last Thursday, supported our government's motion recognizing the importance of fighting for Ontario jobs and also recognizing the fact that pipelines are the safest way of transporting energy resources.

Some had previously suggested that line 5 was solely a federal matter or that the provincial government had no role in this matter. But our government believes that there is absolutely a role for the provincial government to stand up to protect its people and families. There is a role for our government to protect Ontario's jobs and businesses, especially as we emerge from the pandemic. And there is absolutely a role for our government—and any government—to ensure the economic and energy security of its people.

As we have said from day one, the shutting down of line 5 would impact each and every one of us. It would raise the cost of fuel, the cost of food, the cost of heating and everything that the people of Ontario rely on every day. This is why our government has been pushing for one voice, for a Team Canada approach in this fight. All of us need to stand together to protect workers, to stand up for jobs and to fight to keep line 5 open, recognizing that pipelines are the safest way of transporting energy sources.

Mr. Speaker, line 5 not only ensures the safe transportation of oil, propane and other energy products and access to affordable energy and economic benefits for communities across Ontario, but it is also essential to the energy security of our neighbours in Quebec, Alberta, and therefore to Canada as a whole. It is also crucial to the

entire Great Lakes region, including the states of Michigan and Ohio.

As a light crude oil and natural gas liquids pipeline with a capacity of 540,000 barrels per day, line 5 is vital to our refining and petrochemical sectors. Our four refineries ensure that Ontario, Quebec, Michigan and the entire Great Lakes region are well supplied with essential products like home heating fuels, gasoline, diesel and jet fuel.

Line 5 also supplies raw fuel liquids to a Sarnia facility that processes them into propane and petrochemical sector inputs.

Line 5 supports a minimum of 5,000 direct and 23,000 indirect jobs—almost a total of 30,000 jobs—in the Sarnia region alone. That's one third of all jobs in this area.

It supports some \$28 billion in trade revenues.

Without it, our regions would collectively face a staggering 45% reduction in the pipeline supply of petroleum. Without it, Ontario and Michigan's energy supply would be jeopardized.

Again, Mr. Speaker, the people of Ontario would feel this impact in all aspects of their lives, with increased prices at the pump, increased costs and supply shortages in home heating fuel, as well as potentially increased costs for anything that requires trucks to ship goods, including groceries and even online purchases.

There would be negative impacts in the fuel needs of our agricultural sector, construction, manufacturing and other industries.

So, in every sense, line 5 is a lifeline to our economic security, our energy security and our way of life.

That is why we have been engaging with the federal government as well as our counterparts in the House of Commons in Ottawa to respond to this issue, stressing the importance of standing up for the jobs and the economy.

Although our government has been advocating for the continued safe operation of line 5 since November, we were relieved to hear the federal Minister of Natural Resources recently state that the line 5 pipeline is “a vital part of Canadian energy security” and that “its continued operation is non-negotiable” in the context of our relationship with our neighbours and friends to the south. Our government is glad to hear this news and looks forward to learning more about what the federal government has been doing on the diplomatic front.

As I mentioned earlier, our government believes that taking a united front, a Team Canada approach, to protecting our economic and energy security alongside will lead to a positive outcome.

I want to assure all members here that our government will continue to give line 5 the highest priority, and continue to work with our federal counterparts to safeguard the people and businesses of our province and our country.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Responses?

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Laura Mae Lindo: I'm absolutely honoured and thrilled to be standing in this House to discuss the

celebration of International Women's Day, but I must admit I'm also quite frustrated.

Prior to the pandemic, women could not afford child care. Post-pandemic, they still won't be able to afford child care because this government refuses to invest.

1320

Prior to the pandemic, PSWs—primarily racialized women on the front lines—were severely under-waged for such critically important work. During the pandemic, we realized that they were under-waged. This government still refuses to make sure that racialized women on the front lines hear more from them than that they are heroes on the front lines—but that there's real investment to ensure that they can make ends meet. We still have PSWs who don't have access to PPE. We still have PSWs who are struggling to put food on the table.

In my own region of Waterloo, there was a big celebration because 60 PSWs are going to be fast-tracked for all of Waterloo region—60 PSWs. That's not going to solve the problem.

We spent over 600 hours at hearings with the finance and economic recovery committee. We heard first-hand from women business owners, from women in the arts—from a whole bunch of women who said there will not be an economic recovery without a she-covey.

And where are the investments? You know where they are? They're in bills like my colleague's, my friend from Toronto—St. Paul's, where she has called for an intersectional gender equity strategy to get us through this pandemic. That's what we should be celebrating today. We shouldn't be celebrating the moments when the government has decided to reinvest after cutting from things like rape crisis centres. We should be celebrating the investment in women.

If this is truly going to be a moment when we see economic recovery, then we have to recognize what last week's RBC report told us: that there's an uneven recovery happening right now. Mothers, racialized women, young people and newcomers are bearing the brunt of this pandemic.

And what the government can do is invest—invest in women; invest in us. We deserve it.

PIPELINES

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I'm pleased to rise, as the official opposition House leader, to respond to the minister's statement, on behalf of the Ontario NDP.

Our climate is warming at a rate that threatens our very survival. Our world is facing the greatest danger we have ever known—much greater than COVID-19, because there is no vaccine that is going to save us.

This weekend, the NDP launched a bold and ambitious climate action plan that speaks to the priorities of Ontarians—including people who live in Sarnia—who want to see strong climate action on the part of their government and who understand the importance of phasing out fossil fuels.

But while we are transitioning to a low-carbon economy, we must do so in a way that ensures no one is left

behind, that ensures every Ontario community is able to participate in and benefit from the transition to a cleaner, greener future. We can't abandon communities like Sarnia and the workers across Ontario whose jobs are concentrated in carbon-intensive industries. We need a just transition, which is what the NDP has proposed with our Green New Democratic Deal and what this government fails to understand.

There are 3,000 jobs at stake in Sarnia today—3,000 families whose livelihoods are at risk because of an arbitrary and unilateral decision by the state of Michigan. I can tell you, Speaker, that on this side of the House, we take seriously our obligations to those workers and those families. We also take seriously our duty to protect the Great Lakes water supply, not just for current generations but for generations to come. Most of all, we take seriously our responsibility for meaningful consultation and engagement with First Nations peoples.

Despite what this government thinks, this is not an either/or—it's not that you can either have jobs or you can protect the environment. We can do both, and we can do so while respecting Indigenous knowledge, practices and beliefs.

Today was an opportunity for this government to show that it understands the big picture, that it recognizes the need for a robust and effective transition strategy, not just in Sarnia, but for all communities that will be affected. That is what governing is all about, and that is what the people of Ontario deserve.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY JOURNÉE INTERNATIONALE DES FEMMES

M^{me} Lucille Collard: International Women's Day is always an occasion to celebrate the achievements of women around the world and to look towards what more needs to be done.

As the mother of three courageous daughters, as the daughter of an incredibly strong mother, and as the colleague of many women working to break down barriers, I am constantly reminded of how incredible women truly are.

It's important that we all recognize that this year's International Women's Day has an added burden to it. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenge around the world, and it has put many women in precarious and even dangerous situations.

J'ai partagé certains de ces faits dans ma question de ce matin, mais ça vaut la peine de répéter que 10 fois plus de femmes que d'hommes ont quitté le marché du travail. Quelles femmes ont été les plus durement touchées? Les jeunes, les minorités visibles, les nouveaux arrivants et de nombreuses mamans. Douze fois plus de mères que de pères ont quitté leur emploi pour s'occuper de tout-petits ou d'enfants d'âge scolaire. En septembre, alors que 54 000 hommes retournaient sur le marché du travail, 57 000 femmes l'ont quitté.

Les 12 mois derniers ont été un exemple frappant de la résilience, de l'ingéniosité et de la force des femmes.

But we need to keep addressing the barriers women face in this province. We need adequate and accessible child care. We need to make it easier for partners to support women with child care. We need equity and respect for all genders. We also need more women in politics to lead inclusive change.

Je crois que chaque femme dans cette Chambre peut reconnaître les obstacles auxquels les femmes font face si elles veulent se lancer en politique. Personnellement, je dois en bonne partie le privilège d'être ici à une femme extraordinaire : ma mère. Son soutien indéfectible, sa confiance et son aide à la maison m'ont encouragé à persévérer et surmonter les obstacles. Alors si tu écoutes, merci, mom.

Over the weekend, my friend Kate Graham published a powerful article in which she notes: "Perhaps this year's" International Women's Day "marks a moment when we should be pushing harder than ever before towards equity. Perhaps in a year filled with bad news we should be putting extra energy into celebrating the (many) examples of remarkable women who have led us through the year...."

"Maybe it's a day for women to think back to their hardest moment over the past year—whatever that moment was—and celebrate just getting through it."

Today, I'm celebrating women, but I'm also committing to continuing to fight for us.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mr. Mike Schreiner: It's an honour to rise to speak on International Women's Day. Today we celebrate the vital contributions and achievements of women and reflect on how to dismantle the systemic barriers that women still face, especially Black, Indigenous and women of colour.

This pandemic has been hard on everyone, but it has been especially hard on women. That's why we need to turn the COVID-19 she-cession into a post-COVID-19 she-covey.

This month's budget provides the government with an opportunity to turn the platitudes spoken today into real action to support women. We need investments in affordable and accessible child care, in shelters and programs to support survivors of domestic abuse. We need to permanently increase the pay and working conditions of the essential workers, predominantly women, who care for our loved ones. We need paid sick days for essential workers. We need to address the pay gap and the power gap that women face in work. We need to invest in women-owned businesses. We need a she-covey that addresses the intersectional experiences of all women.

As somebody who identifies as male, I want to take a moment to say to men that we have to play our role, whether it's on the home front, the workplace, in public institutions and, indeed, in politics to make sure that we create an environment and conditions where women can thrive.

As we celebrate and reaffirm our commitment to empower women in Ontario, we also need to implement

the policies and programs that will help women thrive in all parts of our communities.

1330

PETITIONS

INTERNET ACCESS

Mr. Percy Hatfield: I have a petition to support affordable Internet access for those on ODSP and OW.

“Whereas the CRTC states it’s important for all Canadians to be able to connect to quality Internet services at affordable prices;

“Whereas Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program recipients live significantly below the poverty line, a gap that continues to grow;

“Whereas our dependence on the Internet has increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic;

“Whereas free public WiFi access—from libraries to coffee shops—has been severely reduced or completely eliminated due to the pandemic, and even when they are operating in full capacity, these places are not appropriate for confidential or private meetings;

“Whereas lower-cost Internet options may exist in some urban areas, in northern Ontario, Internet prices skyrocket to \$100 a month or more;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to immediately amend the Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program directive to include financial support for the cost of ongoing Internet access.”

I fully agree, I’m going to sign my name and make sure it gets down to the desk.

ABORTION IMAGES

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It gives me great pleasure to present this petition on behalf of Katie Dean and Natalie Wakim, part of the Viewer Discretion Legislation Coalition. It is entitled “Call on the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to Block Disturbing Anti-Abortion Images.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas an anti-abortion group, the Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform, is distributing unwanted flyers to people’s homes and displaying placards on major streets in London featuring horrifying and graphic images of aborted fetuses;

“Whereas regularly displaying graphic images on our streets and in our homes is traumatizing, difficult and misleading for women, children, and other vulnerable members of the community;

“Whereas the display of these images at crowded intersections creates a hazard and distraction to drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians;

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

“To support calls for an injunction based on the need to prevent a public nuisance, and should it not be possible to

proceed with an injunction, to develop and bring forward legislation to prohibit the use of such graphic and disturbing images on flyers dropped in people’s mailboxes or exhibited on placards used in the street.”

I fully support this petition. I will be signing my signature and delivering it to the Clerks.

WORKPLACE SAFETY AND INSURANCE BOARD

Mr. Dave Smith: I have a petition entitled “Workplace Safety and Insurance Act Petition.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Mr. Will Bouma: This is entitled, “Combatting Human Trafficking Petition.

“Whereas human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing crimes worldwide and the majority of police-reported incidents of human trafficking in Canada happen right here in Ontario; and

“Whereas it is important that Ontario is equipped to fight this growing crime and support victims and survivors with every tool at our disposal; and

“Whereas everyone deserves freedom from exploitation, fear and violence;

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

“Pass Bill 251, Combating Human Trafficking Act, 2021, so that:

“(1) There is an increased awareness of the issue, supporting a long-term provincial response and emphasizing that all Ontarians have a role to play in combatting human trafficking;

“(2) We strengthen the ability of children’s aid societies and law enforcement to protect exploited children;

“(3) More survivors and the people who support them in obtaining restraining orders against traffickers are supported, with specific consideration for Indigenous survivors;

“(4) The government’s ability to collect non-personal data to better understand the impact of the strategy and respond to human trafficking is increased;

“(5) Law enforcement is provided with more tools to locate victims and charge traffickers.”

Mr. Speaker, I fully support this petition. I will be affixing my signature and giving it to one of the ushers.

OPPOSITION DAY

WORKPLACE SAFETY

Ms. Andrea Horwath: I move opposition day motion number 2, as follows:

Whereas the Ford government cancelled the two guaranteed paid sick days available to workers shortly after being elected; and

Whereas almost 60% of workers do not have access to paid sick days, particularly those who work in many of the front-line essential services relied upon in the COVID-19 pandemic; and

Whereas many of these workers do not qualify for federal emergency sick leave programs and are forced to choose between taking unpaid time off or going into work while sick in order to pay the bills and put food on the table, and the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit pays less than minimum wage to those who do qualify; and

Whereas workplace spread of COVID-19 has accounted for two thirds of community outbreaks in some municipalities, largely in environments without access to paid sick leave; and

Whereas the Ford government’s own experts have publicly advocated for the implementation of paid sick days to better protect Ontarians, especially racialized workers and communities that are disproportionately and hardest hit by the pandemic; and

Whereas the Ford government continues to ignore the advice of its own science table, public health experts, municipal leaders and business and labour advocacy organizations that have identified paid sick days as an effective and necessary measure in the fight against community spread of COVID-19 and the emerging variants;

Therefore, the Legislative Assembly calls on the Ford government to immediately implement a provincially mandated paid sick leave program in accordance with the advice of Ontario’s boards of health and medical officers of health, Ontario’s Big City Mayors (OBCM), municipal councils, organized labour and business advocacy groups.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Ms. Horwath has moved opposition day motion number 2. I’ll look to the Leader of the Opposition to lead off the debate.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: I have to say, it’s kind of a hopeful day here in Ontario. I think, on Friday, when Ontarians received the news that more vaccines were going to be flowing into our province, people felt quite relieved about that. I felt quite relieved about that myself. I think it’s really, really important that we acknowledge that hope is on the horizon—that folks can start to think that perhaps they’re going to be getting their vaccines sooner rather than later. It’s an important time, in that vein, to acknowledge and recognize the health care workers—the docs and the pharmacists and the nurse practitioners and GPs and other folks in health care—who are all going to be part of that army of people who are going to be helping to get vaccines into people’s arms. It’s certainly time to celebrate that.

Finally, after weeks of pushing by the official opposition, the government has indicated that they’re prepared to prioritize our front-line heroes, who have been working in industries and jobs, particularly in hot spots around the province—people who we know have been going to work throughout this pandemic so that the rest of us can stay home and still have the essentials we need. Those essential workers are finally being acknowledged, at least in terms of making sure that they are prioritized in phase 2 of the government’s vaccine rollout.

So these are all good things.

I could spend some time talking about how slow and sloppy and confusing and confused the rollout has been, but today is a time, I think, to acknowledge that Ontarians are feeling a little bit of optimism when it comes to the likelihood of a vaccine.

1340

I do have to say, however, that there are still barriers that exist to people getting their vaccines. We talked about that a little bit earlier today, and I’m going to talk about it again at the end of this discussion.

But I do want to say that New Democrats knew that there was something important that needed to be done not only to provide protection for workers, but to make sure that the spread of the virus was truncated as much as possible. In that bill, which we’ll be talking about in the context of this motion, there is also a clause that indicated that when we get to the point of vaccines, the government should also be making sure that people don’t lose pay when they go off work to get their vaccination. In other words, if they’ve booked a vaccine and have to take some time off work, the bill that my colleague from London West put forward was one that covered off that eventuality. Why? Because New Democrats know that workers need to be supported. We know that workers, especially those front-line heroes, should have been acknowledged and supported by their government from day one, and that didn’t happen.

That’s why we continue, even to this day, to say to the government, it’s not too late. You can still actually do right by these front-line workers and make sure that everyone

has the ability to stay home when they're sick and not have to make that awful choice of having to go to work when they're sick because they fear not being able to pay the bills if they don't go to work—and we know that's happening in our province. We know that some 60% of workers in our province do not have paid sick days.

So the official opposition here in Ontario, the New Democratic Party, is going to continue to pressure this government to do the right thing and bring paid sick days to our province. We know that's not something that the Premier agrees with. We've watched as he has voted against this over and over again. We've watched as he has suggested that there are other programs in place to cover this off, but we know that there are not—and I'll talk about that a little bit, as well. But the bottom line is, this is what a responsible, caring, thoughtful government would do in the context of a global pandemic. They would make sure that they put in place measures that prevent the spread, that keep people safe, that keep people from spreading the virus in the workplace, and that actually do provide that kind of respect for the front-line essential workers we've been relying on.

The problem is that the government here in Ontario got elected and one of the first things they did was to get rid of the two measly sick days that we had—and I say “measly.” There was pressure for years for the previous government to make changes to our laws that were respectful and thoughtful about workers and their needs, and at the very, very end of the 15 years of disappointments, they finally put something together: two measly paid sick days. But lo and behold, the Premier, who got elected two and a half years ago, doesn't believe in paid sick days. He doesn't believe that workers have a right to actually take care of their health and well-being without worrying about putting a roof over their head. So the two measly sick days that the former Liberal government put on the books got quickly swept away by the Ford government.

This is something, I think, that clearly states where this government stands when it comes to workers' protections and workers' rights—and we've known that forever. They like to pretend that has changed, but it hasn't changed. It didn't change right before COVID-19, when they made these kinds of backwards decisions. And Lord knows it hasn't changed during COVID-19, when they refused to step up to support those front-line essential workers with things like paid sick days.

What does that mean? It means that we've had the spread of COVID-19 unnecessarily in workplaces around the province. It means that we have seen a government that didn't do something because they fundamentally don't believe in it, and instead would rather have the virus spreading.

Of course, here we are now in a situation where the variants of concern have taken hold, and still, crickets from the government when it comes to making sure workers don't have to go to work sick because they need to, instead, pay the bills. As a result, we'll see the virus continue to spread in some of those workplaces. It's an

impossible choice that the government is forcing workers to have to make. Nobody should have to worry about paying the bills and feeding the family if they have to stay home sick. It shouldn't be that way. It's inhumane. In fact, everybody agrees, except for the Ford government. Who is “everybody”? Well, of course, it's the official opposition. We've believed this for a very long time. As you know, the member for London West put a bill forward back in December. But it wasn't the first time we've ever talked about this. It's something that just makes sense public health-wise and respect-wise, when it comes to knowing that workers deserve that dignity and that ability to take care of themselves. They're not just there for the purposes of the employer; they're there because they have a life, too, and they should be able to keep that life safeguarded and keep their well-being safeguarded, as well as the well-being of their families. Of course, that's not something the Ford government agrees with. But the Ford government's own experts agreed with paid sick days; the science table and others agreed, the Chief Medical Officer of Health actually agreed—somebody the Premier says he listens to all the time. Apparently, he always takes the advice of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, but not in this case, not when it comes to paid sick days. That's a line the Premier is not going to cross, apparently.

It's shameful when we see not only labour advocates and activists but we see businesses, chambers of commerce, progressive small business groups, the big city mayors' conference—in other words, the mayors of the larger cities around Ontario were urging the Ford government to do the right thing here. It's the chamber of commerce—it's really clear. Former Conservative leaders, the two most recent predecessors of the current Premier—Mr. Tory, who's now the mayor of Toronto, and Mr. Brown, who's now the mayor of Brampton—thought the Ford government should be implementing paid sick days. But for some reason, that's not what has happened here in our province.

It's very much the case that the people who need these paid sick days the most are our front-line heroes. These are the people who are bagging groceries. These are the people who are working in warehouses, making sure that goods come to us. These are the people in meat-packing plants and other kinds of food-processing plants. I know employers do their best to try to prevent the spread in their workplaces—and for those who have been doing their best, that's really great, and we thank them for that. But at the end of the day, the very best thing that could have happened, and that can still happen if the Premier decides to finally do the right thing, is that people don't have to go to work sick, so they don't have to put the rest of their work colleagues at risk, so they don't have to risk an outbreak of COVID-19 at the workplace.

These people are not just those front-line essential workers, often lower-paid, often without any kind of benefits, but they're also women workers. Here we are on International Women's Day—they're women workers. They're racialized women workers. They're people who

are Black or Indigenous or other people of colour who are working in those jobs. They're folks who are lower-income, as I said, often marginalized—people who come from all around the world to build their dream in Ontario, and then when they get sick, they're told by their province, by their new home, that their wellness is not important, that their wellness is not valued. How can you call them heroes on the one hand, how can you call them our front-line heroes, and then not value their very essence of life, their well-being, their health? It makes no sense whatsoever.

I know my MPPs here on the official opposition side have a lot of things to say about this situation, and rightfully so. It's pretty shameful that we're still here, nearly a year this week—a year—since the pandemic was declared here in Ontario anyway, and we still haven't seen the government and Premier Ford step up and do the right thing for workers.

1350

We, however, have Peggy Sattler's Stay Home If You Are Sick Act. We have brought that bill forward on a number of occasions, and multiple motions to try to get the government to come forward and do the right thing, but they continue not to do so.

Today the variants of concern are starting to push the numbers up. We'll see; hopefully, it's just a blip, but there are 1,631 cases of COVID-19 as of today's count. It's a problem.

The government has not done the right thing on many fronts when it comes to the containment of COVID-19. We saw what happened—the tragedies; the horrifying nightmares—in long-term care, not just from the first wave but through the second wave, which is completely unacceptable, completely unforgivable. Yet it happened, because Premier Ford just didn't want to spend the money—he didn't want to invest in the safety, the well-being, the health and the survival of our most vulnerable folks in long-term care.

I still think that there's a long road ahead here. I think that there are still a couple of months—I think that's appropriate to say—a good couple of months here when we're still going to be battling this virus. The vaccines are not going to be in everybody's arms instantly. The virus—especially the variants of concern—still has a chance to continue to spread.

Again, I hope that number from today is not going to continue to be reflected in the next couple of days and that it was only a blip. But we need to do everything we can to make sure that we don't head in the wrong direction, to make sure that we don't have a third wave.

There are lots of things that have to be done in that regard. One of the most important is to make sure people don't feel they have to go to work sick because their government won't give them the protection of paid sick days. There are lots of other things I think that we need to do. But let's do this one thing that for months and months people have been telling the government they should be doing—let's protect workers at work. Let's make sure they don't have to make that choice of going to work sick or

staying home and not being able to pay the bills. Let's give people the understanding that their government will do the right thing and protect us from the spread of COVID-19.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Ms. Jane McKenna: I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the opposition day motion regarding the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit and paid sick leave programs. There is a great deal of opposition spin out there, so I look to provide some clarity and context as it relates to sick leave during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

For the last 81 years, governments of all political stripes and at all levels have recognized that the federal government is best equipped to operate and manage employment support and sick leave programs. The government of Ontario agrees with this long-held position.

In a recent CBC news interview on January 29, the director of the master of health administration program and community care at Ryerson University, Dr. Jim Tiessen, also agreed that the federal government is the best choice to administer a sick-pay program. In support of this position, he said, "The province doesn't have the fiscal capacity the federal government does to generate revenue."

The opposition motion states that government experts have "advocated for the implementation of paid sick days to better protect Ontarians, especially racialized workers and communities that are disproportionately and hardest hit by the pandemic."

Across the country paid sick days have been left to the responsibility of the employer and/or union collective agreements.

But the impact of COVID-19 has been brutal and far-reaching. That's why, on July 16, 2020, Premier Ford joined our federal and provincial partners in signing a historic \$19-billion Safe Restart Agreement, which included \$1.1 billion to provide Ontario workers with 10 paid sick days. Our government recognizes the importance of paid sick days in the fight against COVID-19. We also recognize the federal government, like in so many other countries, is in the best position to deliver this program.

When the pandemic hit, we realized the potential impact of COVID-19 on workers and their families. That's why the first legislation we passed in this place together, almost one year ago, created Ontario's job-protected leave. This leave ensures that no worker will lose their job if they stay home to self-isolate or care for a loved one.

We were one of the first jurisdictions in Canada to pass such progressive legislation.

When it comes to public health advice, the 14-day isolation rule is recommended by the World Health Organization, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and by the Public Health Agency of Canada. This generally accepted 14-day period is typically equal to 10 work days.

In preparing for today's opposition day motion, my office did some research, with help from the legislative library. We considered research that compared the legislative sick leave policies in 43 countries around the world.

The result, based on publicly available information, is that 31 countries had sufficient paid sick leave policies. These countries include Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, China, Colombia, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Iraq, Italy, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand and the United Kingdom. The remaining 12 countries, prior to COVID-19, did not have sufficient national paid sick leave programs. These countries included Bermuda, Canada, Chile, India, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Portugal, South Korea, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, and the United States.

Speaker, there is plenty of research out there and 81 years of history in this country to suggest that federal governments are in the best position to implement paid sick leave programs, but unfortunately the NDP have chosen to play politics with paid sick days.

When the NDP have been in a position to make decisions or influence power, they chose other priorities—like WSIB deeming. Months before the NDP took office in 1990, legislation passed that made deeming more prominent in addressing these payments of lost wages over the long term. Yet in the NDP's five years in government, they did nothing about deeming.

When the NDP held the balance of power from 2011 to 2014, during every budget the NDP made demands in exchange for propping up the Liberal government. When they had the chance to influence change, they focused on gimmicks like a 15% cut to insurance rates that never happened, or creating new taxes on people they considered high-income earners.

But you can only hit the same well so many times.

Now here we are, in the most challenging and unprecedented times of history, and the leader of the NDP is playing politics.

The Leader of the Opposition should be standing with her federal cousins and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh. She should be standing with Premier Ford and provincial and territorial leaders across the country. She should be working with all of us to continue to improve the existing national sick leave program.

Even the former Trump administration recognized the role of the federal government in providing a paid sick leave benefit for workers in the United States as a result of COVID-19. Back in April 2020, bipartisan legislation came into effect which included a national Emergency Paid Sick Leave Act in the United States. Under this legislation, employers with fewer than 500 employees are required to provide paid leave for their workers who need to self-quarantine or who are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms and seeking a diagnosis. These employers are required to provide two weeks of paid sick days—sick leave—paid at the employee's regular rate, capped at \$511 per day, to a maximum of \$5,110. Part-time employees were entitled to the number of hours they worked on average over a typical two-week period. In return, the US federal government provided employers with tax credits and refunds to compensate them.

On January 20, 2021, the new Biden administration announced they would re-enact the paid sick leave requirements—provide expanded paid sick, family and medical leave—and provide a paid leave benefit of \$1,400 per week for a maximum of 15 weeks for eligible workers.

Continuing this national program in the United States will cover three quarters of all workers. It will remain in place until September 20, 2021. Under President Biden's plan, even state and local governments will be reimbursed for their sick pay costs under this national program.

1400

We have seen in the United States, both under the Trump and Biden administrations, an acknowledgement that the federal government is best equipped to provide paid sick leave benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic—but it goes beyond the United States.

In the UK, a federal paid sick leave program provides workers with about \$170 a week for up to 28 weeks.

In Italy, one of the countries hardest hit by COVID-19, workers who test positive receive paid sick leave after a three-day waiting period. Workers are paid by their employer, who is reimbursed by the Italian government.

As always, the NDP are looking to create another new government program that would continue beyond COVID-19, instead of working to improve programs that already exist. Our government believes, as Canadians have for the last 81 years, that the federal government is in the best position to roll out employment support programs. We believe that the middle of a global pandemic is not the time to create permanent new programs without understanding what comes next.

Madam Speaker, the NDP playbook hasn't changed. They either want to spend someone else's money by passing on the cost to small businesses or they want to create new spending programs that will force future governments to cut spending somewhere else.

We only have to look back at the NDP's 2014 election platform, the 100-page “plan that makes sense,” as it was called back then. The NDP's plan promised to cut provincial spending by \$600 million, yet, in the seven years since, all we've heard from the NDP are ways to keep spending money we don't have. But this shouldn't be a surprise. We've all heard variations of the famous saying, “The best way to predict the future is to study the past.”

Back in 1990, the NDP's Agenda for People promised to increase educational spending, create 10,000 non-profit health care spaces and freeze income and sales tax, among other things. As a result, the former NDP formed their first and only government in Ontario. But no one, not even the labour groups that supported the NDP, could have predicted what would come next: a government that forced public employees, including our front-line health care heroes, to take 10 unpaid days off every year for three years. Why did they do it? The NDP government said they had to, to control an over-\$17-billion deficit. In today's dollars, that's about \$27.5 billion.

In my riding of Burlington, people recognize the importance of protecting workers and keeping them safe during the pandemic. They also understand that creating

new permanent programs that significantly increase costs for struggling businesses or taxpayers does not make sense in the middle of a global pandemic.

Sadly, the leader of the NDP would rather saddle small businesses with extra costs than encourage workers to access the federal government's paid sick day program.

I've driven through the member of Hamilton Centre's riding, and I've seen empty storefronts at the Centre on Barton and in other pockets downtown. Businesses that are struggling, or those who have made the tough decision to permanently close—these people recognize that adding new costs for businesses during these uncertain times would be crippling.

Publicly traded companies headquartered in Canada and the United Kingdom have led the way to implementing COVID-19-related paid sick leave policies. Companies like Bell Canada and Teck Resources have revised existing sick leave policies to meet the moment, and many of these companies—included in many popular mutual funds—are implementing temporary policies to provide emergency employee support.

Madam Speaker, there are many areas where the federal government should take the lead or become a full-funding partner.

Let's look at health care. In 1957, the federal government passed the Hospital Insurance and Diagnostic Services Act, which provided provinces and territories with a full cost-sharing partnership with the federal government. This equal partnership continued for almost 20 years. Then, in 1976, the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau, for the first time, did not honour the 50-50 partnership. From 1985 to 1995, six federal budgets scaled back or completely froze health transfers to the provinces for health care. In addition, further reductions by the Chrétien Liberal government in 1998-99 cut another \$11.2 billion in funding. By 2001-02, the federal government covered just 18.7% of the provincial cost of health care; by 2003, the federal share dropped to 16%. I'm shocked when I read that. From 2005 to 2015, the federal government's share increased to nearly 22% of provincial health care costs. Fast-forward to 2021, and Premier Ford, together with other provincial and territorial leaders, are calling on Ottawa to increase contributions from 22% to 35%. Even if the federal government agrees, we will be nowhere near the cost-sharing partnership our health system was built on.

How about long-term care? We all know that 52% of long-term-care facilities in Canada are for-profit. What might come as a bit of a surprise is that the second-largest operator of for-profit homes is owned by the federal government, through the crown corporation known as the Public Sector Pension Investment Board. Provincial and territorial leaders recognize that, just like health care, the federal government has an important role in what lies ahead in long-term care across our country.

Just like employment insurance and health care, the federal government has acknowledged their role when it comes to sick day benefits during the pandemic. After creating the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit in September, which provided up to 10 paid sick days, just last

month the federal government doubled the program, creating 20 paid sick days. This is great news. By working with the federal government to improve a program that already exists, we are better supporting Ontario workers and their families. Even Canada's unions have welcomed the extension of this program.

Yet when my staff and I looked at the websites of several NDP members, we couldn't find application details on the federal paid sick day program. In fact, my Burlington constituency office, just last week, helped people in NDP-held ridings apply for the sick leave benefit because they were unable to get the information from their local representative. That is really a shame, because as elected officials, we have an obligation to inform our constituents about the government programs available to support them.

Madam Speaker, I want to make sure the people who live in NDP-held ridings know how to access the federal government's 20 paid sick days. For details on the CRSB, call 1-800-959-2019, or visit my website at janemckennamp.ca/crsb.

As usual, the NDP makes promises and proposes flashy solutions without considering the cost to taxpayers. Take, for example, the NDP's Stay At Home If You Are Sick Act, which would force all employers to give seven paid days of leave to anyone working for them for just one week. As I said before, while I like a good "buy one get one free," it's ridiculous to think, under the member for London West's bill, that if you work seven days, you'll get seven paid sick days off. No sick leave program in North America gives employees one week of paid leave after just one week on the job. Policy ideas like this one prove that the NDP's jobs and economic growth policies have only gotten worse since they were taken out of office.

Our government knows, just like the NDP did way back then, that creating new permanent programs that grow our structural deficit will only result in impossible choices down the road. But today's NDP has a short memory.

They supported federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh's push for 10 paid sick days federally. In fact, the NDP labour critic posted on Facebook, after the passage of the 10 paid federal sick days, "[I'm] so proud of the efforts of Jagmeet Singh."

And then in February, the NDP member for Ottawa Centre called the 10 paid sick days provided by the federal government "useless." Madam Speaker, I'm sure the 110,000 Ontario families who have been helped by this program don't think it's useless.

It's clear that the NDP's paid sick leave proposal wasn't thought out. On one hand, their proposal allowed: "an employer may require an employee who takes leave under this section to provide evidence reasonable in the circumstances that the employee is entitled to the leave." Yet employers also are prohibited from asking their employees for a sick note as proof they qualify for personal emergency leave.

Let's put a few pieces together. Someone could work for you for just seven days and get seven paid days off. In the real world, this would mean that an employer, who

barely knows an employee after seven days on the job, is prohibited from asking for a sick note. It makes absolutely no sense.

1410

From the start of this pandemic, our government's message has been clear: If you're sick, stay home. Yet the Ontario NDP want Ontario to believe something different. They want people to believe every other province is duplicating the federal paid sick day program. This is not the case. The NDP want people to believe every other province is using the pandemic to make permanent changes to their sick leave policies. This is not the case, no matter how loud they say it.

I would like to share the latest information I received from the legislative library this week on sick days.

Let's start with British Columbia's NDP government. On Tuesday, the member from Brampton East said the following about their NDP cousins in BC: "That's what happens when you elect an NDP government. They actually put in policy that helps folks out...." When it comes to sick days, before COVID-19, the government of BC provided workers with three unpaid sickness or injury days. During the pandemic, workers in BC have access to unpaid leave.

Before the pandemic hit, Alberta workers received five unpaid personal or family days. During COVID-19, workers get 14 unpaid days.

Under the Saskatchewan Employment Act, workers get 12 unpaid personal days. When the pandemic hit, the Saskatchewan government offered a self-isolation support program, providing \$450 per week for a maximum of two weeks. The program ended five days after the federal government's paid sick day program started.

Before COVID-19, Manitoba law mandated three unpaid days for workers employed at least 30 days by the same employer. During the pandemic, workers are eligible for an unpaid public health emergency leave.

In Nunavut, outside of COVID-19, it is unclear what, if any, sick leave policies exist. During COVID-19, government employees only can apply to receive up to four paid self-isolation days.

Before COVID-19, the Northwest Territories provided workers with five unpaid days each year.

In the Yukon, outside of the pandemic, workers receive a maximum of 12 days without pay. During COVID-19, workers are eligible for 14 unpaid sick days. Employers who choose to pay workers for sick days can apply to a paid sick leave rebate program to receive a rebate for up to 10 days. This program was funded to a maximum of \$4 million, and it ends this month.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, before the pandemic, workers employed for three months were eligible for three unpaid sick days. During COVID-19, workers can access an unpaid communicable disease emergency leave.

In New Brunswick, workers are normally entitled to five unpaid days. During the pandemic, workers can access an unpaid COVID-19 emergency leave.

Before COVID-19, workers in Nova Scotia received three unpaid sick days. During the pandemic, workers can access an unpaid emergency leave.

In Prince Edward Island, workers employed three months receive three unpaid sick days. Workers employed five years with the same company receive one paid sick day. During COVID-19, workers can access unpaid emergency leave.

Finally, Quebec: With a population of just 8.5 million, Quebec has recorded over 10,000 deaths, nearly 50% of the Canadian total. Prior to the pandemic, workers in Quebec received up to 26 weeks of unpaid leave and two paid sick days after three months on the job. During the pandemic, Quebec has not introduced any paid sick days.

I want to underline that while other provinces I mentioned have limited job-protected leave, Ontario's infectious disease emergency leave is unlimited.

Now let's consider federally regulated industries—the public and private sector employers that fall under federal labour laws, like WestJet or Canada Post. Prior to the pandemic, workers in federally regulated industries were entitled to three paid sick days after three months on the job. During COVID-19, these workers can receive up to two weeks of unpaid leave.

It has been all over the news that Canada Post's Mississauga Gateway facility had one of Ontario's largest COVID-19 workplace outbreaks. More than 300 workers tested positive for the virus. This massive outbreak happened despite workers at Canada Post having three paid sick days. This seems like the right moment to quote the leader of the official opposition, who, on October 5, 2020, told CityNews: "Had people been supported by their government not to go to work if they're sick ... and to get supports financially to enable them to take time off work, we wouldn't be in the situation that we are."

Just last week, the Toronto Star reported that Canada Post contravened federal labour laws when it failed to notify the federal minister about first becoming aware of the potential outbreak. In addition, Canada Post failed to submit an investigation report into a "hazardous occurrence," as required by law, after the first case of its employees testing positive for COVID-19 on January 5.

While Ontario's Minister of Labour can't intervene at Canada Post, our inspectors are visiting workplaces across Ontario every single day. We have conducted more than 39,100 inspections, issued more than 40,100 orders, and shut down more than 67 unsafe workplaces.

The outbreak at Canada Post shows that paid sick days are not the magic bullet to stop the spread of COVID-19.

When you consider federally regulated industries like our airlines, banks, telecommunications and, yes, even Canada Post, there is a strong mandate for a national paid sick benefit, like employment insurance, that would cover all workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Madam Speaker, as I've said before, if the NDP doesn't like the federal program, they should offer real suggestions to improve the federal government's national program. If the leader of the Ontario NDP believes Ontario's paid sick day program isn't as good as the COVID-19 sick leave program under Presidents Trump and Biden, she should stand with Premier Ford, other provincial and territorial leaders, and federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh to propose

alternative solutions to strengthen this national program for all Canadians.

The federal government has continued to be a willing partner. They have listened and made adjustments to their various programs. They've even doubled the number of sick days, from 10 to 20.

If the leader of the NDP has suggestions on how to make Canada's national sick day program better, she should provide them to Prime Minister Trudeau or, better yet, reach out to her neighbour in Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, who also happens to be the federal Minister of Labour. Instead, the NDP are using their talking points on paid sick days to inspire Twitter posts. What they should be doing is something—anything—to help build upon the national paid sick day program that already exists. When your roof is leaking, you don't start hanging wallpaper; you fix the darn roof.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Michael Coteau: It's a pleasure to speak to this motion today. It's something that I've supported in the past—the belief in paid sick days.

It's really sad to hear the Conservatives stand up in this House and talk about sick days like they're something that can't be used to stop the spread of COVID-19. It's sad that they don't understand that people in Ontario, when sick, should be staying home, but they also need to pay the bills.

The member opposite from Burlington talked about how the answer is entirely in the federal program, but even the minister responsible for that federal program has said that this is just a baseline and that provinces should be stepping up to complement what they've been doing.

But this is not a new trend by this government. This is really a decision that they've made—to not invest in people. It's a constant trend by the Conservative government over the course of the last two and a half years. There are so many examples that can be pointed at that demonstrate this lack of investment into the people of Ontario. We saw this right away when the government came into power and one of the first things they did was to get rid of the two sick days that were there. It was a shame, because it was a starting point to building a stronger, more reliable system that was there to protect people. Those cuts were constant.

Going back to investing into people and through a concept like paid sick days, this government has constantly looked for ways to save money and at the same time impact negatively on the lives of people. I was shocked when one of the first things the Premier did was get rid of after-school programs in Ontario.

We had great programs here in the city of Toronto, but also throughout the province—programs like Focus on Youth. They actually took young people in neighbourhoods where they didn't traditionally have the opportunity for jobs and, through programs like Community Use of Schools and Focus on Youth, they actually got jobs out there, and it changed the trajectory of a young person's life through gaining experience at a young age and then leveraging that for further advancement in employment

into the future. But they cut it right away. I think the Solicitor General at the time said that it was a pet project that was just there to please a few Liberals. Madam Speaker, make no mistake: This was about investing in people. And I do believe that the NDP's original bill for paid sick days, the bill that I introduced, Bill 247, and the motion we have today are really a reflection of the opposition as a whole looking for ways to support Ontarians and to stop these constant cuts by the Ford government.

1420

We saw a constant attack on the people of Ontario through these cuts over the last two and a half years. The COVID response, I think, has been the great revealer of the flaws in this government's approach. The government opposite says that there are not many countries that have these types of insurance policies, sick days for people. But you can just take two minutes on the Internet and do some research, and you'll get listings in different sources—these are academic sources—on which countries actually provide paid sick days or mandate them.

There are at least 145 countries that provide paid sick days for short- or long-term illness, with 127 providing a week or more annually. There are 98 countries in the world where there's a guarantee of at least one month or more for paid sick days. So when a person does get ill, they know that they have their government to fall back on so they can continue to pay the bills; they can feed their children, support their family and head down a road towards recovery. But not this government. It doesn't believe in that. This government is all about every person for themselves, fend for yourself. Anything that goes centrally from a government into investing into people is looked down upon. There are, again, hundreds of examples over the course of the last two and a half years that speak to the alignment of that belief.

I'm going to stop here, Madam Speaker. There are a couple more speakers who would like to speak within our allocated time. But we'll be supporting this motion, and we'll continue to look for ways to stop the Conservatives from destroying the social fabric that Ontarians have built up over the years so we can make sure that when a person becomes ill, there is some support there so they can continue to prosper and to build in Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Faisal Hassan: I rise today to speak of the urgent need for the motion for paid sick days to have the all-party support needed to protect workers and indeed the province in ensuring family members don't have to choose between going to work ill or staying home and not getting the paycheque needed to pay for rent and put food on the table.

Here we are, one year into the pandemic, and this government has ignored for months and months the medical experts, city councillors, business leaders, labour leaders and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, among others, who have called for the province to do what is right and safe during this pandemic and implement paid sick days. Madam Speaker, paid sick days save lives.

In my community of York South—Weston, we are an identified hot spot, one of particularly high risk when it

comes to COVID. This community is also home to a great many essential workers—those health care front-line heroes, transit workers, grocery workers and others that have kept our economy going and ensured we have had the supplies we needed during this pandemic. Those same hard-working heroes are not making big wages and are usually working part-time at more than one workplace to provide for their families. They simply cannot afford to miss a paycheque.

The high level of evictions and those a paycheque away from eviction in my community show this pandemic has only made worse the already difficult financial struggles many people face daily. Please support the health and well-being of families and implement paid sick days now.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: It's an honour to rise to speak on this important issue today. The bottom line is, Speaker, that if we are going to contain COVID-19 and avoid a third wave and another lockdown, we have to contain the spread of the virus in workplaces.

StatsCan data shows that 84% of the spread throughout the pandemic has been community spread, and Public Health Ontario data shows that most of that community spread has happened in workplaces. The second-most is in long-term-care homes, which you could argue is a workplace, and the third-most is in schools and child care facilities, again, oftentimes among workers. That is why so many people across the province, whether it's boards of health, chief public health officers, Ontario's Big City Mayors, municipal councils, labour groups, chambers of commerce, small business organizations such as the Better Way Alliance and others are all asking the provincial government to step in and provide paid sick leave for workers.

It's simple, Speaker: When you wake up in the morning and you're not feeling well, you should stay home. But for far too many workers, they face an impossible choice: Do I stay home and protect myself, my family, my co-workers and others, or do I pay the bills, pay the rent, put food on the table? All too often, it's an impossible choice for people, and they understandably choose to go to work because they can't afford not to.

Now, I understand the government says, "Well, we have a federal program." Yes, we do have a federal program, and I'm encouraging people to participate in that program. But the bottom line is the program falls far short of what is needed. There are delays in being able to receive funds. Workers have to apply rather than knowing they just automatically can stay home and qualify. I don't understand why the government doesn't say, "Hey, let's bring in mandated paid sick leave in Ontario, and then by all means, let's lobby the federal government to help cover the cost of the program, but let's bring the program in place right now in Ontario so workers don't have to make this impossible choice, so they know they automatically qualify for paid sick days under Ontario's Employment Standards Act."

Speaker, it is also vitally important that we be able to pay workers to take time off to get vaccinated. I just want

to cite a few statistics in my region. Everyone pretty much knows that those of us who live in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph are pretty lucky. We've been ahead of the curve when it comes to vaccinations. Our medical officer of health started working on a vaccine appointment portal last September, and it's been up and running for a few weeks now. We've been at the forefront of vaccinating people in long-term care and in health care facilities. But in some cases, 50% to 70% of workers in some of those homes have actually not gotten vaccinated. It's not because they don't want to be vaccinated. It's not because they are hesitant to be vaccinated. It's because they can't afford to take time off from work to be vaccinated, which is a whole other issue around why we need to provide better wages and working conditions, particularly for PSWs in home care and in long-term-care homes. At the very least, let's provide them with paid time off to get vaccinated.

I want to close by saying that I believe that, in addition to paid sick days, we need a comprehensive workplace safety program that not only includes sick days but includes mandated proper PPE for workers; that includes providing immediate funding for rolling out rapid tests more aggressively with the staff to implement those rapid tests; that provides multilingual education campaigns to tell workers, and especially migrant workers, their rights to refuse unsafe work.

Speaker, I will be voting in favour of this motion, and I encourage all my colleagues in this House to do so as well.

1430

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: I want to remind the members as to what we are debating today, and that is, of course, a specific motion that entails COVID-19 supports, specifically sick day supports. That's something our government heard loud and clear and certainly advocated with our federal counterparts to be able to get additional sick day leave during COVID-19.

It's understandable why the protections are needed in place to protect those workers, which is why we were one of the first provinces to introduce job protection. And then, talk about being a leader province-wide, many other provinces followed suit. For example, when we did introduce job-protected leave, Bill 186—and I do thank the opposition for actually supporting that particular bill, unlike other measures. After that, we saw the same sort of legislation introduced in the Alberta Legislature, in Saskatchewan, and then six other provinces followed suit—again, Ontario leading by example.

To top that all off, why it was so important for Ontario, again one of the largest provinces, to introduce that, well, that just speaks to the culture that Ontario represents, which is a great part of what Canada represents. That's the access to equality of opportunity and why people come to this country, people like my grandparents who I came with back in the 1990s—and it was a tough time to come to Canada. Again, it was a recession and everyone was looking for employment and there were not a lot of jobs

available. It was a combination of a few things as to why many jobs weren't available for many new immigrants coming to the country. That was because we were not only in a financial crisis, in a recession, but fees were going up, businesses were being taxed—and that's not just my family that noticed that coming in the 1990s.

Earlier on, a member in this Legislature who has spoken many times about his family's business, the member from Willowdale—his family came in the 1970s, again to a land of equal opportunity, where if you work hard for every dollar, every cent possible, you too can achieve access. To this day, his family is in the convenience store business. And look, now their son is in the Legislature, and myself, the granddaughter of immigrants and the daughter of immigrants as well standing in this Legislature.

The context for that is, again, because a lot of people come here to work hard. They value every single dollar they make. Something that I heard in the election, and I'm sure members of the opposition heard—I know the member in my riding who knocked on doors for the members of the opposition certainly heard this, because I got some input from those people he knocked on the doors of, and that is the money has to come from somewhere. Where is the respect for taxpayer dollars? There's only one taxpayer. It was really interestingly put by the member from Burlington when she said, "If the roof is leaking, you don't spend money on the wallpaper; you fix the roof."

That's something many new Canadians and people who have been here for multiple generations recognize, that again, if you work hard and you play by the rules, you can get ahead. But then punitive things get introduced, fee after fee, tax after tax. You can't wiggle. You can't make any earning.

So it brings me to remind people in this Legislature that back when we were talking about other payroll taxes—we talked about WSIB and the fact that we need to reduce it again for businesses not to be punished for hiring more people. Again, if they can hire more people, that affects the worker. Yet members of the opposition voted against it. When they had an opportunity in this Legislature to help the workers and help the businesses, they sided with the Liberals when they introduced another payroll tax in this Legislature, and that payroll tax was the ORPP.

I will quote something that my predecessor had said in this Legislature. The late and lovely lady Munro recognized it very well in many lessons that she passed on to myself and my other colleagues in this Legislature. She said, "Businesses in this province have been continually assaulted by this government's"—at the time she was referring to the government of the day—"increased red tape, increased operating costs in both taxes and hydro rates, along with the fear of a new payroll tax. Some of the most vulnerable businesses do not possess the financial cushion to absorb this proposal."

Then she goes on to say, "Businesses can only pay these when they make a profit. Businesses can only hire more employees and grow if the government allows them to do so. It is no longer a secret that each and every day companies choose to pass Ontario by and find jurisdictions where growth is possible."

She goes on to say, later on in that debate, about things like what's being proposed by the members of the opposition and additional payroll taxes to pay for sick days for COVID that we already have. Again, we already have these sick days. Federally, we advocate to have these sick days. So now we're advocating for more taxes to increase programs that people do not need because they already have them at the federal level.

Again, to go on quoting my predecessor, the late Lady Julia Munro, she says that it's the principle: "The same principle about what a tax applies to the Ontario health premium," for example. "One of the first measures introduced by the Liberal government in 2004, which broke its election promise not to raise taxes. Calling it a premium instead of a tax may make it sound like you're paying for an admission to a select club, but all that matters is its compulsion, as goes for the cap-and-trade pricing system, which is just a tax on carbon emissions. Relabeling taxes might be good public relations, but it is bad classification taxonomy."

"Not calling it a tax encourages governments to engage in the fiction of having dedicated levies to fund every type of expenditure, from bridges to roads to debt service, without the burden of a tax." Again from the late Lady Munro, because she recognized money has to come from somewhere.

As the member from Burlington recognized, the sick day program has been around for 81 years. It's been effective for 81 years. She went on to say that all the different provinces that had sick day programs, when it came to COVID-19, pivoted and used the federal program. In fact, we talked about certain provinces like Quebec and Saskatchewan that ended up getting rid of their provincial sick day programs in lieu of the federal program, and of course, Saskatchewan, who only had theirs running five days, ended it after that. I think that's very important to recognize, Speaker.

The member from Guelph talked about how you have to get the sick days expeditiously and they have to be very quickly done. I'll point to a letter that the Premier and the Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development wrote to the Prime Minister and to the counterpart. As a result of provincial advocacy, the payments are now going out the door as early as three to five days, so the workers can see those funds in their accounts.

Again, if there are things that are a hold-up for any of the sick days, something I do in my riding of Barrie—Innisfil, of course working with my federal counterpart, the MP John Brassard, is if there is anything that businesses need in terms of inquiries, any grants they are waiting for, any relations they need to deal with—CRA, for example—we help them.

I think it's upon everyone in the Legislature to recognize the supports that are available, not to hide that, not to hide the fact that there are 20 sick days. There is nothing to be ashamed of, advocating for people to have access to these sick days, certainly. That's something that's bestowed upon all of us in this Legislature, to advocate for our constituents but also letting them be aware of the programs that are available, like the 20 paid sick days

available at the federal level, because of the impacts of COVID-19.

Again, Speaker, for a lot of that work, I have to applaud our Premier and of course our minister in charge of this file for their advocacy when it comes to increasing sick days. We only had about 10, and then a historic negotiation was, as the member from Burlington alluded to, back in July, when Premier Ford negotiated a historic \$19-billion Safe Restart Agreement with the federal government to provide over \$1 billion for 10 sick days, which was agreed to by the province. Again, the province advocating—but then I see what our government has done, I see what the Premier has done. I really thank them for that and what they've done for my constituents. But then I look to what the members of the opposition have done and what impact it's going to have on workers.

The Leader of the Opposition had talked about small businesses. Well, let me tell what your small businesses are talking about when it comes to sick days: “Dan Kelly, president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, says this is only an issue in Ontario, adding that he believes it's an attempt by some to relitigate measures brought in by the previous Wynne government.

“This is an attempt to use the cover of the pandemic to reintroduce employer-paid sick days”—Dan Kelly, president of the CFIB.

1440

The chamber of commerce said in a statement that it supports the idea of protecting workers, but this idea is unaffordable: “Businesses, particularly small businesses, simply cannot afford the additional financial responsibility to fund sick leave at this time.”

When the member of the opposition says that she's talked to small businesses and members of the chamber and the CFIB, I wonder if she read those particular quotes from those very same people, the ones who employ our community members. Again, after COVID-19, we're going to have to have a significant recovery, and if there are no jobs to go back to, there are no sick days to claim because there is no employer to pay for your sick days. That's exactly why we are working with the federal government during the time of COVID. If the sick days are needed, they are there—again, something our government has accomplished.

I look to the members of the opposition in terms of what they've accomplished. In the first budget, our government was able to eliminate over \$3 billion in tax increases. What did the members of the opposition do? They voted against it. In our first year of government, this government was able to cancel over \$150 million in scheduled fees. What did the members of the opposition do? They voted against it.

This is an elimination of fees and taxes that help our employers and our workers in the economy because this is less payroll tax they have to pay. This is less fees they have to pay. That's more money into the economy. That's more money for job creation.

No one is arguing that sick days aren't needed. That's why we have them; that's why we advocated with the federal government. But we also have to acknowledge

what the proposal before us is, which is, again, another payroll tax to shackle the next generation—my generation, for example—and those who come before us. Again, there is only one taxpayer, and we've got to have a job to go back to if we want to claim those sick days. If there is no job to go back to, what's the point?

Another point I wanted to come across here is when we talk about employment, COVID-19 and sick days, something that our government has done—in addition to negotiating the historic \$1.1-billion federal program that is now being offered to give 20 sick days, there are other things we've done. You've seen the results of advocating for this particular program because in Ontario, already, 245,000 people have applied, and to date, only \$340 million has been accessed nationwide, meaning there is still about \$760 million in funding for these sick days. Why would the members of the opposition deprive these individuals from accessing that funding? We should all be championing the fact that this program exists and allowing access to it. Tell those workers in your riding that this fund is available.

The member from Burlington had mentioned it, but the things that we can do to pave the way for those workers, for those employees—

Laughter.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: I understand why the members of the opposition are laughing at me. The reason they are laughing at me is because they understand their position on this. They're going to do what they do all the time: They tax and they spend. And when they do get into government, as was mentioned by the member from Burlington, they pretend they're going to cut spending and then they don't do it. They pretend they're going to cut taxes and they don't do it. The money has to come from somewhere and there's only one employer, Speaker.

The member from Burlington talked about the 1990s. I was very little; I wasn't around for that in the 1990s. But as I learned from the member from Burlington, even then, when the New Democrats were in government, they weren't able to succeed on their anti-deeming policy. What's more, when they had an opportunity to make a difference, they still propped up other governments. And when they did promise to cut \$60 million in spending, they didn't do it.

Again, I point to the fact that we've been able to achieve a lot in our days in this Legislature, advocating for a sick day program that works. We've advocated to expedite it, so now people can get their sick days in three to five days.

That's not it, Speaker. We have to acknowledge that there's unspent money in the program and the other sick benefits and whatnot that do exist through the federal programs, and ways that we're helping to support workers. We've lowered their fees. We've lowered WSIB, something the opposition voted against. We've been able to provide small business grants—again, lifting up those business owners so they have a little bit more liquidity in their business, because if they do well, they can hire more people.

I speak to businesses day in and day out, and they tell me the same thing: They're worried for the day that we

come out of COVID-19 and they're going to be punished. They've been team players this whole pandemic. They've had to close their businesses when they've had to stem the outbreak of the virus, but they understand that, coming out of COVID-19, we're all going to have to be in this together. For them to be able to open up their doors again, they are going to have to make additional sacrifices, but they are afraid everything that they've done is only going to lead to them being taxed again, and they're going to go back to the days of additional payroll taxes that are only punitive to them and all the employees they want to hire—because no business can be successful without its employees. No one wants the worker to leave. Job retention is a very real thing.

If you want to attract that talent into your business, you want to be able to say, “This is how many sick days we provide”—and many businesses do it of their own free will; they don't need big government to get in there and say, “Okay, well, we're just going to take your payroll, and we'll just take half of that, and there you go. There's your program.” For some of these people, they do it out of their heart, because they care for their employees. Again, they don't need the government to get in the way.

But I know if it was up to the opposition—a quote that really comes to mind is, if they see something move, they'll likely tax it. If they see something keep moving, they're going to regulate it. And if it stops moving, they're going to subsidize it. On that note, I'd just say that I think small businesses are in great fear as to what the plans here are for this program, and they really want to know how much the member of the New Democratic Party is going to be increasing payroll taxes, and how she is going to afford this.

Again, most people in COVID-19—at least the ones I speak to—don't care what level of government the support is coming from; they need the support and they need it now, which is why in three to five business days you can now get the federal sick day program. It's there when people need it, and that speaks to the constant mantra throughout this whole pandemic, which is that we're all in it together. Certainly our government has worked across this nation, from coast to coast, to work with our federal government to provide these needed sick-day benefits, and I would say that if it wasn't for the championing of the Premier and the minister, it potentially wouldn't have gotten done.

The member from Burlington mentioned to the members of the opposition that they're right next door to the minister for the file in Hamilton. Certainly they're more than welcome—they don't even have to send a letter; they can probably just knock on their door and ask for this. But yet, we wrote a letter and we got things accomplished.

Speaker, I'm going to wrap up my comments by just saying that we have to understand the supports that are already available. When workers and employees needed protective equipment, this government urged a lot of businesses to step up to the plate, retool their businesses, provide those supports, provide those protections, provide them to our front-line workers.

We recognize that many people in large business settings are going to need, again, rapid testing; we rolled out rapid testing. Every step of the way, we've been there for our employees, and we've been there for workers. We introduced job protection legislation. We went a step further to provide sick leave.

Again, this is about sick leave for COVID-19, and every step of the way, this government has taken action to be able to support people through COVID-19, but we're not going to be shackling them to the unintended consequences of this pandemic later on with increased taxes and increased payroll, because we recognize that recovery is going to take a lot more effort.

On that note, I will end my remarks.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Ms. Doly Begum: Today is International Women's Day, and as we celebrate and recognize women, it is imperative that we recognize the reality that many, many women are facing in their workplaces, especially during this pandemic.

Essential workers across this province, many of whom are women, have been making the impossible choice between putting food on the table and their safety. This is unacceptable. This pandemic has claimed the lives of front-line workers across this province, women like Maureen Ambersley, Christine Mandegarian, Arlene Reid, Sharon Roberts and many who lost their lives simply for going to work. We must recognize the need to protect all workers. Mandating paid sick days will save lives.

This call for paid sick days is not an isolated one from the NDP or from this side of the House, Madam Speaker, despite what the government members will say. It is being echoed by workers from across this province, from health care experts, doctors, policy experts, unions and many small business owners. Government leaders like the mayor of Brampton and former leader of the Conservative Party here; the mayor of Toronto, another leader of the Conservative Party; and chief medical officer Dr. Eileen de Villa have all echoed the call. There is no doubt that paid sick days have the potential to save lives, and that they could have prevented many untimely deaths of workers.

Speaker, we hear the opposition members talk about this roof leaking and how you don't try to patch it; you fix it. But this government is choosing to just throw away the roof, continuing to leave workers vulnerable, forcing them to risk their lives to make ends meet. That's what it looks like. We need paid sick days for women and all workers who have worked tirelessly during this pandemic to protect all of us.

1450

Once more—because this morning I called on the House, so once more, I'm calling on this House, all members from all parties, for paid sick days. Not for myself, not for the NDP, but for the workers across this province so they can stay home when they're sick, so that workers don't lose their livelihoods by having to not go to work.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. John Fraser: I was listening to the member from Barrie–Innisfil, and there's a lot to unpack there. I am going to say, I'm supporting this motion, simply because paid sick days save lives. I know the member from London West and my colleague from Don Valley East have both put forward bills, and there's unanimous support on this side of the House and throughout society for it. The arguments that the member from Barrie–Innisfil was making are the same arguments that people used to say no to having any minimum wage, to a standardized work week and to the Canada Pension Plan, something that supports a lot of people who would otherwise be living in abject poverty in this province. So there's a balance here.

We live in the wealthiest province in Canada. We have an incredible ability to generate wealth. What we have to do when we're in here is make sure that that wealth and those supports are there for everybody. It doesn't mean everybody is going to be equal, but there are basic minimum standards.

You took away two paid sick days—two. That's a fraction of a per cent of an annual salary. Two paid sick days. You took away the raise to the minimum wage. You took away equal pay for equal work. On International Women's Day, we can mention that again.

We have to recognize that workers need protection. That's why we have laws and that's why I'll support this motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Kevin Yarde: It's an honour to rise to speak to our opposition day motion from our leader.

Before I get into the meat of my speech, I want to just talk about something I heard earlier from the Associate Minister of Children and Women's Issues. She mentioned that we must promote women's full economic potential. On International Women's Day, I would expect, after hearing that, that she will probably support our opposition day motion, knowing full well that the majority of and many essential workers are women who have to choose between going to work sick or staying home without any pay.

Now, in Peel and in the Brampton area we have a large manufacturing and industrial area, and we can't expect these companies to shut down these vital infrastructures and essential services whenever there's an outbreak. At the same time, we can't expect to see our workers stay home. They have to go to work because they have to put food on the table. Unfortunately, this is the option that this government has given the workers.

Now, in the city of Brampton, as my colleague from Scarborough Southwest mentioned, the mayor and the councillors are all in line with Dr. Loh in saying that we need paid sick days. I was disappointed to hear last week that all the Conservative MPPs in Peel region voted against having paid sick days, knowing full well that the majority of workers are essential workers in the Peel region.

This government needs to support workers, and I would expect them to do that, just like other governments like BC

and the Yukon have, and they need to step up and they need to step up and do it now.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Ms. Sara Singh: It's an honour to rise here as the member from Brampton Centre, but also a Peel member, to speak about the importance of paid sick days and to support the opposition day motion here.

As we've heard many times in the House, it is absolutely essential that this government implement paid sick days. Paid sick days are long overdue, and it is urgently required.

I know that the government opposite doesn't want to listen to the words of the opposition, so today, I'm going to spend some time sharing some words from our regional council, who represent not only the city of Brampton but Mississauga and Caledon, who have echoed the call for paid sick days. They have actually created their own portal online to call for residents to support paid sick days. They have said that a lack of paid sick days is a health hazard, particularly for low-income workers, contract and agency workers who cannot work remotely, and health care workers, many of whom are considered essential but do not have access to paid sick days. That's from the regional council.

Speaker, in our city, we know that more must be done. As Chair Iannicca said, "We cannot afford to wait to do more to prevent the spread of the virus in our community. We encourage residents to join the call on the federal and provincial governments" to support paid sick days.

Last week, we saw MPPs from Peel vote against our bill by the member from London West to help support paid sick days. I'll end with a quote from Mayor Bonnie Crombie, who said that she is very disappointed in our Mississauga MPPs: "They know how important sick days are. This should not come down to ideological differences—we need to do the right thing."

I encourage all members to support our opposition day motion and help us get paid sick days and help save lives in Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Ian Arthur: It is an honour today to rise and fight for paid sick days for everyone in Ontario. There are few issues where there is as much consensus outside of this Legislature as this one. The Ontario NDP's call for paid sick days has garnered support from nearly every corner of Ontario, from chambers of commerce, professional organizations, municipalities, health experts—basically, everyone who doesn't sit opposite me in this room.

It's unbelievable that we are still debating this over a year into the pandemic. The data is irrefutable: Countries that have unpaid sick leave have the best results in combatting the virus. New Zealand, Australia and the Scandinavian countries, to name a few, all have paid sick days that allow people to stay home if they are sick, without fear of losing their wages. Why? Because they can afford to stay home if they are unwell. They're not afraid of being unable to afford their rent, their utilities, their

Internet, their food. Paid sick leave allows them to combat the spread of the virus, and getting the virus under control is actually the quickest way that we can ensure that these businesses stay open. The government's approach is counterintuitive, and it does not support businesses in the long run.

It's estimated that 60% of Ontarians do not have permanent sick days, and that number is unfortunately much higher among those with low income and racialized people in sectors such as hospitality, food services and retail.

I just want to put this statement from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce on record: "Ensuring people, particularly during a pandemic, can afford to stay home, is both the right thing to do and an economical thing to do. When a worker protects themselves, they protect their colleagues and employer and in turn, they safeguard the entire business."

It's time for the members opposite to listen. It is not impossible. It is within their power to do this. It is within their responsibility to do this. It's time to have paid sick days in Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Ms. Rima Berns-McGown: The people who need paid sick days the most are the people whose communities have been hit the hardest by COVID: working-class, immigrant communities of Black, Indigenous and other people of colour, many of whom hold front-line essential jobs that mean that they cannot work from home and that have put them at a daily risk of COVID throughout the pandemic. So many of them are women. Many of those jobs are precarious, which means they do not come with benefits, and the number of hours and crucial income they provide are not guaranteed.

The Ford government has refused to place a meaningful moratorium on evictions. Thousands of hard-working families have faced eviction hearings at the Landlord and Tenant Board in recent months, and most of them face eviction because of COVID-related arrears. If you know you're going to be on the street if you don't make your rent, you are going to do everything you can to get that paycheque, even if it means going to work sick, even if it means endangering other people and spreading the virus, because the government has given you no choice: no income, no housing; no income, no food on the table.

The Ford government knows that the federal program is no substitute for the paid sick days that health professionals, mayors, medical officers of health and small business advocates have demanded.

It's absolutely shameful that in the middle of a pandemic, the Ford government is both increasing community spread of COVID-19 and making poverty and homelessness worse by not giving hard-working families the paid sick days they desperately need.

1500

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: As always, it's an honour to rise on behalf of the residents of London North Centre and speak to this opposition day motion.

Speaker, my office has been inundated with calls and emails, and I have spoken over the phone with countless constituents who support the MPP from London West's timely, thoughtful and proactive legislation during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the Stay Home If You Are Sick Act. Medical experts, scientists, business people, public health officials, municipal councils and so many more have voiced their support for paid sick days.

On this International Women's Day, we heard the minister address how the pandemic has unfairly hit women. Women would directly benefit from paid sick days to look after a child. As variants of concern appear in our schools—one has just been identified at my former high school, and one I think you know, Speaker, Saunders Secondary School—women will again be impacted, having to stay home to care for ill children. What will happen when the mother falls ill? Staying home keeps others safe, and paid sick days save lives.

The Premier has claimed that everything is on the table, but I would posit that, clearly, paid sick days from this province are not on the table.

It took almost a year for this government to act on behalf of and to support small businesses. Let's hope it doesn't take another year for this government to finally stand up and support workers.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: It's an honour to rise on behalf of the residents of St. Catharines and speak on the opposition day motion today.

I have a single mother and a resident in St. Catharines, Jacqueline, who tested positive for COVID-19 in late August. She made the difficult and prudent decision to leave work and quarantine at home until her symptoms dissipated. While her actions may have prevented an outbreak at the optometrist office where she works, the decision was a personally costly one because Jacqueline doesn't have access to paid sick days, as a part-time worker. That meant her family went without money for rent or food. Jacqueline put her community ahead of her own self-interest.

This government keeps trying to save a buck when we should be doing the right thing. That is why there is a chorus of support for paid sick days in my community. Both the St. Catharines city council and the Niagara regional council passed motions and wrote letters in support of paid sick days. They wrote these letters because they recognize that most workers deemed essential do not have paid sick leave. They recognize that people need support to do the right thing and stay home.

You have legislation in front of you from my colleague and caucus for paid sick leave, and yet you are ignoring the chorus of voices, ignoring people like Jacqueline and voting it down. Shame on you.

The letters that my community wrote were to you, Mr. Premier. Just do the right thing. Don't use this to save a

buck. Listen to the chorus of voices saying that we need paid sick days and pass this reasonable motion from the official opposition. Do the right thing.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Ms. Suze Morrison: Paid sick days save lives. A paid sick day would prevent a personal support worker with a cough from going into the homes of vulnerable seniors. It would allow a factory worker to stay home instead of accidentally starting an outbreak at their plant. But for many essential workers, taking a day off work means taking a cut in pay that they simply can't afford.

People living paycheque to paycheque can't afford to miss a shift. For a lot of people, that lost pay means not being able to buy groceries or being late on the rent.

No one should ever be put in a position of having to choose between going to work sick and potentially spreading a deadly virus throughout our community or staying home and putting their family at risk of hunger or homelessness.

In my riding and across Toronto, we know that many of these workers who are working the lowest-paid jobs without access to paid sick leave are Black, racialized and Indigenous. They are also the most likely to live in the postal codes that have been the hardest hit by the pandemic. There is a direct correlation between poverty and health outcomes, and we've known this in the health system for decades. These are the same workers we've called heroes and praised for their dedication to our community—the people who have risked their lives and the health and safety of their families so that the rest of us could stay home. And yet, this government doesn't believe that those workers deserve paid sick days.

Speaker, the Ontario NDP has been calling for paid sick days for years.

The time is long overdue to put good public health measures, through paid sick days, ahead of politics.

I urge all members of this House to vote in favour of this motion and to take action today to ensure that all workers have access to paid sick days.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I rise today to support the motion that was put forward by the leader of the official opposition on paid sick days. Of course, this is an issue that I have been working on for quite a period of time with the bill that I introduced in December, the Stay Home If You Are Sick Act, which was debated and, unfortunately, defeated by the members across the way in March.

I listened with interest to the comments from the member from Burlington, who pointed to the US as a jurisdiction that Ontario could be looking to. In the US, they did exactly what my paid sick leave bill requires. It mandated employers to provide paid sick leave which would then be reimbursed by the government—because that's the only way we can ensure that workers don't have to worry about taking an unpaid leave, having their pay interrupted, having their pay reduced and, in many cases,

making the decision to go to work instead of staying home when they are sick.

I also want to take a moment to point to some health care workers, nurses, in all of our communities who have paid sick days at work and therefore are not eligible for the federal sickness benefit. They have been told by the hospital in London that if they have a notice from the health unit that they are required to stay home to self-isolate for COVID-19-related reasons, they cannot use their paid sick days. They can't apply to the federal program. They have to use vacation days or take an unpaid leave and stay home in order to do the right thing.

Speaker, once again, we call on this government to listen to the experts, the mayors, the city councils, the boards of health, who are calling for paid sick days so that workers can stay home if they are sick.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I rise on behalf of my constituents of London–Fanshawe to debate the motion for paid sick days.

It should not be a surprise that the Premier eliminated the two paid sick days that Ontario had, as one of his first acts in office, and would continue to deny them, even in the middle of a pandemic.

Support for Bill 239, the Stay Home If You Are Sick Act, has been wide-ranging and strong.

Unions, worker rights groups, newspaper editorial boards, business owners, municipalities, Ontario's top doctors and the province's own science table have made it clear that paid sick days will save lives.

This motion is proposing paid sick days that are seamlessly accessible, fully paid, universal, permanent and adequate—all things that the federal sick day program is not. No matter how much the Premier believes otherwise, the CRSB is limited. There is a waiting period, and it amounts to less than the minimum wage.

It's not enough to tell people to stay home if they're sick. How can you stay home when you can't afford to take a day off work?

Workplaces are hot spots for COVID-19 transmission.

Only 40% of Canadians have access to paid sick leave; that number drops to 10% among low-wage earners.

We all have heard heartbreaking stories from our constituents calling our office about how they don't have sick days and what it means to go home when you're sick and perhaps spread that to your family members.

So I urge the government, on this side of the House, to support this motion and pass paid sick days Bill 239 in this Legislature to help workers and families during the pandemic.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

1510

Mr. Jamie West: I'm very proud to talk about the importance of paid sick days.

This morning, SEIU, Unifor and CUPE launched a campaign called Respect Us. Protect Us. Pay Us. They

launched it intentionally on International Women's Day because the majority of health care workers are women.

The year 2021 marks 110 years of women demanding respect, and it's time to listen.

Speaker, women in health care want more than hollow words from the government.

Gloria is an SEIU member, she's a PSW and a single mother. She said, "I am damn good at my job. But, I can't even take a sick day, so I put everything I have at risk to ensure I have a roof over my head and that of my child."

Sharleen Stewart, on behalf of health care workers like Gloria, said, "Don't call us champions. Pay us. Don't call us heroes. Pay us. Don't call us your friends. Pay us."

In solidarity with the SEIU, Unifor and CUPE health care workers, I'm calling on the Conservative government to respect them, to protect them and to pay them.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Percy Hatfield: I'm one of the lucky ones. I enjoy good health; I always have.

When I worked at the CBC, years would go by before I called in sick, and when I did, it was usually because of a really bad cold or the flu. Mind you, thanks to my union, I had a really good sick leave plan. If I had to take time off, I didn't lose a nickel from my paycheque.

We, in this House, are in the same boat: If we call in and we don't make it into the office or we miss our turn at House duty, we still get paid.

That's how it worked when I was a city councillor in Windsor, too.

I, and many more like me, have been lucky for most of our working lives, but others not so much—60% of the people in Ontario don't have the same benefits or the same privileges. If they call in sick, they don't get paid. If they don't get paid, they don't have enough money for food, rent or for a new pair of running shoes for the kids. They go to work when they're not feeling well. They try to hide their symptoms from their boss or their co-workers, and many times they become more seriously ill and infect the people they came into contact with.

Medical experts support paid sick leave. I say to my Conservative friends: Listen to the experts. Do the right thing. Support paid sick leave so everyone can stay home instead of spreading COVID-19.

I know there is a federal program that people can apply for, but I'm told that it's complicated, cumbersome and has long-term limitations.

What we need in Ontario is a made-in-Ontario solution, one that will accelerate our recovery from the lockdowns.

We can follow other examples or we can chart our own course and set the example for others to follow. Let's become the sick leave champions we know we can be.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: Today is International Women's Day.

I want to take this opportunity to recognize that the majority of our essential front-line workers are women. Many still don't have paid sick days. My community is home to many essential workers who cram onto crowded

buses every day just to get to work, often working long hours at minimum wage. If they don't go to work, they don't get paid. Everyone here, on both sides of this chamber, has rightfully called these workers heroes. But does the government trust and respect them?

When essential workers do get sick, why is this government putting the onus on them to have to choose between going to work sick or staying home and worrying about how they are going to feed their families and pay the bills?

As the vaccine rolls out, we must ensure that workers are able to take the time off they need to get vaccinated.

This government has rejected multiple attempts by the NDP to give paid sick days to Ontario workers.

Many public health experts, including the chair of Ontario's science advisory table and the Toronto and Peel medical officers of health, have said a paid sick day program is necessary. Public health experts have told us repeatedly that the federal program is not enough. So why is this government not listening to their advice?

I urge all of my colleagues here on the other side to do the right thing and support this motion. Let's give paid sick days to all workers so we can better stop the spread and give our workers the peace of mind they deserve.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Ms. Laura Mae Lindo: I stand in the House today in full support of this motion. Paid sick days are critical to combatting this pandemic. The people of Kitchener Centre know that, and the people across Waterloo region know that as well.

Those least likely to have paid sick days are the most vulnerable communities—racialized women, lower-income communities and precarious workers.

I'm going to quote a constituent who wrote to me: "The workers least likely to have paid sick days are the most vulnerable economically, and they are also the most vulnerable to exposure to disease, including COVID-19. Nowhere is it more apparent that doing the right thing for vulnerable workers is also the right thing for the rest of us."

Locally, in Kitchener Centre, as well as across Waterloo region, we know that the federal program is simply not enough.

I'll quote again: "The federal program is not sufficient, and this is a provincial responsibility. Please take a stand for vulnerable workers, many of whom are women. International Women's Day is the perfect time to introduce paid sick leave legislation. If we're going to rebuild the economy, we must rebuild with paid sick leave, which is both more compassionate and economically sound and is particularly critical for women, many of whom are already in precarious employment."

It is the provincial government's responsibility to protect the people of Ontario—and that means every single person. Paid sick days save lives. The people of Kitchener Centre know that. The people across Waterloo region know that. The legislation to ensure that paid sick leave becomes something for us during this pandemic is our responsibility to make.

I fully support this motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Miss Monique Taylor: I am proud to stand on behalf of the residents of Hamilton Mountain to speak in favour of this motion. New Democrats have been working very hard to ensure that people have the ability to stay home when they're sick.

We are watching the numbers continue to grow again in the positive cases, and we're seeing the variants starting to really climb. I wrote down a couple of numbers—my numbers from last night: The UK variant is at 828; on February 15, it was at 309. That means we've doubled in not even two weeks. For the South African variant, we're at 31; February 15, we were at nine. For the Brazilian variant, 13; two weeks ago, we were at one. These numbers are growing at a rapid pace. If we do not give people the ability to stay home when they're not feeling well, then these numbers will continue to increase.

Today is International Women's Day. We know that women have borne the brunt of this pandemic. They're the ones who are working mainly on our front lines, overworked and underpaid. Can we not do right the right thing at least by them today, on International Women's Day, and ensure that if they're ill, if they need to get a COVID-19 test, if their children are ill and can't go to school, they have protection to be able to know that they are going to pay their rent at the end of the day?

I want to comment on the member from Barrie—Innisfil and her comment that you don't fix the roof by changing the wallpaper. Many people in this province wish they had a roof over their head. Maybe if they weren't so out of touch with people who are actually living in this province, they wouldn't make comments such as that, and they would ensure that we had paid sick days for everyone across this province.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Michael Mantha: I'm very pleased to stand up on behalf of the good people of Algoma—Manitoulin to discuss the great benefits that paid sick days would bring to all Ontarians.

For a brief moment during the first wave, I almost believed this government actually thought we were all in this together, but then it ended up being all talk and no action. Now we're at the point where they are just hiding behind the vaccination plan and the federal government as an excuse to do nothing.

Ça fait un an que les gens ont de la misère. Ça continue encore aujourd'hui alors qu'on déconfiner la province tranquillement, et ça va continuer même après qu'on ait vacciné tout le monde, parce que notre économie ne va pas rebondir magiquement tout de suite. Les gens ont besoin d'aide, et c'est pourquoi notre parti propose les jours de maladie payés pour tous les travailleurs et travailleuses de l'Ontario. Ce gouvernement doit comprendre que les Ontariens en ont besoin et veulent des jours de maladie payés.

People are calling my office and telling me they can't keep losing a day's pay every time their child has a

COVID-19 symptom. We're getting calls from front-line workers who are worried they won't be able to pay their rent if they catch COVID-19 and have to self-isolate.

This government likes to repeat that we already have the federal Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit, but the reality is, it's just not paid sick days. Not everyone qualifies automatically, and it doesn't offer the same benefits. Speaker, we need paid sick days.

1520

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Guratan Singh: It's always an honour to rise in this House and speak on behalf of the constituents of Brampton East. I want everybody to take a moment right now and reflect on the terrible decision that folks in Brampton and across Ontario had to make this morning. Workers woke up feeling sick, and then they had to make a decision between going to work sick or putting food on their table, between going to work sick and paying their bills, between going to work sick and paying their rent or their mortgage.

We are in unprecedented times. We are in the middle of a pandemic. When I look at the stats in Brampton, they are staggering. Almost 40,000 people to date have been infected with COVID-19. More than 230 people have died, and there have been almost 110 outbreaks in workplaces.

Public health is clear: Workplaces are one of the greatest areas of spread for COVID-19—the same workplaces where workers risk their lives, going in every day to move our economy, so that others can work from home. They go to work, but they don't have the dignity to stay home when they're feeling sick. They don't have the safety for themselves and for their communities to stay home when they are feeling sick.

Now, over the past few weeks, we've seen this Conservative government vote down paid sick days. We've heard the Premier call paid sick days a waste of taxpayer money. That is shameful. Workers deserve paid sick days. They need paid sick days. Lives are at risk. You will literally save lives by bringing in paid sick days, so that's why we are all calling on the Conservative government to do the right thing. Bring in paid sick days so workers, so Ontarians, so people can have the dignity, the respect and safety that they deserve.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

M^{me} France Gélinas: As we all know, today is the one-year anniversary of WHO telling us that we were in a global pandemic. We now know an awful lot more about the coronavirus than we did a year ago. We know that a steady stream of transmission happens in the workplace. With contact tracing, we know that workers with symptoms are going to work because they cannot afford to stay home, and they're spreading the virus.

During a pandemic, when we see that the program in place—that is, the federal program—does not work, you pivot. You do what needs to be done to end this pandemic, and that means paid sick days. If not, thousands more

businesses will go insolvent. Thousands more people will get sick, and many of them will die, all of this on our watch—on your watch. This is in your hands right now. You can change this by bringing forward paid sick days. It is as simple as that. Will the government do it?

Des journées de maladie payées, ça va sauver des vies et en finir plus rapidement avec cette pandémie.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate? Further debate?

We'll go back to the leader of the official opposition for right of reply.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Thank you very much, Speaker. I appreciate that.

You know, one of the things that's definitely the case is that you get to understand the government's values and their priorities based on what they do. And I can tell you that it's been pretty troubling to watch these last number of months with COVID-19, as the government really is not prepared to step up and take care of the most vulnerable amongst us or to make the decisions that would help the most people. But while they're denying front-line heroes from obtaining paid sick days, while they're denying the opportunity for people to do the right thing and stay home, what the government has chosen to promote or to go ahead with are things like sweet deals for their developer friends with ministerial zoning order changes.

And so we don't want to have paid sick days for everyday workers who are busting their backs on the front lines of the essential workplaces that help us all to stay home and stay safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, but when it comes to a developer who needs a ministerial zoning order to pave over a wetland like Duffins Creek, for example, the priority of the Conservative government is the well-connected, the moneyed people, the developers. So we get ministerial zoning orders. We get a situation where a minister signs off on projects to pave over Duffins Creek on the same day—miraculously—that those developers literally put money in the coffers of the Conservative Party.

This is the priority of the Conservative government here in Ontario. They will help the very wealthy international corporations like Walmart rake in even more profits while they won't help everyday people be able to take a paid sick day, while they won't help everyday small businesses be able to have a fighting chance at surviving through COVID-19. While they support and do everything they can—they move heaven and earth—to help big corporations and to help developers, they deny everyday workers, our front-line heroes, the opportunity to take a paid sick day.

These people—this government—are the ones who have chosen to protect the for-profit corporations and their own government from any kind of accountability for the debacle, for the tragedy, for the horrifying situation that unfolded in long-term care, and not just in wave one but in wave two. Instead of making sure that PSWs were properly paid, that there were enough of them, that they were in one place at an appropriate time and not going from one long-term-care home to another and that they had

the PPE—no, that wasn't the priority. That was not the priority. Instead, literally almost 4,000 seniors have lost their lives—inexcusably, the greater majority of those in the second wave instead of the first.

This is the choice that we see from the government over and over again. It's about their friends; it's about the well-connected; it's about the wealthy, but it's not about the people who generate that wealth. It's not about the everyday workers that at the very least deserve the humanity of getting a paid sick day when they contract the virus or when they feel that they might have done so—not even giving them the dignity, not even giving them the respect. Those front-line heroes they talk a good game about have had their government turn its back on them.

It's not just the NDP. It is municipal councils, it is municipality leaders and mayors, it is public health experts, it is experts that the government apparently listens to. The Premier's own Chief Medical Officer of Health has recommended this. But this government would rather pad the pockets of their friends, protect their friends and give their friends lots of great opportunity, while everyday front-line heroes are not even given the opportunity to stay safe and stop the spread.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Ms. Horwath has moved opposition day motion number two. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed will please say "nay."

In my opinion the nays have it.

A recorded vote being required, the bells will ring for 30 minutes, during which time the members may cast their votes.

Prepare the lobbies, please.

The division bells rang from 1529 to 1559.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): The vote was held on opposition day motion number 2.

The Deputy Clerk (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 34; the nays are 52.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): I declare the motion lost.

Motion negatived.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

CONCURRENCE IN SUPPLY

Hon. Paul Calandra: I move concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Long-Term Care, including supplementaries; the Ministry of Education, including supplementaries; the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, including supplementaries; the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries; the Ministry of Health, including supplementaries; the Ministry of Infrastructure; the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines; the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, including supplementaries; the Ministry of Economic

Development, Job Creation and Trade; and the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, including supplementaries.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Mr. Calandra has moved government orders 48 through 57. Back to the government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: With that, I'll cede the floor to the opposition.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Ms. Catherine Fife: It's a pleasure to join the debate today. This might be my first one as the finance critic on estimates, and the debate, and really reviewing what has happened through the course of this year—a year, I think, that we can all acknowledge was very challenging.

Just to review how we got here, at this particular time and place: Last Thursday, the province released the second edition of their supplementary expenditures estimates for the budget year. You may remember that in September, the first edition of supplementary estimates was released. Back in November, they released their 2021 estimates. At the beginning of February, the government also released their Q3 numbers, and we are anxiously awaiting the 2021-22 budget, which will be the most important, I think, in the history of this province.

We all know that the work in this House is important work; of course it is. Question period is fun for some people and not so fun for others. But the work in our legislative committees is equally if not more important to the governing of this province. The estimates committee plays a key role in monitoring government spending and ensuring that funding is properly allocated and invested in the services that Ontarians rely on. This work has never been more important, especially during this pandemic.

As many in the House know, the budget estimates are required to be tabled no later than 12 sessional days after the budget has been tabled. From those estimates, the Standing Committee on Estimates picks at least six and up to 12 ministries to review. The minister and high-level ministry officials are subject to the scrutiny and questioning of MPPs. This is very similar in many respects, Madam Chair, to what happens at public accounts. I was very proud to chair that committee for the last two and a half years.

It is an important measure of accountability. It is an important measure of checks and balances and it speaks to the importance of financial transparency for the entire province. This is the type of accountability that governments of all stripes need. The committee needs to be done with this review by the third Thursday in November. This year, the committee did not complete their report. As I mentioned, it has been an unusual year. This was also complicated by the fact that the formal budget for the last fiscal year was not tabled until November 5, so there was no time for the estimates committee to meet and review the spending presented in the November 5 budget. Moving forward, this cannot happen again.

The Standing Committee on Estimates serves an important role in holding the government and ministers to account. If you believe, as I do, that budgets are moral

documents that speak to our priorities as a government, as a Legislature, those priorities should reflect what the people of this province need. Listen, we also have to make sure that that money which was allocated is actually spent. Moving forward, I hope to actually be keeping a very close eye on these expenditures. I also look forward to the government following the appropriate schedule this year and tabling the estimates on time so that the committee has sufficient time to meet and to scrutinize.

Just one final point about the committee is that the committees that are chaired by opposition members—public accounts, estimates and government appointments, important committees—the government has not allowed those Chairs of those committees to call the committee to work outside of the legislative schedule. However, the government committees are allowed to meet. We fundamentally find this to be unequal, if not desperately unfair. Listen, the Chairs of those committees that are led by opposition members want to do the work. It is important work to be done, so let them work. Let them work.

Everyone in the House will agree that it's been a challenging year for the province's finances. The pandemic has brought unparalleled disruption to our economy and our society. The financial impact of that disruption hasn't just been felt this year; it will be felt for years to come. As I mentioned, I think those committees should be able to work outside of the legislative calendar to ensure that we are responding in a fiscally responsible and timely manner to the COVID-19 pandemic. But just because there have been unprecedented challenges does not mean that the norms of good governance and accountability need to be disregarded. It's important to follow the money to see what the government's priorities really are and to see if those priorities match what the people need, especially during a time of crisis.

Let's look at the government's Q3 outlook that was released in February. From that government outlook, "Since the 2020 budget, the government has fully allocated all of the time-limited pandemic response funding and extraordinary contingencies of \$13.3 billion in 2020–21. In light of this, and to help mitigate expense risks for the remainder of 2020–21, the standard contingency fund has been allocated an additional \$2.1 billion for 2020–21, given the uncertain and unprecedented impact of the global pandemic."

This is important, Madam Speaker. The government has topped up the contingency fund: "The standard contingency fund is maintained to help mitigate expense risks—for example, in cases where health and safety may be compromised, and which may otherwise adversely affect Ontario's fiscal performance. The remaining standard contingency fund at the time of the 2020 budget was \$3.0 billion, with \$1.9 billion remaining after draws in the 2020–21 third quarter" estimates.

Why is this important? Well, I will tell you, Madam Speaker. The whole issue of contingency funds is a quandary that Legislatures across the country face. A recent report examined where the money came from, because disentangling the federal funding and the

provincial funding is important, because it indicates: Has the provincial government really stepped up and invested money in health, in education, in health and safety?

In Ontario, it's really interesting; the health care spending in Ontario is expected to be the equivalent of—this is the top-up—\$1,180 per person, with only \$160 of that per-person allocation from the provincial government. So on the health file with regard to COVID-19, this government relied very heavily on the federal government. In fact, 94% of that funding was federal money.

On the education response—because when the schools closed down last March, there was an urgency to open those schools safely, and there were measures that needed to be put in place to make schools as safe as they could be. But on this file, the COVID-19 top-up of the \$100 per person being spent on child care and education—only \$20 of that came from the provincial government.

1610

On the contingency fund—and this is an important distinction: unallocated funds related to COVID-19. I will speak to this in a little bit. The government has put out their expenditure estimates, and this came out last week. On page 17 of the estimate reports, under “Treasury Board support program,” it very clearly indicates that there is almost \$4 billion in this contingency fund. I'm going to get to why that's so important.

You'll have to remember that the fiscal year is March 31. The government of the day has 23 days to spend this money or it will go to pay down the deficit. So this not only is a question of transparency around where the money is going or where the money is not going, but it is a question of—and this is an important debate that we should be having; it should have happened at estimates, and we should have had that opportunity—is this where the government should be putting that contingency fund, to pay down the deficit, as we are coming into a third wave?

I'm sure you noticed that the numbers today have gone up again, so all of us in this House should be singularly focused on preventing a third wave and another shutdown of the economy.

We would argue—and we will—that investing right now in long-term care, in our health care system, in accelerating the very sloppy vaccination strategy that the government has done, and in ensuring that our schools have everything they need to ensure that they do not become places where transmission of COVID-19 happens—those investments would be very wise right now. In fact, I would argue that they would be fiscally responsible.

On the issue of unallocated funds related to COVID-19: This is a type of contingency fund that may be used in the future for direct measures, but for which there are no committed plans. This is very true. Of the \$3.9883882 million that is now currently sitting—

Mr. Gilles Bisson: Billions.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Billions, sorry. Thank you, yes. It's a very big distinction.

There are, to date, no directives about this funding. If there are no direct measures, for which there are no

committed plans, these funds impact the government expenditures and, therefore, the government deficits.

As I said, the fiscal year is fast approaching—March 31—and \$4 billion, I hope we can all agree, is a lot of money. As far as an accounting structure, these accounting structures can be eliminated with the stroke of a pen, thereby reducing the deficit.

This is, of course, concerning to us for a number of reasons, in that we think that at this time in the history of this province, there are ways to invest that money in keeping people safe and in keeping the economy open. In fact, there has never been a more clear and apparent case for public investment in public safety. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like that money is going to get out into the province. We argue that it should be put into place and that there's a good financial case for that.

The Globe and Mail also noted, when the Minister of Finance did announce the top-up of the contingency fund, “But its numbers also show it still has \$4 billion left to spend this fiscal year if needed in a general contingency fund, while leaving \$500 million in a reserve fund meant to be drawn upon if the province's revenue projections are off.” All the more—

Mr. Gilles Bisson: It's \$4.5 billion?

Ms. Catherine Fife: It's \$4.5 billion in total—so all the more reason for estimates to meet, and to go line by line and to review. If the government can point—which you haven't—to where that money is going, to date, we would really appreciate seeing it. Why not demonstrate where that money is going? If it's not going someplace, then we all have a big problem in this Legislature.

This really points to the transparency in spending. In both the Q3 and the second supplementary estimates, the province isn't being totally transparent about what the contingency fund money is being spent on. We have no evidence, we have no notes about where this money is going, because it remains unallocated. I want to see a line-by-line accounting of where this contingency funding is being allocated. I want to follow the money to see where the priorities are, if they do align with the people we serve. Is the money rolling out quickly enough to Ontario so that they are properly supported?

We certainly know that, on the small business grant, that is not happening. It took this government almost eight months to come forward with direct support by way of a grant, and it's a huge process for businesses to go through. Many have been waiting weeks now—and never mind that they waited almost eight months for that support.

So after countless missteps, a lot of Ontarians just don't trust this government. When the citizens of this province lose trust, then you have a very serious issue of undermining confidence in the pandemic response and in the economic recovery of the province.

Last week's supplementary estimates—and I've already pointed to them, page 17. That's a big number. The description of that spending in the estimates documents regards as “other transactions.” There are no details attached to these, as I mentioned. This is a lot of money. No details, a lot of money—you see a pattern here, Madam Speaker.

The contingency fund is meant for unforeseen emergencies or crises that the government may need to respond to. Well, I can make a very compelling argument right here and right now that we are in an economic crisis, and I'm going to go through who is being negatively impacted by a lack of strategic investment to date in the province.

In my opinion, these crises haven't gone away. Certainly, that has been confirmed by several public health units across the province. You will note that Lanark county, whose MPP who has served in the House and who was basically telling folks that COVID-19 is a bit of a hoax, is moving into the red zone in the province. We're seeing higher numbers in Simcoe–Muskoka of the new variant. There's a lot of concern around pockets of spread around COVID-19, because once it's out there in the community, it is very, very hard to control. We know this. We went through the first wave together. We went through the second wave together. We made the same mistakes in the second wave. So there is a good financial and economic reason to invest these dollars in strategic investments to keep people safe.

So \$4 billion, as most Ontarians would tell you, is a lot of money. I remember when the Liberals were here. They used to drop that on the way to work. But in today's terms, in the middle of a crisis, that money needs to be helping people stay healthy and safe so our economy can stay open.

Why can't the government be transparent and say where the money is going to be spent? Why aren't they sharing that information with this House, and why aren't they sharing it with the members of the public?

Money in the bank doesn't support people in long-term care or improve safety in our schools.

And if this money isn't spent, as I've pointed out, it goes to pay the deficit. Is that what the people of this province want? I ask you this in seriousness, because I can see that it's a very sensitive issue. The government feels that they have spent all that federal money—94% of the COVID-19 response was from the federal government. The people of this province have recognized that there's a pattern and a gap in direct support to address COVID-19 and strategic investing. This also doesn't mean that the province spent enough at the right time, quickly enough or wisely.

The Premier has said consistently that his government will spare no expense. All of that unearned media every single day—that's what he says each and every time. He also says everything is on the table. Well, it's a pretty small table. In fact, it's a bit of a card table, I would say. Do you see what I did there? It's like a house of cards sort of thing. I'm here all week. That's okay.

1620

Everything is on the table, but apparently it isn't on the table, because we just had a very painful debate on a made-in-Ontario sick leave plan—particularly our members from Brampton and Peel and Mississauga and downtown Toronto. There is a very compelling case here to ensure that people do not go to work sick. The argument that this government pushed the federal government to do these

four weeks, where it is completely—it's a narrative that doesn't sell across the province, because that federal program has not been accessed to the degree that it should be in a pandemic, which is an indicator that it is an unsuccessful program, much like the CECRA program, the rent support.

You'll remember, Madam Speaker, when the provincial government refused to bring in direct commercial rent support for businesses—businesses that stood up for us in the province of Ontario, that did everything the government asked them to do. What did the government do? They passed the buck to the federal government, to a program that did not work, that was landlord-driven, and that was insufficient from a funding perspective.

The gaps in the way that this government has responded to this pandemic are real, they are documented and they cause concern across this province. There are many examples of where money went and where money shouldn't be going.

The \$4.5 million for security guards in long-term-care homes—I don't know who was trying to get in or who was trying to get out, but that was not a wise expenditure that flowed out there to the people of this province.

The Premier stands up every day and says to the people of this province, "Listen, folks, we've got your back." But they haven't put in the investment to ensure that people actually see it in a very tangible way. That compromises everything that we've been fighting for in this House.

Just think about last May, Madam Speaker. You and I are former school board trustees. Kids had been learning remotely, and there were huge challenges with that, huge inequities across boards and across neighbourhoods. Just think of our northern members who don't have access to the kind of broadband that those students needed. We had some folks out in rural communities who were trying to go to the Tim Hortons to access the WiFi. This is a real example, especially in some rural communities.

The broadband bill that they introduced last Thursday, as I pointed out in my question this morning, has very little to do with expanding broadband. We would fully support a huge investment in broadband infrastructure, because it will be the great equalizer on a go-forward basis. It won't double down on the inequities that we are seeing across this province.

But when you think about last May, experts at that point were already talking about what needed to be done to make schools safe for kids to return to school in September. There was a good chunk of time there, and if you sat on SCOFEA, as I did, for those four months, you heard again and again the solutions that needed to be put in place to ensure that we were mitigating all risk around COVID-19—better ventilation, smaller class sizes. The government was not proactive on this.

My sister teaches in Peel. She started off with a full class, but as students and families started to feel that the school was not as safe as it could be and that community transmission of COVID-19 was so apparent, her class of 29 dropped down to 28 online, and she has one student in her class. She goes in every day because, of course, that's

her job and she's an amazing teacher. But at one point, the vice-principal asked her for a seating plan—it got to a point of being comical—for one student in a class.

Mr. Gilles Bisson: You've got to be kidding me.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I wish I was kidding. I'm not kidding.

We all want to support the education system, and we come from that system. It drew us into politics. But there has to be some strategic common-sense investment that happens.

On the issue of ventilation, across the education sector, the four publicly funded education systems across this province—there is an infrastructure capital deficit that has been well documented by Fix our Schools. I believe we're up to \$16.1 billion. Investing in schools during a pandemic to keep students and staff safe because of working conditions, our learning conditions, would have been an amazing investment. It would have corrected a systemic wrong that was left over—a Liberal hangover leftover. Yet the companies that came to us at SCOFEA also made the point that ventilation—the HVAC sector put forward a very strong proposal for investment that not only would correct some of the infrastructure deficits that we see in our system, but also create good jobs. Doesn't that sound like a win-win solution—create good jobs in a pandemic, when many are suffering, and then also correct a long-standing systemic issue in our education system?

During the first wave, also, when we saw the devastating impacts that COVID-19 was having on long-term-care homes and congregate settings—and we knew that a second wave was coming. Experts told us, "A second wave is coming. Prepare for that wave." The Premier promised to put this iron ring around long-term care, but there were no solid measures that were actually put in place. Clearly, what a missed opportunity to once again correct a long-standing systemic issue that the Liberals left us with. You would have had full public support for that investment.

Right now, in Lambton county, there are a number of long-term-care facilities that have been inspected—because this has been a long-standing issue around inspections—but there are no consequences from the inspections. Homes are found not to be compliant, but there are no consequences, and so there's no corrective behaviour.

These are two issues that you could have invested in; you still could. You still have 23 days.

During the first wave, we also saw countless businesses struggle. We proposed some quick financial support programs to get them through the first wave. This was our Save Main Street strategy. We listened to businesses, based on the consultation. We determined how much the rent support was going to cost, the PPE, the retraining, the upscaling and the pivoting that needed to happen in order for businesses to survive through this pandemic—because if they didn't survive, it obviously would impact our economic recovery. The government refused to listen and relied heavily on the federal programs.

I was very proud of our Save Main Street strategy that we put forward in April. All of our caucus members took

it out to our respective downtown BIAs. The CFIB supported it and the chamber of commerce supported it, because they recognized that you just can't add more debt to businesses during a pandemic. They can't recover.

Up until two weeks ago, I was working with a company in Ottawa that took the tax deferral—as they will, because they have no choice—but then the payment on the tax deferral came due, and, of course, they still didn't have any revenue because we were in a second lockdown. These are high consequences, these are high stakes for businesses. That business owner found that the finance ministry was going to put a lien on the business and also charge 7% interest on the deferred taxes, which is debt—7%.

The Ministry of Finance, in the middle of the pandemic, should not be making money off of businesses that have been in a great deal of pain and stress. I hope we can all agree on that.

During the first wave, we also saw \$1.6 million spent, in the early weeks of the pandemic, to have a consulting company set up a convoluted command structure to respond to COVID-19. You'll remember that—\$1.6 million to consultants to tell the system, which was already designed to deal with a pandemic and a vaccination protocol, how to do that and try to make sense of it.

Remember, though, if Public Health Ontario had not been gutted pre-pandemic, this type of spending wouldn't have had to happen and we would have had experts who, for all of their careers, had vaccinated folks and had ensured that best protocols were in place. I'm thinking of the medical officer in Kingston who, as soon as the pandemic happened, took all of their food inspectors and brought them to long-term-care homes. That's a tangible strategy that public health units applied that actually saved lives. You would agree with that, the member from Kingston and the Islands? Yes.

1630

There have been countless missed opportunities to allocate money at more appropriate times. The government has missed some big opportunities to be proactive and to take the lead of other successful jurisdictions. It is interesting to see how Ontario has weathered this storm. Certainly, we now know for a fact that we have not weathered it equally across this province.

Just as it is International Women's Day, it is a fitting time, I think, Madam Speaker, to raise these issues, because we've been talking about the she-cession and the need for a she-covery strategy in this province since last April. We saw very early, based on the job numbers, who was being disproportionately affected by this and that impact it was having on specific communities.

To this date, there has not been a solid response from the government on the she-cession, but it is clear from countless reports that if women are not deliberately and intentionally included in the economic recovery, the province will suffer for it. You cannot leave 51% of the population out of the equation if you are planning on a full economic recovery in Ontario.

I have to say, given that today is International Women's Day, it is only fair and just for me to give a shout-out to

Farrah Khan and Pamela Cross, who wrote an op-ed today in the *Toronto Star*. It's entitled "This International Women's Day Ensure That Women's Expert Voices Are Centred in COVID-19 Recovery Plans." They go on to say, and they're not wrong, "This International Women's Day we can expect to hear the usual platitudes from government, business and institutions about women's empowerment and how far we have come. What we deserve to hear are concrete commitments to address the gender-based impacts of the pandemic. We cannot go back on decades of progress on women's gender equity.

"It's been almost a full year since the pandemic hit. During that time, lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, while important for controlling the spread of the virus, have exacerbated violence in the home." This is something that we don't talk about with great honesty in this place, Madam Speaker.

"Women are living in precarious situations faced with a limited reprieve from violence. Family courts have only been able to manage the most urgent issues, which has left some women and children in unsafe situations. Criminal courts are releasing higher numbers of accused people on bail to try to control the spread of COVID-19 in jails." This is very true of my community of Kitchener-Waterloo. You would be shocked about the nature of the crimes and the people who were in, say, Maplehurst and who are now in the community because of the outbreaks that are happening in our jail system.

"Court services, such as duty counsel, have been available only remotely. Supervised access centres have not been in operation for much of the past year. Violence-against-women shelters have had to reduce their capacity to meet physical distancing requirements.

"On top of that, women have been left with primary responsibility for managing children, including overseeing their school work, through much of the pandemic." I cannot be the only MPP in this chamber who had very stressful, tension-filled conversations with mothers who were trying to balance work, caring for their elderly parents and children. They were genuinely squeezed during this pandemic, and to the breaking point.

"The impacts of the pandemic on women's economic and employment situations have been immense. RBC's July 2020 Economics Report noted that the pandemic 'knocked women's participation in the labour force down from a historic high to its lowest level in over 30 years'" — 30 years. If we do not have a strategic investment strategy to get women back into the workforce, we will not recover. There will be no economic recovery without a she-covery.

"Women were the first to lose their jobs and, for those who remained employed, they have had some of the highest-risk work, serving on the front lines in the food service industry as well as providing personal care services to vulnerable populations. Many of the workers who provide care for children, sick or elderly adults or people with disabilities are women who are racialized, new to Canada or working here temporarily." And still, under the Employment Standards Act for the province of Ontario, which is our responsibility collectively as a Legislature, they still do not have paid sick days.

"Young women between the ages of 20 and 24"—this is my daughter now—"are exiting the labour force the most quickly due to the pandemic. These are also the women most likely to be targeted for intimate partner and sexual violence. The loss of economic independence due to job loss makes these women even more vulnerable to being victimized in acts of gender-based violence.... Furthermore, harassment has not stopped just because work has gone online; in fact, it has increased for women working from home."

The federal government, to their credit, has brought in some places—today, they just announced an expert committee of women who have the expertise and education to sit down and stay focused on this one task, and that is ensuring that women see an economic recovery happen in this country.

"For meaningful COVID recovery, we need to centre women, especially those on the margins including but not limited to Black, Indigenous and women of colour. Our voices must be at the leadership tables or it's not recovery at all. We cannot go back to where we were 30 years ago. We need more, not fewer options for women."

One of the biggest issues that we have heard during this pandemic is the need for child care. For some of us, we've been fighting for child care for years now, especially child care around schools, which we started back in 2008-09. For instance, for child care, for every dollar that's invested in early learning and care—preferably in a not-for-profit, quality, accessible, affordable model, which most not-for-profits try to be—there's a return on investment to the economy of \$7. So if the government is looking for an economic strategy, as you enter into budget 2021-22, there has never been a stronger case for investing in early learning and care—never. And if women are left behind, which they will be if there is no affordable child care on the radar for this government—and I'm not talking about the big box corporate child care, Madam Speaker; I'm talking about the not-for-profit model, which ensures that every dollar that goes into that system actually goes to the quality of care of the children. If you're looking for the biggest bang for your buck in this budget, then early learning and care, preferably the not-for-profit model, needs to be part of that equation.

The RBC Economics report came out on March 4. It also highlights why governments of all stripes across this entire country must be focused on women for economic recovery. It goes on to say, "COVID Further Clouded the Outlook for Canadian Women at Risk of Disruption.

"Almost half a million Canadian women who lost their jobs during the pandemic hadn't returned to work as of January. More than 200,000 had slipped into the ranks of the long-term unemployed, a threefold increase over last year.

"Before the crisis, these women held a wide variety of jobs, but there was a common thread. Many worked, for modest pay, in the low-skilled service jobs that helped keep the broader Canadian economy humming along. They may have lacked the economic clout of some other Canadian workers, but they were highly visible, in food

courts, salons, pubs and elsewhere—places that didn't allow for safe physical distancing when the pandemic hit. Because women represented the majority in industries most affected by virus-containment measures, they bore the brunt of the job losses." And this is very true for the province of Ontario.

"Widespread vaccinations will bring back many service jobs." There is a lack of confidence, I would say. Although I still remain hopeful, Madam Speaker, that my parents, who are 74 and 72, in Peterborough, may get a vaccine. They need it very quickly, I think, just for their own mental health.

"Widespread vaccinations will bring back many service jobs. But firms have repositioned themselves to require fewer workers." This is an interesting economic trend that will impact how we navigate through the next few months of this pandemic. "And the year-long pandemic may have cemented new consumer habits around online shopping, at-home workouts and other digitally enabled activities.

"In this way, the pandemic accelerated structural economic changes that were in motion pre-COVID. Canadian women were already at higher risk of disruption because they held more than half of the 35% of Canadian jobs susceptible to automation. The COVID crisis made them even more vulnerable, by forcing many firms to adopt contactless and other digital technologies far sooner than they might have otherwise.

1640

"Post-COVID, the work future for these Canadian women looks very uncertain," but there is hope. There are programs out there that actually work. I was having a conversation earlier today with the Minister of Finance—I was thankful that he'd reached out—and we talked about priorities. I believe we have similar goals but perhaps different avenues to get to those goals.

But on early learning and care and partnering with the not-for-profit sector, you simply cannot go wrong. For communities across this province in all of our ridings, there are not-for-profit agencies in that sector who are ready to help, be it on housing, be it on health care, be it on education, and there's no additional red tape. I know you're very fascinated with red tape. There's no additional red tape; there's no additional bureaucracy; there's no additional administrative overhead. They're ready to get to work, and so if you're looking for a good return on that investment and partnering with the not-for-profit sector, it is there.

One such program, particularly as I'm talking about the double jeopardy for women—and that's what this analysis from RBC is called. The double jeopardy piece is that women obviously worked in these high-risk areas. Automation was already coming down the line and so they're further disenfranchised from an economic perspective.

One of these program is called In Her Shoes. It's a social enterprise of the Kitchener-Waterloo YWCA. It's an employment and entrepreneurship training program that uses the YW Kitchener-Waterloo's Bricks and Clicks stores as a training lab. This is something that's ready to go. I have to tell you, when I look at where the government

has spent some money, making a case for \$530,000 over two years to create over 100-plus new jobs in KW for women by retraining, by upscaling, this is a smart investment.

Fundamentally, I think where we see the difference between the government and how we see investing in people and public services is that if you have a coordinated approach, you don't have to leave people behind. You can have an inclusive model that ensures that when the skills are there and the opportunities are there, and when women are supported through this educational program, such as In Her Shoes, then self-sufficiency happens as well, and then you don't have the large numbers of 200,000-plus women who are now on some form of assistance. Those women don't want to be on assistance. They want to be financially independent. They want to have their independence because when they do have that financial independence, they can't be victimized. There's a direct correlation between financial security and the risk that women are put at in their homes and in their communities.

This program, in and of itself, has a curriculum, topics like business plans, product posts, inventory, shipping, communication, customer service, accounting, budgets. They focus, for the first year, which will be online—but they have a plan to transition to moving off-line at some point. These are the digital literacy and business skills that we need in the province of Ontario.

This proposal came to the Minister of Finance this morning with some enthusiasm on my part. It's not just because it's a local program for me in Kitchener-Waterloo, but these programs are all across our province. As I said, in the grand scheme of things, \$530,000 to create 10 long-term, sustainable jobs in communities specifically for at-risk populations like BIPOC women makes a lot of sense. It shouldn't have to take a huge amount of convincing, quite honestly, to do this.

We have seen the province of Ontario sort of weather through a very difficult time. I think that is something that we can all agree on, but there has never been a stronger case for specific, strategic investment to close that gap, from an equity perspective, but also for keeping people safe. If you ignore the health and safety component, we will shut down again. We will see what happened in the second phase as well.

Now, when you look across the country and you see how Ontario has weathered the storm, there are some provinces who quite honestly have done a fairly good job. Ontario's economy has faced an even tougher slog than most provinces through the course of the pandemic, in part because we were facing the auto sector shutdowns earlier in the year and a lagged reopening after the first wave of industry closures, so because we didn't do our due diligence in the first wave, we were disproportionately affected and delayed in reopening again.

We know what to do. We know how to support businesses: You've got to spend the money. You've got to put it into play. You've got to get that card table out, and add a couple more card tables, so that you can actually ensure that when you say that everything is on the table,

everything is, including a paid sick day model for the province of Ontario, which ensures that people don't have to make that very difficult decision.

Earlier, when we were talking about education—I have to say, there's a reason why the asymptomatic testing off-site in communities has not had a huge uptake. The Minister of Education was musing about why that might be. Well, it's a very simple answer, Madam Speaker: Parents who don't have sick days are not going to send their kids to an asymptomatic testing place, because if their kid tests positive, they have to isolate and they don't get paid. It really isn't rocket science. And the federal program, regardless of what the Minister of Labour has said, is very clearly a delayed program. When you are living paycheque to paycheque to paycheque, and hour by hour as an hourly worker, you don't have the liberty of making that kind of a decision. That is why I believe that asymptomatic testing has not had a huge uptake: because it comes with risk, and of course that risk plays itself out in the broader community as a whole. We need to correct that, and we need to build that safety net in for all workers in the province of Ontario.

The RBC report is pretty shocking for women, and I have to say, the OFL right now is having a session on International Women's Day. Our critics are speaking at it, and they're talking about the very real and risky place that women are in right now from a financial independence perspective in Ontario.

With that, Madam Speaker: My goal as the finance critic is to really connect the numbers—where the numbers are; where the numbers aren't; where the investment is happening; where it is not—into what we see out in the community. I would urge every member to have a look at the RBC report and to look at what's at stake, because if this budget comes out and it doesn't have some structural changes to address an uneven recovery, which we are facing in Ontario, then we are doomed to make the same mistakes that we have in the second wave. I have to say, what a missed opportunity for that, Madam Speaker.

From a long-term issue, there has to be, as I said, tangible resources allocated in the budget. We have to see where that funding is going. We have to be able to measure it, because the government throws out a lot of numbers and says that they have targets, but if there's no transparency in how those numbers are playing themselves out in Ontario, then we really don't know. We really don't know if it's making a difference.

With that, I have to say, I'm going to end my commentary on the estimates.

But I will just once more say that I really believe that estimates and public accounts and government appointments—the legislative committees that are chaired by opposition members—should be able to meet outside of the legislative calendar. We should be able to continue to work when the House is not sitting. We're willing to do that work. We're willing to show up and work with our colleagues to make sure that there is transparency in where the funding is going.

1650

It was very frustrating for me, as the former Chair of public accounts, to see that the Auditor General was reviewing expenditures and finding gaps in those expenditures and yet we weren't able to review them and hold the ministries and hold the bureaucrats to account. People depend on us to do that. Given the numbers that we are facing and the lack of investment in some key areas, I think that we could be doing a better job. But you have to let us meet. You have to let the committees do their work.

You also have to stop bringing forward legislation that ensures bringing big money back into politics. How is that a priority for those families who are still waiting for justice in long-term care? How is ensuring that taxpayer dollars go to us, by way of a subsidy, a priority for the parents who were beside themselves when schools had to close down—and this is still happening. We have an outbreak at Sunnyside in Kitchener that was in the paper today.

I would urge the government, as sincerely as I possibly can, to get your priorities straight. Put the people first. Invest in the people. Invest in the services to keep them safe so that we see the economy not have to shut down again and we can have an inclusive she-covery for all citizens in the province of Ontario. You would have our full support if you did such a thing.

We will obviously be following the funding in the next budget very carefully. As I said, budgets are moral documents. They tell us the story and the priorities of the government. Those priorities should match the priorities of the people we serve.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Michael Parsa: I'm pleased to rise today in my role as parliamentary assistant to the President of the Treasury Board and member of the Standing Committee on Estimates, as well as a member of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, to discuss the procedural process specific to concurrence as it relates to the government's estimates for the 2021 fiscal year. I will begin by explaining what concurrence is, and then I will explain the estimates process.

While concurrence is perhaps not the most glamorous process in the Ontario Legislature, I would argue that it is of utmost importance that all members, moreover all Ontarians, understand how the Legislative Assembly authorizes the spending of money.

Speaker, it's important to hear and to keep in mind that every dollar spent comes from the province's hard-working taxpayers, who, over the past year, have faced incredible economic, health and mental hardships in the face of an unprecedented global pandemic and corresponding public health crisis.

I'd like to begin by providing a refresher on the government's fiscal cycle. The government tabled their 2021 expenditure estimates on May 12. The expenditure estimates provide details of the operating and capital spending needs of ministries and legislative offices for the fiscal year. This constitutes the government's annual formal request to the Legislature to approve spending requirements. Should

they pass, the estimates provide each ministry with the legal authority to spend their operating and capital budgets.

Once expenditure estimates are introduced, the Standing Committee on Estimates is convened and chaired by a member of the official opposition. The Standing Committee on Estimates selects between six and 12 ministries to appear before the committee itself to answer questions specific to their respective expenditure estimates. Those ministries whose expenditure estimates are not selected are considered passed by the committee, reported back to the House and approved by the House via deemed concurrence. Committee members then review specific allocations, called votes, within a select ministry's expenditure estimates. This, in turn, provides invaluable oversight of the government's spending.

Then, in accordance with the standing orders, the committee must complete its work by the third Thursday in November of each year. When that process wraps up, the estimates are brought back to this assembly for concurrence, which also explains why I present before my fellow members here today.

Concurrence and the subsequent review of a supply bill together represent the last step towards the Legislature's approval of the spending for a fiscal year. Should the Supply Act pass, it signifies the final approval by this House of expenditures proposed by the government in the expenditure estimates and supplementary estimates that have been tabled during the fiscal year.

It's important to highlight that today our government is not proposing any new spending but is simply looking to approve the spending outlined in the 2020-21 estimates.

To close today's impromptu civics lesson, I should add that following the order for concurrence in the estimates, the government then introduces a Supply Act to provide the final statutory authority for this government's and this assembly's spending. Today's discussion and subsequent vote are both important steps in approving the government's spending for the current fiscal year, which ends March 31, 2021.

I think it's fair to say that the recent fiscal year is truly one for the history books. But despite the many challenges we've collectively faced as a province and will continue to face until COVID-19 vaccines are distributed en masse to Ontarians, this government has maintained a laser-like focus to meet its most important priority, and that's to continue to protect the health and well-being of Ontarians.

Despite the pandemic, this government has not wavered in rising to meet the needs of Ontarians. The creation of the Office of the Comptroller General in February 2020 is one way we're accomplishing this. This office, the first among Canadian provinces to be led by a deputy minister, who in turn follows the principles of enterprise risk management, works with ministries and provincial agencies to anticipate financial risks and other proactive guidance to ministries and public sector agencies to mitigate potential risks. In doing so, we not only provide increased value for the people of Ontario but, equally important, we ensure Ontarians, whom this Legislature dutifully serves, are the

centre of everything we do. Now more than ever, we need to ensure that taxpayers' dollars are directed to the vital front-line programs and services the people of Ontario rely on every single day. This is one way we're working to modernize government operations and build a government that truly works for the people.

Our rigorous focus on improving efficiency and value has allowed us to make prudent and historic investments in critical health care and front-line services while expanding the government's fiscal capacity to weather future challenges.

Enterprise risk management is also a long-standing best practice in the private sector and was recommended in EY Canada's line-by-line review of government spending over the past 15 years released in September 2018, as well as the 2019 Ontario budget. With the help of enterprise risk management, we hope to build a government culture whereby public resources are managed responsibly, respectfully and rightfully. In response to the continued economic uncertainty posed by COVID-19, enterprise risk management will empower government to take timely and effective actions to address potential problems in both the short and long term and, equally important, ensure our people, businesses and government are well positioned to recover and thrive in Ontario's post-pandemic economy. By embracing enterprise risk management, we're bringing the rigour of business to the business of government.

Speaker, this leveraging of new and improved ways to strengthen government brings me to my final topic of the day: this government's recent success in leveraging leading-edge, innovative technologies to combat COVID-19. A good example of this is the COVID-19 Web portal at ontario.ca/covid19. This one-stop-shop dashboard provides all the latest data and information about the virus's presence in Ontario. Since July 2020, the COVID-19 Web portal has been visited over 49.3 million times, with 119.7 million total page views.

Another example of Ontario's leveraging of technology is the COVID Alert app. Developed in partnership between the Ontario Digital Service, Ottawa-based Shopify and the federal government, the app gives Ontarians a digital defence against COVID-19. It's free, easy to use and private. The app notifies you if you've been in contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19. With over 6.3 million downloads to date, the COVID Alert app is a bona fide made-in-Ontario success story.

1700

I'd like to close my remarks by thanking all the members who are here today, who have been here either in person, following the health guidelines of our medical professionals, or been here virtually. Their unwavering commitment to public service is a testament to the steely-eyed resolve of Ontario's parliamentary system. Despite a year-long global pandemic, we met and will continue to meet as members of provincial Parliament to conduct vital government business and keep the wheels of government in motion. That is the embodiment of the Ontario spirit, which truly makes me proud to serve as an Ontario member of provincial Parliament.

I'd like to turn the floor over to my colleague the MPP for Willowdale, parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Finance, and member of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Wayne Gates: It's my pleasure to rise and speak to my time sitting on the estimates committee today.

For those of you watching at home, estimates is one of our committees here at Queen's Park where we discuss government spending decisions.

Since my time on this committee, we've seen the same thing over and over again—that has been this government's drive to cut public services. Whether in the chamber or in the committee, this government uses its power to cut education, cut our infrastructure and, worst of all, cut our health care.

It may seem like a long time ago now, but here's what this government was cutting before the pandemic. Let's not forget what the Financial Accountability Officer said about the Premier's 2019 budget: It cut the public health budget by \$49 million a year. If you can imagine, it shortchanged long-term care by \$65 million. It spent \$314 million less on hospital infrastructure projects. They cut \$69 million from children and youth mental health services. Overall—and it's not me saying it; it was the Financial Accountability Officer—it showed a \$2.7-billion cut in funding for Ontario health care.

I've said this since the beginning: COVID-19 did not create a crisis in long-term care, and it did not create a crisis in health care. But it did shine a light on what families have been telling us for years. This pandemic did shine a light on a number of failings of this government. It also had a very serious impact on some of the important industries in our province.

One industry in particular was the tourism industry here in Ontario, a very, very important industry in my riding of Niagara Falls, Fort Erie and Niagara-on-the-Lake—an industry that supports 40,000 jobs in our community. Almost all of those people experienced layoffs or fully lost their jobs. With the border closed and many people staying at home through the last tourism season, hotels and tourist operators struggled. However, they have been proactive and have worked hard to speak to government and come up with solutions—solutions that were presented to this government in a number of ways, including the finance committee hearings that took place through the summer, which I participated in, and also in the form of direct letters to this government.

I'm going to speak really quickly on my Bill 199, where I said to the government, "Give everybody a tax credit of \$1,000 if they tour domestically." The government did listen a bit. I say "a bit" because what they did is, they said that if you spend up to \$5,000, they'll give you 20%.

What I'm saying to the government—and I've said it before: Most people don't have \$5,000 right now to spend on domestic tourism, whether it's up north, whether it's in Toronto or down in the beautiful riding of Niagara Falls, Niagara-on-the-Lake and Fort Erie. They don't have that

kind of money. Can you imagine everybody saying that if we're going to survive and get out of COVID-19 in the tourist sector, we need people in Ontario to make sure they're taking their vacations right here in beautiful Ontario? The easiest way to do that is with Bill 199, with a tax credit for \$1,000. I think everybody can agree with that. I have no idea why you want to say, "You have to spend \$5,000 to get 20% of it back." It makes no sense.

I have one of those letters here with me today. It outlines the concerns the tourist industry has had with tangible solutions.

Liquidity remains the main issue for hotels—and providing low-interest-rate loans, which I've raised here a number of times over the last year. That's what they need. They have to have that. Unfortunately, this government has not provided that support—and relief on their property taxes and insurance, by the way. Some of their insurance has gone from \$200,000 to \$1 million in a place that's closed or 90% empty. I've talked to this government over and over and over. I don't know what riding he's from, but the last finance minister said there were going to be solutions; I haven't heard a word. But insurance rates in the province of Ontario for small and medium-sized businesses and hotels should be addressed by your government. It's absolutely a disgrace.

On the property taxes, another financial burden for hotel owners right now: They have seen nearly a 70% reduction in revenue, yet their insurance rates have gone up 200% and 300%.

Think about it, Speaker—you're from Windsor, so you know about this. Our casinos have been closed for a year. Some 4,000 people work in our casinos in Niagara Falls; I have no idea how many work in Windsor, but I know it's a few thousand. What people don't talk about is the spinoff jobs through that casino—which is six or seven times, all the spinoff jobs—so now you're talking about over 20,000 jobs that have been lost because the casino is closed. We have to address that, without a doubt.

When we are discussing this government's estimates, we are truly discussing this government's priorities, and quite frankly, it seems that this government has not made supporting our entire tourism sector a priority. When this government announced a small business grant, they decided to exclude hotels from applying—an industry that has been crushed by COVID-19 through no fault of their own, and this government decided to exclude them. It really shows their support of the tourist sector.

You have to get your heads around it: You've got to support the entire tourist sector, not just a section of it. If we want to make sure that we come out of COVID-19 and our economy starts to boom—the tourist sector was hit first, it was hit the hardest, and if we don't support it, it's going to be the last one to come back. We can bring it back within a year, or we can take three or four or five years. You guys have to make that decision in your budget.

As I said, COVID-19 has shone a light on many of the failings of this government. Estimates continues to be a prime example. In this committee, we go over the estimates and the expenses of important ministries like the

Ministry of Health. There is where we can really see how badly the Conservative government has failed the people of the province of Ontario, when it comes to health care.

Let's not forget that in 2019, a year into the government's term, for six months, the Greater Niagara General Hospital was at 104% capacity. The average time a patient waited—I know you guys are all busy on that side, but listen to this: The average time a patient waited in the emergency room before they could get a room was 46 hours. That was the state of health care that the Conservatives left in Niagara as the pandemic hit. You can never really be ready for a pandemic, so I'm not saying you guys should have been ready, but the government should have seen that alarm bell even way before the pandemic.

Never in the estimates did you see money to get this hospital built. What is the holdup? The pandemic has shown that we need a new Niagara Falls hospital now more than ever. We need it because of our population growth. You may be surprised, as people from Toronto and Peel and those areas—guess where they're going as they move out of those communities? They're coming to Niagara Falls. They're going to Fort Erie. There was a big article in the paper just the other day about how Fort Erie can't keep up with the demand for housing. They're coming to Niagara-on-the-Lake. We need a new hospital.

One of the things that we can do with our new hospital is—we talk about the number of people who are unemployed today, and there are lots in Niagara. Why would we not start the infrastructure project and build our new hospital in Niagara Falls? Guess what we could do? I'm asking all the Conservatives. You guys can yell it out, if you want; you usually yell at me when I'm talking. We could actually use local workers. Think about that. We could use local businesses. We could use local tradespeople. We could add apprenticeships as we build that hospital, because it takes four or four and a half—if it gets built; it's a very big hospital.

Why wouldn't we do that and support local workers? Let's get the hospital built as quickly as possible. To this day, they have not allocated the money to that hospital in that committee.

1710

Speaker—I'm going to run out of time—health care is in crisis now. Yet time and again, they're passing budget bills that don't address the crisis, especially in long-term care. I've got a minute left, but the Canadian military blew the whistle on what was happening in long-term care. We actually called in the military because of what was happening there. And think about this, in my last minute or whatever it is: In long-term care, there were 3,759 people who died. In Niagara, 369 people died. They were our moms, our dads, our grandparents, our aunts and uncles. I'm going to say to this government—and I've said it before—they were collateral damage of this second wave of COVID-19. We knew; we all knew. You were told, we were told—we all knew that if we did not do something about what happened after the first wave, they were going to die in those facilities. That's exactly what happened: 369 people died in Niagara.

I want to finish, because I've only got 13 seconds left. You promised us the Moderna vaccine, 5,500 doses. We didn't get them, and because we didn't get them, people died in Niagara, and that's not fair. I'm saying to this government, give us our vaccines that we're owed so people in Niagara can live—

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Thank you. Further debate?

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I'm very pleased to rise here today in my role as parliamentary assistant to the President of the Treasury Board to speak with respect to concurrence in supply. I'd like to build on the remarks of my colleague and elaborate on this government's unwavering and unparalleled support to protect individuals, families and businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. I'll do so by discussing the additional support recently outlined in the provincial 2020-21 third quarter finances.

Speaker, as my colleague has explained today, our government's priority from day one of this pandemic has not wavered. We will do whatever it takes and whatever is necessary to protect the lives and livelihoods of Ontarians and defeat this virus, which has brought so much pain and suffering to the people of this province.

As the provincial 2020-21 third quarter outlines, this government has made considerable additional investments since the release of the 2020 Ontario budget on November 5, which the member elaborated on earlier. These additional investments outlined in the 2020-21 third quarter finances include \$1.4 billion to launch the Ontario Small Business Support Grant. This program is helping small businesses that have been required to close or significantly restrict their services under the province-wide shut down. With grants starting at \$10,000 and up to \$20,000, I understand we have already approved over \$60 million in grants for small business in Mississauga alone.

We have provided \$869 million in additional investment for Ontario hospitals to purchase supplies and equipment to help address the surge of COVID-19 cases. This brings our total increase in funding to hospitals since 2019-20 to \$3.4 billion.

In November, I was proud to announce an investment of \$22 million for 141 new hospital beds in Mississauga, including up to 70 in the pandemic response unit at the Mississauga Hospital in Mississauga-Lakeshore. Speaker, we have done everything in our power to expand on our hospital capacity during the second wave of COVID-19. We also provided \$609 million to support procurement of additional personal protective equipment for our front-line workers. We invested \$309 million in additional support to respond to the impact of COVID-19 on Ontario's long-term-care sector, including new provisions and containment measures and more funding to implement testing guidelines. Finally, we provided \$235 million in additional support to protect children and staff in child care and early years settings.

But that's not all. Our government has also made available an additional \$2.1 billion to spend before the end of the year. Providing this added contingency funding not only ensures that we have the flexibility we need to

continue a response to the COVID-19 crisis but, most importantly, to ensure that we are able to fight and overcome the new variants of concern.

I'd like to highlight something else which is also very important. Despite the extraordinary uncertainty that we are experiencing together as a province over the past year, this government, through each financial quarter, has delivered on our core commitment to restore trust, transparency and accountability to Ontario's finances and to spend Ontario's money smarter.

Madam Speaker, I'd like to close my remarks today by briefly highlighting our government's continued effort to manage risk in these uncertain times and to make smarter decisions through enterprise risk management. As you know, Speaker, this is the practice of identifying, assessing, prioritizing and managing the unknown in an organization. It helps us to forecast and manage risks by enhancing internal oversight, improving conditions between departments and ensuring robust decision-making processes across the entire organization. In other words, this process helps us to develop limited resources to the greatest effect, and at the same time, identify problems before they can take root.

In doing so, we can help ensure that we have the necessary financial resources to invest in what matters most, both during COVID-19 and in the recovery to come. Enterprise risk management is recognized as best practice in the private sector. In the 2019 budget, it was recognized as an important enabler in our government's effort to ensure improved services and better outcomes for Ontario. This was reinforced by EY Canada in its 2019 line-by-line review, which called for a commitment to evidence-based decision-making, including the consideration of business risk and the implementation of enterprise risk management across ministries and provincial agencies.

My colleague the member from Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill has already discussed the office of the comptroller general, but I just want to reiterate that this is the first comptroller general in Canada to be a deputy-minister-level position. As well, our government has created the enterprise risk office. Together, these two offices, both created by the government, will align and streamline practices all across the government to ensure a more effective and more coordinated risk management landscape while also helping to coordinate risk functions across the government, to protect the core programs and essential services that Ontarians have relied on during the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these offices ensure that risk is properly identified and managed before public money is spent, providing better value and greater accountability to the people of Ontario.

But Madam Speaker, that is not all we are doing to manage risk. In my role as parliamentary assistant for internal audit to the President of the Treasury Board, risk management is one of our core functions. We not only monitor risks throughout the fiscal year and beyond; we also use risk management tools to closely track the implementation of the initiatives that my colleague and I have highlighted here today.

Another important new initiative is the creation of the audit and accountability committee to direct internal audits in priority areas across the government. This committee, which I am proud to serve on, is the only one of its kind in Canada, and it is already helping to bring a new level of accountability to help ensure that we receive the best value for our money.

Proactively, we are working to identify emerging program and policy-related risks. Collectively, this comprehensive analysis not only informs our fiscal planning process, which also includes developing plans to mitigate and manage financial and other risks, but in doing so, we are ensuring that Ontarians' hard-earned taxpayer dollars are treated with respect and are invested in core services, including health care and education and all the other programs that the Ontario people depend on. This in turn will help to ensure that we have the financial firepower to be ready for anything at any time.

1720

I stand before this Legislature to reaffirm that our government will do whatever is necessary to protect the lives and the livelihoods of the people of Ontario, and to finally conquer COVID-19. This is what the Premier has called the Ontario spirit. Speaker, once again, I'm confident that the collective spirit will get us through this crisis and beyond.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate?

Mr. Stan Cho: Thank you to my friends and colleagues the member for Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill and Mississauga–Lakeshore for their very vibrant remarks this afternoon.

Well, Speaker, this is the second year that I've had the privilege to rise in this House to speak in favour of the concurrence on estimates. But speaking to the importance of the government spending this past year is entirely different than last. Over the last year, our government has been wholly focused on piloting our province through a perfect storm. We've provided unprecedented, historic levels of funding to protect Ontarians, and we've set partisan differences aside and worked collaboratively with all levels of government to wage war against this deadly virus.

Today I want to look back at this extraordinary year and the government's response. But before I do, I want to speak for a brief moment about something which has not changed this year, and that is this government's unyielding commitment to responsible fiscal stewardship, accountability and transparency.

In 2019, I spoke at great length about the importance of returning the province to a position of fiscal sustainability after years of neglect and mismanagement by the former government. Though we were mocked by members opposite for our focus on reducing Ontario's debt and structural deficit, we knew then what we know today: that balancing the budget was never an end in itself; it was a means to protect the vital programs and services that Ontarians rely on. It was the understanding that, like any responsible family budget, you have to save for a rainy day. And so,

Speaker, against the strong objections from the members opposite, this government, in its first two years, took the necessary steps to cut a planned Liberal deficit of \$15 billion in half. It was that prudence that has given us the flexibility and the fiscal power to spend today. We saved for a rainy day, and when it started to pour, we were ready.

Madam Speaker, despite the COVID-19 global pandemic, despite the devastating health emergency and global economic crisis, our government always has and always will be responsible managers of the public's money. During this crisis our government did not hesitate and will not hesitate to spend every dollar necessary to protect the lives and livelihoods of the people of Ontario. We have provided the unprecedented levels of support that Ontarians and Ontario businesses need to get through this challenging time.

No government is perfect, and there is no government in the world that has responded perfectly to this pandemic. There is no playbook on COVID-19. But from day one, and for every day over the past year, this government has been there for Ontarians. We've had their backs, and our actions speak loud and clear.

On March 25, 2020, two weeks into the global pandemic, when governments around the world were struggling to respond, when the federal government and governments across Canada were trying to figure out a plan, Ontario led the way and released our economic and fiscal update. It included \$17 billion in immediate support to ensure Ontario's world-class public health care system was prepared for the worst, to support individuals, families and communities across the province as we asked them to sacrifice so much to protect their neighbours and to position Ontario's economy to weather the challenges that lay ahead.

For Ontario's long-term-care sector, funding went to address surge capacity, provide more staffing to support infection control, implement testing and screening in all homes and purchase the necessary supplies and equipment to tackle COVID-19 outbreaks. For hospitals, funding went to address capacity issues—issues created by years of inaction and neglect from the previous government, exacerbated by a once-in-a-century health emergency. We created 1,000 additional acute care beds and 500 critical care beds, as well as an additional COVID-19 assessment centre. We provided five months of interest and penalty relief for Ontario businesses to file and make payments for provincially administered taxes, thereby immediately injecting \$10 billion into the provincial economy and freeing up cash flow for businesses big and small.

We also deferred the quarterly municipal remittance of school boards' education property tax, providing municipalities with the flexibility to give tax deferrals to residents, businesses and communities across the province, while ensuring that school boards continue to receive their funding. When Ontarians and Ontario businesses asked for the government's help, we responded quickly to protect jobs and household budgets.

On September 30, we released our plan to better prepare the province for the second wave of the pandemic,

Keeping Ontarians Safe: Preparing for Future Waves of COVID-19. It included \$1.3 billion to expand and enhance efforts to test, trace and isolate new COVID-19 cases. It provided \$1.07 billion to expand lab capacity, reduce testing backups, support existing assessment centres and add more testing locations. It provided \$52.5 million to recruit, retain and support over 3,700 more front-line health care workers and caregivers, to ensure the health care system could meet any surge in demand, while continuing to provide safe and high-quality care to patients and long-term-care residents. We provided \$1.3 billion in funding to reopen schools safely and securely by hiring more teachers, deploying public health nurses directly into schools and keeping class sizes small.

Then, Speaker, at the height of the pandemic's second wave, we tabled a multi-year budget on November 5, 2020. This not only allowed the government to continue providing Ontarians with support and to make more investments to protect their lives and livelihoods, but also to continue to be transparent, open and honest with Ontarians about the province's finances, to be accountable and to put forward a long-term outlook with the most recent and the most reliable data.

From the beginning of the pandemic, Premier Ford has said that Ontarians would see the data he sees, and it is a guiding principle we have followed with health data and with financial reporting. Ontarians deserve nothing less. Unlike previous governments, from the beginning of our mandate, this government has delivered on its promise of financial transparency. That's regular reporting and responsible fiscal management. It's a promise we kept before the pandemic and during.

The 2020 budget, entitled Ontario's Action Plan: Protect, Support, Recover, provided \$45 billion in additional support for individuals, families and job creators. We announced a nation-leading commitment to provide an average of four hours of daily direct care from a nurse or PSW to every resident in a long-term-care home, making Ontario the leader among Canadian provinces in protecting seniors.

We made significant investments in broadband infrastructure and cellular access, to ensure communities across Ontario are connected. Ontarians in northern and rural Ontario, traditionally underserved communities, will be able to do more professional online training, purchase goods and services online to avoid going to the store in person, or register a new business and sell goods online. By working to provide high-speed broadband to unserved and underserved communities, we're also laying the groundwork for a robust post-pandemic economic recovery, an economic recovery in which a rising tide lifts all boats and returns Ontario to its rightful place as Canada's economic engine.

Our action plan also provided immediate relief to businesses by lowering the Employer Health Tax, the EHT, a tax on jobs; the provincial portion of property taxes, saving businesses up to 30% on their property taxes; and commercial hydro rates, giving struggling businesses relief today, while making Ontario even more competitive

for the future. After all, Speaker, when this pandemic is behind us—and it will, one day soon, be behind us—every jurisdiction in the world will be competing for investment, for consumer demand and for jobs, and Ontario can no longer afford to be second-best.

On top of all those investments, the government recognized early on that in order to beat this virus, we would have to act quickly; that with so much uncertainty, we would need to be able to react to rapidly changing circumstances on the ground, to be able to deploy resources where they were needed most, to be able to move faster than governments were built to move. To accomplish this, we acted prudently in March and again in November by setting aside \$13.3 billion in dedicated COVID-19 contingency funds. If we know anything for sure, it's that we needed to be ready for anything.

1730

For a year now, the members opposite have accused this government of hoarding money, despite financial report after financial report showing that this money was being used. The government's third quarter financial report shows that all of the \$13.3 billion for 2020-21 has been allocated, but still, members opposite have chosen to play politics.

These contingency funds have allowed this government to act quickly to adapt, to provide emergency PPE to our front-line workers, to partner with the federal government on a rent relief program and to provide \$1.2 billion and growing to over 80,000 businesses—actually, as of Friday morning, that figure is closer to 84,000 in non-repayable grants of up to \$20,000.

When faced with a once-in-a-century pandemic, a global emergency, a dual health and economic crisis, this government acted and acted quickly. We acted responsibly. COVID-19 has impacted Ontarians from all walks of life and from all parts of this province. In rural southern Ontario or downtown Toronto, in fly-in communities in the north or the 905, COVID-19 has shown us one fundamental truth: We are all part of Team Ontario. When faced with these immense challenges, one thing is certain: Ontarians come together to support each other, to protect their neighbours, to look out for their communities, and their government will continue to be there to support them, too.

This past year, the government has made historic, unprecedented investments. We've done anything and everything that's necessary to protect the people we serve, and after the most difficult year in our lifetime, there is finally hope on the horizon. Over the past few months, I've had the opportunity to travel our province virtually and speak with Ontarians from all walks of life, and no matter where I am or who I speak to, I hear the same thing: Nobody has given up on Ontario. We will get through this, and we must continue to work together.

In closing, I urge all members of this House to support concurrence of estimates. It is critical work that is being done by the government, and the spending necessary to protect the lives and livelihoods of Ontarians must continue.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Further debate? Further debate?

Mr. Calandra has moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Long-Term Care, including supplementaries. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed to the motion will say "nay."

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

A recorded vote being required pursuant to the order of the House dated March 4, 2021, it will be deferred until after question period tomorrow.

Mr. Calandra has moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Education, including supplementaries. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed will please say "nay."

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

The vote will be deferred until tomorrow.

Mr. Calandra has moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, including supplementaries. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed to the motion will please say "nay."

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

The vote will be deferred until tomorrow.

Mr. Calandra has moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed will please say "nay."

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

The vote will be deferred until tomorrow.

Mr. Calandra has moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Health, including supplementaries. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed will please say "nay."

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

The vote will be deferred until tomorrow.

Mr. Calandra has moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Infrastructure. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed will please say "nay."

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

A vote being required, it will happen tomorrow.

Mr. Calandra has moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Energy, Northern Development and Mines. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed will please say "nay."

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

A recorded vote will happen tomorrow.

Mr. Calandra has moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, including

supplementaries. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say “aye.”

All those opposed to the motion will please say “nay.”

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

The vote will happen tomorrow.

Mr. Calandra has moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say “aye.”

All those opposed will please say “nay.”

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

A vote being required, it will happen tomorrow.

Mr. Calandra has moved concurrence in supply for the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, including supplementaries. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say “aye.”

All those opposed will please say “nay.”

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

A recorded vote being needed, it will happen tomorrow.

Votes deferred.

PROTECTING ONTARIO ELECTIONS ACT, 2021

LOI DE 2021 SUR LA PROTECTION DES ÉLECTIONS EN ONTARIO

Resuming the debate adjourned on March 8, 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 Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): The last time the bill was debated, the member for Algoma-Manitoulin had the floor.

M. Michael Mantha: Merci encore, madame la Présidente. C'est tout le temps un plaisir de prendre ma présidence par la voix des gens d'Algoma-Manitoulin.

Puis, ce matin, il y avait beaucoup de mes commentaires qui étaient essentiellement visés sur les priorités de ce gouvernement, et puis en regard du projet de loi 254, qui s'appelle, en français, la Loi modifiant diverses lois en ce qui concerne les élections et les députés à l'Assemblée—

Une voix.

M. Michael Mantha: Oui, oui. Il y a beaucoup de mes commentaires qui ont été dits ce matin et puis partagés avec les gens de l'Assemblée qui étaient visés vers comment ceci était pour essentiellement aider le gouvernement. Quand on regarde les augmentations de donations qu'une personne peut faire envers un parti politique—beaucoup de ce que j'ai aussi emporté ce matin, c'était les priorités. Puis c'est là où est-ce que j'aimerais, avec le reste du temps que j'ai avec mes

commentaires—je voudrais viser là où le gouvernement a vraiment manqué la marque.

Quand on regarde des réformes électorales, est-ce que c'est important? Absolument, c'est important. Mais est-ce que ce l'est en ce moment, dans le milieu d'une pandémie, où on prend les décisions que le gouvernement ont mises sur ce projet de loi ici, et puis l'emporter ici en maison? Je ne pense pas que ce sont les priorités que, moi, j'ai entendues dans mon bureau.

Coudonc, avec les appels que j'ai des gens de ma circonscription qui m'appellent, qui ont tellement de questions sur leurs priorités : sur l'éducation, sur la livraison de l'accès aux vaccins dans leur communauté, sur les petites entreprises, qui sont en train de trouver tellement de difficultés à payer leur hypothèque, leurs coûts d'opération.

1740

Ce n'est vraiment pas une question qui est venue à mon bureau, qu'ils me disent : « Écoute, là, Mike, on aimerait ça nous autre, vraiment—sur les priorités de ce gouvernement—que tu leur dises qu'on veut avoir une augmentation aux donations qu'on peut donner à un parti politique. Et puis, en plus de ça, on ne veut pas simplement que tu parles des donations—présentement aux alentours de 1 600 \$ qu'on peut offrir—on veut que tu le doubles. On veut que tu l'augmentes à 3 300 \$ et puis qu'on fasse certain qu'on puisse donner le maximum qu'on peut offrir aux gens et aux partis politiques. »

Bien, je m'excuse, madame la Présidente, moi, j'aurais de la misère—et puis, moi, je suis un politicien qui est extrêmement bien payé pour les tâches que je suis en train de faire. Mais ce que je prends pour acquis : 90 % des gens à travers de cette province n'ont pas la facilité d'offrir de tels montants.

Ce qui fait que, il faut qu'on se pose la question : pour qui, ce projet de loi? Qui est-ce que cette modification, cette réforme, est en train de viser?

Mais, franchement, ce n'est pas dur à déterminer. Si tu regardes l'histoire, si tu regardes ce que ce gouvernement a fait pour se rendre à ce point-ci, il y a beaucoup de leurs amis et puis les gros développeurs qui vont vraiment prendre avantage de cette situation et vraiment aider ce gouvernement conservateur.

Encore, mes mots étaient envers les priorités de ce gouvernement, et ils ont manqué les priorités des gens de l'Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Question?

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you to the member for Algoma-Manitoulin for his comments on this bill. I'm just wondering if the member from Manitoulin supports a couple of the recommendations from the Chief Electoral Officer in this bill, specifically the five extra days for advance polls that would be on a flexible basis, the advisory committee that is being recommended be set up to advise on technology that would be a permanent committee to look at changing technology, and also the request for administrative penalties to better drive compliance in elections—what the member's thoughts are on those aspects of the bill.

M. Michael Mantha: Je veux remercier le député pour avoir apporté sa question; ça en est une que je pense avoir touchée dans tous mes commentaires à travers de mon discours que j'ai offert aux gens. Est-ce qu'il y a de la réforme qui est nécessaire? Absolument, il y a de la réforme qui est nécessaire. Est-ce que ça va aider? Il y en a plusieurs qui vont aider. Il n'y a rien de ce bord-ci de la maison—on ne dit pas que : « Non, il n'y a pas de quoi qu'on devrait mettre au clair pour les gens de la province pour qui le processus devrait marcher pour faciliter le procès électoral. » Est-ce qu'il y a des démarches qu'on peut prendre? C'est certain. Je pense que j'ai été clair dans les commentaires que j'ai offerts.

Mais ce que j'offre aussi à mon ami le député, c'est que c'est une chance où vous avez manqué les priorités. Les priorités des gens ne sont pas la plupart de ce que vous avez proposé dans ce projet de loi. Et surtout dans le milieu d'une pandémie, c'est vraiment un manque de ce gouvernement et puis vraiment un gros manque de ce que les gens de la province trouvent important, eux.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Next question?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you to the member. This Bill 254 increases the taxpayer subsidy from 0.45 cents to 0.63 cents. On September 28, 2016, member from Chatham-Kent-Leamington said, "Yet there are apparently millions of dollars just lying around that can be sent directly to political parties. That is unacceptable. It once again goes to show how the Liberals have lost their way and somewhere along the line started caring more about their own political futures and filling the pockets of political hacks than the future of this province, and it's shameful. It sends a terrible message to anyone in this province who has had to deal with cutbacks. There is plenty of money for" the Premier "and her party, but no money for you, the taxpayer. Is that the message our government should send to its people?"

How do you account for the change of heart on the part of the PC government?

M. Michael Mantha: Je veux remercier la députée de Waterloo. Vraiment, tu as fessé le clou sur la tête, comme on dit. Et puis, quand on regarde les priorités de ce gouvernement, ils cherchent, oui, vraiment, avec leurs réformes qu'ils présentent ici, à augmenter leurs donations. Et puis, si tu regardes les gens qu'ils cherchent à viser, c'est comme j'ai dit dans mon discours tantôt : l'argent disponible ne vient pas des gens qui travaillent au jour le jour dans nos moulins à scie ou bien dans la mine, ou d'une garde-malade qui travaille dans un hôpital ou d'une personne qui cherche à s'avancer et qui travaille à trois ou quatre petites jobs, qui travaille au Tim Hortons ou au dépanneur du coin. Ce ne sont pas ces gens-là qui vont faire ces donations-là. Ce sont les gros entrepreneurs, les gros développeurs qui vont faire ces donations. On voit vraiment où sont les priorités de ce gouvernement.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Next question?

Mr. Mike Harris: The member brings up a couple of good points, and I will say that, but just because we're in

the middle of a pandemic doesn't mean that the government doesn't have to continue to function.

We've got an election that's roughly a year away. I would like to know whether or not the member opposite is going to support the parts of this legislation that speak very, very extensively to electoral reform, especially when we're looking at a bipartisan committee that will be struck by Elections Ontario to discuss potential ways to be able to vote from your home or from voting machines or different ways we can do that, especially given the fact that we are in the middle of a pandemic. So I'd like to hear some thoughts, a little bit more, on that part of this legislation.

M. Michael Mantha: Je veux remercier le député d'apporter sa question. Pour répondre à sa question, c'est que, oui, nous sommes dans une pandémie. Tu ne peux pas mettre ça de côté et dire qu'on ne l'est pas ou que ce n'est pas si important. Votre focus devrait être comme une flèche, seulement sur les choses qu'on a besoin de faire pour vraiment adresser les besoins des gens durant la pandémie.

Avoir les discussions qu'on a présentement sur la réforme, oui, c'est important. Est-ce que c'est le temps maintenant d'avoir ces discussions-là? Non, ce n'est pas le temps. Ce qui fait qu'on revient à tout ce que j'ai donné au travers de tout mon discours : où sont vos priorités?

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Next question? The member from Niagara Falls.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate that.

I'll talk a little bit about Bill 254, but I'm a little concerned at the timing of it. I did hear one of my colleagues on the other side say, "Well, we still have to do stuff," but do you know what? We are in the middle of a pandemic. We could be talking about long-term care. I really wish that this government would talk about a bill that I put forward around deeming, where injured workers are being forced to live in poverty. Presumptive language, I think, would be a really good one to have a debate around. This is where our health care heroes have gotten COVID-19 in our hospitals, in our long-term-care facilities, and unfortunately, they have to fight with WSIB to get WSIB.

Those are the type of things that I think we should be debating in here right now. I'll be honest with you: raising the limit to \$3,300? The average donation in my riding to me is \$29. I'm not sure that's going to help me much, but that was pretty interesting to me.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Goldie Ghamari): Question?

Mr. Wayne Gates: Yes, my question is to the member: Why would they bring a bill forward right now when we have so many other more important things to discuss?

M. Michael Mantha: Merci de la question du bon député. Essentiellement, le discours que vous avez présenté, c'est vraiment : où est-ce que le gouvernement est en train de mettre sa vision? C'est sur les priorités de tous les Ontariens, à la fin de la journée. Oui, on est dans le milieu d'une pandémie, et oui, il faut vraiment qu'on

paye attention au temps, qui est précieux pour tous nous autres qui sommes ici dans la maison, qu'on soit sérieux et qu'on prenne avantage du temps qu'on passe ici, et puis vraiment qu'on mette les enjeux, les idées, les besoins avant les nôtres—avant les nôtres—et là où ça va répondre aux besoins des gens de cette province.

Le député pose la question : qui est visé et va profiter d'un tel projet de loi? C'est simple à dire : ce ne sont pas les gens et les garde-malades qui travaillent dans les hôpitaux. Ce ne sont pas les gens qui travaillent au dépanneur, au magasin ou au Tim Hortons qui vont profiter de ce projet de loi, parce qu'ils n'ont pas la capacité de faire les donations nécessaires—

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Thank you. Question?

Mr. Will Bouma: It's great to engage with the member opposite on this bill. It was very good to listen to his speech. Sorry I had to listen to the translation; I'm still working on my français.

1750

But I was curious: Is his only beef with the legislation the timing? We heard this afternoon and this morning many times that the Liberals didn't make the necessary reform until they were forced into it by a scandal. You have spoken positively about a number of changes that we're making in this legislation. So two questions: Number one, will you be supporting the legislation? And number two—there are always other priorities—when would be a good time to do this during this sitting of the House?

M. Michael Mantha: Savez-vous quoi? Premièrement, pour l'enjeu et son engagement—à nos pupitres, on a tous ces nouveaux beaux appareils ici pour que les gens puissent participer et écouter et s'engager avec l'enjeu. Je le félicite d'avoir embarqué et participé, parce qu'il y a plusieurs gens dans ma circonscription qui aiment ça entendre leur langue ici dans la maison. C'est pareil quand mon collègue de Kiiwetinoong parle en cri, c'est de quoi qui nous touche tous à la maison, au fait de l'engagement.

Puis ta question que tu as posée avec l'histoire que les libéraux ont apportée à la maison—je suis complètement d'accord avec toi. Il y a bien de choses qu'eux autres ont apportées à la maison qui n'étaient pas, on va dire—qui ont donné cause à la relève : que les gens se frustrant à travers la province, qu'ils aient forcé de vraiment tous nous punir ici dans la maison et puis apporter de nouveaux régimes à travers le système électoral.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): We don't really have time for another question and answer. Further debate? The member for Timmins.

M. Gilles Bisson: Merci, madame la Présidente. C'est donc un plaisir de se voir ici à l'Assemblée. Je ne vous dirais pas que c'est une bonne affaire qu'on est dans ce débat-là, mais c'est un plaisir d'être ensemble.

Je pense que le point que mon collègue essayait de faire, puis je n'ai pas pu lui demander la question so, donc, je vais le faire dans mon débat, c'est que le gouvernement décide dans le milieu d'une pandémie que la question qui préoccupe tous les citoyens dans nos comtés—parce que

je suis sûr que vous avez eu tous des téléphones chez vous dans vos comtés, ici sur le bord de l'opposition et de l'autre bord, du gouvernement. Ils disent que la première affaire, puis l'affaire la plus importante que vous avez à faire, c'est de changer les régies de finance quand ça vient aux partis politiques. Je te dis, mes lignes au bureau du comté n'ont jamais sonné. Je n'ai jamais, jamais eu un courriel sur la question.

Mais je vais te dire, madame la Présidente, qui, et pourquoi ils m'ont appelé. Les citoyens chez nous dans mon comté—comme chez le député de l'autre bord de la Chambre, comme chez les députés sur ce bord ici de la Chambre—appellent pourquoi? « On veut avoir certaines affaires que le gouvernement fait pour être capable de nous aider avec cette pandémie. »

Combien des petites entreprises à travers la province et dans nos comtés se sont fait crever à travers cette pandémie parce qu'elles ont dû fermer? Et on comprend. Ces employeurs-là, ces petites entreprises, comprennent qu'ils avaient besoin de fermer. Ils ne s'abstiennent pas, pour la plus grosse part, contre le gouvernement sur la nécessité. Mais où il y a un gros problème, ils disent : « Écoute, n'êtes-vous pas capables de nous aider, pour nous assurer qu'on a en place des programmes qui vont nous allouer à nous garder en place après la pandémie, pour s'assurer qu'on peut rebondir et recommencer nos commerces et rengager notre monde dans nos communautés? » Pourquoi n'a-t-on pas ça comme issue et projet de loi et n'importe quelle initiative que le gouvernement aurait pu mettre en place durant le début de cette pandémie l'année passée et aujourd'hui?

Le gouvernement dit : « Oh, oui, on a fait des affaires. » Oui, vous êtes allés voir M. Justin Trudeau, puis M. Trudeau vous a donné beaucoup, beaucoup d'argent. Vous avez aidé à prendre l'argent de M. Trudeau, et oui, jusqu'à un certain point, vous avez dépensé une partie de cet argent, mais il y a 4,5 milliards de dollars qui est encore là que vous n'avez pas dépensés, puis on a moins de 30 jours avant d'y aller à la fin de l'année fiscale.

Et c'est donc le gouvernement qui dit, « Bien, écoute »—

Interjection.

M. Gilles Bisson: Le chef parlementaire, je pense qu'il est fâché encore, madame la Présidente. Il a un petit problème, ce chef parlementaire, quand ça vient à n'importe quoi qui est contre son opinion.

Pourquoi est-ce qu'on n'a pas mis en place—ou le gouvernement aurait pu voter pour—les initiatives qui étaient mises en place par la députée de London, M^{me} Sattler, quand ça vient à un programme pour assister ceux qui ne sont pas capables d'aller travailler parce qu'ils sont malades? Présentement dans nos hôpitaux, dans nos maisons de soins de longue durée, dans nos épiceries et autres entreprises à travers la province, on a beaucoup de monde qui se trouve dans une situation où ils n'ont pas un régime d'être capables d'avoir un salaire quand ils sont malades. La seule affaire qu'ils peuvent faire, c'est d'appliquer pour le programme fédéral, qui est seulement deux semaines et 500 \$.

Madame la Présidente, je ne sais pas si le gouvernement le sait, mais il y a beaucoup de monde qui fait plus que 500\$ par semaine. Quand ils ont seulement 500 \$ du gouvernement fédéral, ils se disent : « Écoute, moi, il faut que j'aïlle travailler. Par le temps que j'additionne toutes les factures que je dois faire à la maison, mon loyer, le paiement sur le char, les assurances, le manger, le linge pour les enfants », ils se trouvent dans une situation où ils n'ont pas assez.

Puis, ils disent : « On a besoin d'avoir quelque chose si je dois être parti pour trois ou quatre jours ou une semaine dans le temps que je ne me sens pas bien, et j'ai un test quelque part pour vérifier si j'ai la COVID-19. » Ça peut prendre deux, trois, quatre, cinq jours.

So donc, pourquoi est-ce que le gouvernement ne veut pas aider ce monde-là et mettre en place un programme pour être capable de s'assurer que ce monde-là peut rester à la maison, puis avoir une couple de sous qu'ils rendent pour les assister au-dessus ce que le gouvernement fédéral donne? Non, non. Ils arrivent ici et nous disent : « Écoute, l'affaire la plus importante, c'est d'augmenter le montant d'argent que les donateurs au Parti conservateur sont capables de donner. » Puis moi, je dis, écoute, s'il y a une raison pourquoi le monde se méfie des politiciens, c'est exactement pour ces raisons-ci, parce que la population regarde et dit : « Écoute, qu'est-ce que ç'a à faire avec ma situation, moi? »

Je m'en fiche bien que le Parti conservateur va avoir plus d'argent. Moi, je veux faire sûr que les petites entreprises restent en place, que le travailleur qui n'est pas capable d'aller travailler parce qu'il ne se sent pas bien ou elle ne se sent pas bien a l'habileté d'être capable de rester à la maison jusqu'à temps qu'un test de COVID-19 est fait. Il y a beaucoup d'affaires que le gouvernement aurait pu faire pour être capable d'assister la population. Mais qu'est-ce qu'ils font? Ils arrivent ici avec ce projet de loi.

L'affaire numéro un dans nos comtés, présentement, madame la Présidente, ce sont les vaccins. Le monde téléphone au bureau et nous dit, « Comment ça marche pour moi? » Le monde téléphone avec des questions telles que : « Mon mari a 81 ans. Moi, j'ai 78 ans. On peut tous les deux aller prendre notre vaccin? » Pas d'information. Ils se demandent la question : « Moi, j'ai une condition préexistante et j'ai besoin de savoir quand est-ce que, moi, je peux aller chercher mon vaccin. »

Aujourd'hui, la ministre de la Santé nous a dit qu'au mois d'avril, ça va arriver. Mais moi, j'étais au comité aujourd'hui faisant affaire avec cette question, et moi, j'ai demandé la même question à la ministre, comme le député indépendant, puis on a eu deux différentes réponses—au même comité, de la même ministre. Il y avait : oui, il va y avoir un système où tu peux téléphoner ou aller sur un site Web pour être capable de t'enregistrer pour avoir ton vaccin. Et on a eu : non, ça va être seulement par téléphone, ou il ne va pas y avoir de système parce que les pharmacies n'ont pas accès au système informatique que le gouvernement a en place. Mais lequel c'est? On a eu différentes réponses.

Ce que le public veut savoir : « Comment ça marche? Comment on va avoir mon vaccin? » Le gouvernement doit prendre son temps pour être capable de répondre à ces questions-là et clairement communiquer avec la population ontarienne ce qu'ils sont capables de faire pour accéder aux vaccins.

Bien non, le gouvernement, il arrive ici, puis c'est bien plus important de parler de combien d'argent le Parti conservateur va être capable de rechercher. Madame la Présidente, elles sont où, les priorités? Je pense que les priorités du gouvernement sont un peu, comment dire, mêlées. Elles sont un peu mêlées. Et tout ce que je demanderais, c'est que le gouvernement, pourquoi pas prendre le temps—ils disent : « On veut travailler d'une manière de coopération. » Ils n'ont rien coopéré depuis le début de cette pandémie. Ils parlent de coopération, mais ils disent : « Fais ce que j'aime, puis fais ce que je veux, et si vous n'aimez pas ça, allez-vous-en. »

Interjection.

M. Gilles Bisson: Écoute, encore le chef parlementaire; il est blessé, le pauvre chef parlementaire de l'autre bord. Madame la Présidente, je pense qu'on doit envoyer de l'oxygène à l'autre bord. Il a besoin de l'oxygène ou d'un mouchoir. Je ne sais pas lequel—

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): My apologies to the member for Timmins. You will be able to finish debate next time the bill is called.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Lisa Gretzky): Seeing the time on the clock, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 9 a.m.

The House adjourned at 1800.

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Gélinas, France (NDP)	Nickel Belt	
Ghamari, Goldie (PC)	Carleton	
Gill, Parm (PC)	Milton	
Glover, Chris (NDP)	Spadina—Fort York	
Gravelle, Michael (LIB)	Thunder Bay—Superior North / Thunder Bay—Supérieur-Nord	
Gretzky, Lisa (NDP)	Windsor West / Windsor-Ouest	First Deputy Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Première vice-présidente du comité plénier de l'Assemblée
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Harden, Joel (NDP)	Ottawa Centre / Ottawa-Centre	
Harris, Mike (PC)	Kitchener—Conestoga	
Hassan, Faisal (NDP)	York South—Weston / York-Sud— Weston	
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Kusendova, Natalia (PC)	Mississauga Centre / Mississauga- Centre	
Lecce, Hon. / L'hon. Stephen (PC)	King—Vaughan	Minister of Education / Ministre de l'Éducation
Lindo, Laura Mae (NDP)	Kitchener Centre / Kitchener-Centre	
MacLeod, Hon. / L'hon. Lisa (PC)	Nepean	Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries / ministre des Industries du patrimoine, du sport, du tourisme et de la culture
Mamakwa, Sol (NDP)	Kiiwetinoong	
Mantha, Michael (NDP)	Algoma—Manitoulin	
Martin, Robin (PC)	Eglinton—Lawrence	
Martow, Gila (PC)	Thornhill	
McDonnell, Jim (PC)	Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry	
McKenna, Jane (PC)	Burlington	
McNaughton, Hon. / L'hon. Monte (PC)	Lambton—Kent—Middlesex	Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development / Ministre du Travail, de la Formation et du Développement des compétences
Miller, Norman (PC)	Parry Sound—Muskoka	
Miller, Paul (NDP)	Hamilton East—Stoney Creek / Hamilton-Est—Stoney Creek	
Mitas, Christina Maria (PC)	Scarborough Centre / Scarborough- Centre	
Monteith-Farrell, Judith (NDP)	Thunder Bay—Atikokan	
Morrison, Suze (NDP)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	
Mulroney, Hon. / L'hon. Caroline (PC)	York—Simcoe	Minister of Francophone Affairs / Ministre des Affaires francophones Minister of Transportation / Ministre des Transports

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
Natyshak, Taras (NDP)	Essex	
Nicholls, Rick (PC)	Chatham-Kent—Leamington	Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Président du comité plénier de l'Assemblée Deputy Speaker / Vice-président
Oosterhoff, Sam (PC)	Niagara West / Niagara-Ouest	
Pang, Billy (PC)	Markham—Unionville	
Park, Lindsey (PC)	Durham	
Parsa, Michael (PC)	Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill	
Pettapiece, Randy (PC)	Perth—Wellington	
Phillips, Rod (PC)	Ajax	
Piccini, David (PC)	Northumberland—Peterborough South / Northumberland—Peterborough-Sud	
Rakocevic, Tom (NDP)	Humber River—Black Creek	
Rasheed, Kaleed (PC)	Mississauga East—Cooksville / Mississauga-Est—Cooksville	
Rickford, Hon. / L'hon. Greg (PC)	Kenora—Rainy River	Minister of Energy, Northern Development and Mines / Ministre de l'Énergie, du Développement du Nord et des Mines Minister of Indigenous Affairs / Ministre des Affaires autochtones
Roberts, Jeremy (PC)	Ottawa West—Nepean / Ottawa- Ouest—Nepean	
Romano, Hon. / L'hon. Ross (PC)	Sault Ste. Marie	Minister of Colleges and Universities / Ministre des Collèges et Universités
Sabawy, Sheref (PC)	Mississauga—Erin Mills	
Sandhu, Amarjot (PC)	Brampton West / Brampton-Ouest	
Sarkaria, Hon. / L'hon. Prabmeet Singh (PC)	Brampton South / Brampton-Sud	Associate Minister of Small Business and Red Tape Reduction / Ministre associé délégué au dossier des Petites Entreprises et de la Réduction des formalités administratives Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille
Sattler, Peggy (NDP)	London West / London-Ouest	Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire de l'opposition officielle
Schreiner, Mike (GRN)	Guelph	
Scott, Hon. / L'hon. Laurie (PC)	Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock	Minister of Infrastructure / Ministre de l'Infrastructure
Shaw, Sandy (NDP)	Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas / Hamilton-Ouest—Ancaster—Dundas	
Simard, Amanda (LIB)	Glengarry—Prescott—Russell	
Singh, Gurratan (NDP)	Brampton East / Brampton-Est	Deputy Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire adjoint de l'opposition officielle
Singh, Sara (NDP)	Brampton Centre / Brampton-Centre	Deputy Leader, Official Opposition / Chef adjointe de l'opposition officielle
Skelly, Donna (PC)	Flamborough—Glanbrook	
Smith, Dave (PC)	Peterborough—Kawartha	
Smith, Hon. / L'hon. Todd (PC)	Bay of Quinte / Baie de Quinte	Minister of Children, Community and Social Services / Ministre des Services à l'enfance et des Services sociaux et communautaires
Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie) (NDP)	St. Catharines	
Stiles, Marit (NDP)	Davenport	
Surma, Hon. / L'hon. Kinga (PC)	Etobicoke Centre / Etobicoke-Centre	Associate Minister of Transportation (GTA) / Ministre associée des Transports (RGT) Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille
Tabuns, Peter (NDP)	Toronto—Danforth	
Tangri, Nina (PC)	Mississauga—Streetsville	
Taylor, Monique (NDP)	Hamilton Mountain	
Thanigasalam, Vijay (PC)	Scarborough—Rouge Park	
Thompson, Hon. / L'hon. Lisa M. (PC)	Huron—Bruce	Minister of Government and Consumer Services / Ministre des Services gouvernementaux et des Services aux consommateurs
Tibollo, Hon. / L'hon. Michael A. (PC)	Vaughan—Woodbridge	Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions / Ministre associé délégué au dossier de la Santé mentale et de la Lutte contre les dépendances Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille
Triantafilopoulos, Effie J. (PC)	Oakville North—Burlington / Oakville-Nord—Burlington	
Vanthof, John (NDP)	Timiskaming—Cochrane	Deputy Leader, Official Opposition / Chef adjoint de l'opposition officielle
Wai, Daisy (PC)	Richmond Hill	

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
Walker, Hon. / L'hon. Bill (PC)	Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound	Associate Minister of Energy / Ministre associé de l'Énergie Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille
West, Jamie (NDP)	Sudbury	
Wilson, Jim (IND)	Simcoe—Grey	
Wynne, Kathleen O. (LIB)	Don Valley West / Don Valley-Ouest	
Yakubski, Hon. / L'hon. John (PC)	Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke	Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry / Ministre des Richesses naturelles et des Forêts
Yarde, Kevin (NDP)	Brampton North / Brampton-Nord	
Yurek, Hon. / L'hon. Jeff (PC)	Elgin—Middlesex—London	Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks / Ministre de l'Environnement, de la Protection de la nature et des Parcs

**STANDING AND SELECT COMMITTEES OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
COMITÉS PERMANENTS ET SPÉCIAUX DE L'ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE**

Standing Committee on Estimates / Comité permanent des budgets des dépenses

Chair / Président: Peter Tabuns
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Donna Skelly
Teresa J. Armstrong, Toby Barrett
Lorne Coe, Rudy Cuzzetto
Randy Hillier, Jane McKenna
Judith Monteith-Farrell, Michael Parsa
Randy Pettapiece, Donna Skelly
Peter Tabuns
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Thushitha Kobikrishna

**Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs /
Comité permanent des finances et des affaires économiques**

Chair / Président: Amarjot Sandhu
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Jeremy Roberts
Ian Arthur, Stan Cho
Catherine Fife, Mitzie Hunter
Logan Kanapathi, Sol Mamakwa
David Piccini, Jeremy Roberts
Amarjot Sandhu, Dave Smith
Vijay Thanigasalam
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Julia Douglas

**Standing Committee on General Government / Comité
permanent des affaires gouvernementales**

Chair / Présidente: Goldie Ghamari
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Mike Schreiner
Jill Andrew, Robert Bailey
Guy Bourgouin, Stephen Crawford
Goldie Ghamari, Chris Glover
Mike Harris, Sheref Sabawy
Amarjot Sandhu, Mike Schreiner
Daisy Wai
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

**Standing Committee on Government Agencies / Comité
permanent des organismes gouvernementaux**

Chair / Président: Gilles Bisson
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Aris Babikian
Aris Babikian, Gilles Bisson
Will Bouma, Lorne Coe
Wayne Gates, Robin Martin
Norman Miller, Rick Nicholls
Billy Pang, Amanda Simard
Marit Stiles
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Julia Douglas

**Standing Committee on Justice Policy / Comité permanent de
la justice**

Chair / Président: Daryl Kramp
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Lucille Collard
Will Bouma, Lucille Collard
Parm Gill, Daryl Kramp
Natalia Kusendova, Suze Morrison
Lindsey Park, Gurratan Singh
Nina Tangri, Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Kevin Yarde
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Thushitha Kobikrishna

**Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly / Comité
permanent de l'Assemblée législative**

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Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Vijay Thanigasalam
Rima Berns-McGown, Michael Coteau
Faisal Hassan, Logan Kanapathi
Michael Mantha, Jim McDonell
Christina Maria Mitas, Sam Oosterhoff
Kaleed Rasheed, Donna Skelly
Vijay Thanigasalam
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tonia Grannum

**Standing Committee on Public Accounts / Comité permanent
des comptes publics**

Chair / Président: Taras Natyshak
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: France Gélinas
Deepak Anand, Toby Barrett
Jessica Bell, Stephen Blais
Stephen Crawford, Rudy Cuzzetto
France Gélinas, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Taras Natyshak
Michael Parsa
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell

**Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills / Comité
permanent des règlements et des projets de loi d'intérêt privé**

Chair / Président: Logan Kanapathi
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: John Fraser
Will Bouma, John Fraser
Logan Kanapathi, Vincent Ke
Laura Mae Lindo, Paul Miller
Billy Pang, Jeremy Roberts
Dave Smith, Daisy Wai
Jamie West
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

**Standing Committee on Social Policy / Comité permanent de
la politique sociale**

Chair / Président: Deepak Anand
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Bhutila Karpoche
Deepak Anand, Aris Babikian
Jeff Burch, Amy Fee
Michael Gravelle, Joel Harden
Mike Harris, Christine Hogarth
Belinda C. Karahalios, Bhutila Karpoche
Natalia Kusendova
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tanzima Khan

**Select Committee on Emergency Management Oversight /
Comité spécial de la surveillance de la gestion des situations
d'urgence**

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Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Tom Rakocevic
Robert Bailey, Gilles Bisson
John Fraser, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Robin Martin
Sam Oosterhoff, Lindsey Park
Tom Rakocevic, Sara Singh
Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell