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Mercredi
8 mai 2024

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Wednesday 8 May 2024

Mercredi 8 mai 2024

The House met at 0900.

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

Prayers.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

WORKING FOR WORKERS FIVE
ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 VISANT À OEUVRER
POUR LES TRAVAILLEURS, CINQ

Mr. Piccini moved second reading of the following bill:

Bill 190, An Act to amend various statutes with respect to employment and labour and other matters / Projet de loi 190, Loi modifiant diverses lois relatives à l'emploi et au travail et à d'autres questions.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Would the minister care to lead off the debate.

Hon. David Piccini: It's an honour to rise today to debate Bill 190, the Working for Workers Five Act. Speaker, it's like Harry Potter. They just keep getting better, and we're on to number 5.

Speaker, I'll be dividing my time with my incredible parliamentary assistant from Ajax, the hard-working member.

I want to first start by thanking the ministry office team at labour, immigration, training and skills development—they've worked incredibly hard on this largest labour bill—and the incredible men and women who work for the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development all over our province, who work hard each and every day. I really want to thank them, the deputy and the entire team for the work that they have done to put this bill together. It's a team effort, and it's a team sport. I thank them.

The member from Ajax—again, I'll be dividing my time with her. Her background as an immigrant to Canada as a teenager and her work with provincial and Canadian school boards and associations gives her such an important perspective on the changes we're tabling as a part of this latest bill.

I also, Speaker, would like to acknowledge the Premier for his leadership and support not only on this bill but for trail-blazing Working for Workers legislation over the past number of years. The Premier knows, and I agree, that by putting workers first, we can bring the Ontario dream within reach for more people and ensure Ontario remains the best place to live, work and raise a family.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank everybody—in addition to those I've mentioned—who has supported us with this bill. I want to acknowledge the member from Mississauga–Malton and the member for Scarborough Centre who have heard concerns, contributed to this bill, spoken with their communities, championed this legislation and done incredible work in their former capacities as parliamentary assistants.

Above all else, the Ontarians who have contributed to this piece of legislation: the workers, employers, firefighters, newcomers, labour organizations, business and industry associations and so many more—the people who just pick up the phone and call you at your constituency office surprised to see you answer and then contribute to important pieces of legislation like this.

It's also fitting that we're talking about this bill during Occupational Safety and Health Week, which is observed yearly across North America, to raise awareness about the importance of workplace health and safety and to promote the prevention of workplace injuries and illnesses. In fact, Ontario's own Occupational Safety and Health Day falls yearly on the first Tuesday in May, which was yesterday.

Given that, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the importance of supporting a culture of health and safety in every workplace all year long. Our bill includes important measures to do just that. It builds on the success of our previous Working for Workers bills, introducing new legislation, regulatory amendments and other actions that would help people find good jobs, increase worker protections and support newcomers.

We're working to open pathways into the skilled trades; remove barriers to employment; protect front-line heroes and workers; support women at work and improve fairness for workers. By continuing to put workers first, we can spread opportunity and good jobs by strengthening worker supports and protections, and we can tackle the labour shortage and promote economic growth.

Protecting front-line heroes and workers: As I get started on the details of this bill and the complementary measures in the Working for Workers package, there are some people I want to talk about first. I'm talking about the heroes who put all of us first every day, who risk their lives for ours when they go to work, and that's Ontario's firefighters. They run to danger as we run away from it, something we've so often said in this place, and they deserve a government that values their service and their sacrifice. They deserve a government that recognizes the risks they take each and every day and provides more expansive supports.

In the months I've been Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development—which is seven—

I've been listening to the firefighters' concerns. I've heard from municipal firefighters, wildland firefighters and fire investigators, including concerns about getting the support they need and deserve if they fall ill from diseases that firefighters are at higher risk from because of the dangerous work they do to keep us all safe.

I'm proud that our government is serving those who serve by strengthening and improving protections for Ontario's municipal and wildland firefighters. That's why we're proposing to ensure wildland firefighters and investigators have the same presumptive coverage that municipal firefighters have for occupational cancers, heart injuries and for PTSD.

I would like to thank the MPP for Thunder Bay–Atikokan for all his hard work and advocacy on this file—and our Minister of Natural Resources. I'd like to thank the member for Mushkegowuk–James Bay, the member for Thunder Bay–Superior North and everybody who has contributed to this important piece.

The member here has taken time to introduce me to wildland firefighters, has welcomed me to the great north in Thunder Bay—we were there at Kakabeka Falls together—and has brought such an important perspective for firefighters in Ontario. I value you being such a strong advocate for the north.

As a part of this bill, I'm introducing legislative changes to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act to include wildland firefighters and wildland fire investigators in the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board presumptive coverage for PTSD. And we're complementing this with a regulatory change to the firefighters regulation to include wildland firefighters and wildland fire investigators in presumptive WSIB coverage for occupational cancers and heart injuries. As we continue to see more wildfires in Ontario with each passing year, our wildland firefighters need the support they deserve for their heroic efforts.

To further improve all occupational cancer presumptive coverage for all firefighters and fire investigators—including those fighting and investigating wildfires—we are proposing to improve presumptive coverage for primary site skin cancer by reducing the duration of service required from 15 to 10 years. Once again, we are leading Canada with the lowest duration of service in the country.

0910

I want to thank the incredible members from the OPFFA, in particular Greg Horton and the incredible team, and Gavin Jacklyn, who invited us down to Brantford for this important legislation. And I want to thank, for the work that he did, our member for Brantford–Brant, who had us down. It was emotional because behind these moves are men and women who have served. Behind these moves are men and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice.

If passed, this change would allow more firefighters and investigators suffering from this occupational cancer to access the WSIB benefits and services they need and

deserve. I know everyone in this room today sees the importance of standing with front-line heroes.

My mission—and the mission of the Premier and our entire government—is to build a province that leaves no one behind. That is why, as a part of this larger package of actions to complement the changes in this bill, we're also planning to consult on expanding PTSD coverage to more workers. I want to thank the PAO for the work they do, Mark Baxter and the incredible team there. We want to further support workers who regularly witness traumatic situations in their jobs.

Mark Baxter brought a team which included two incredible police officers from Cobourg to meet with me. They spoke a bit about the work that the front-line men and women in uniform do and the fact that this coverage and these supports are provided for front-line officers, but those who review body cam footage and often see these traumatic incidents not once, not twice, but sometimes up to seven times, do not have support. Again, I want to thank the Police Association of Ontario for the work that they do and those men and women who are on the front lines, protecting our communities.

I had the opportunity to go out and join Cobourg Police Services on ride-alongs, Port Hope Police Service on ride-alongs, the OPP on ride-alongs and Durham police on ride-alongs. These are just some of the many services that protect the community I have the honour of representing. The member for Ajax will have more on to say on this later.

Another key element of this bill, and one I'm excited to talk about, is opening up pathways into the skilled trades. This matters. They are also heroes, the tradesmen and -women who go to work on our front lines. For years, governments talked about it. They talked the talk but we are walking the walk. Under the leadership of Premier Ford and this government we're recognizing that the trades matter, that if we are going to build the hospitals, the schools, which previous governments shut down in rural communities like mine that we are now building—and, yes, if anyone is watching in Newcastle, we're still fighting to get that new school in Newcastle, something I'm working with our Ministry of Education on.

Speaker, we are seeing a new day in Ontario, a day where we're building schools and child care centres in rural Ontario, where we're building hospitals—over 50 in construction right now—where we're building highways.

I want to thank the incredible men and women in labour who joined us for the Highway 413 announcement. It's incredible. I see some of the members opposite watching. It must be frustrating, watching unions that traditionally back them standing behind Premier Ford and saying on the mike—and if you don't believe me, Speaker, it's on YouTube; just go back and watch it—that there has been no Premier who has had the backs of labour and our private sector building unions than Premier Doug Ford.

There were hundreds who stood shoulder to shoulder with us, the incredible men and women from LIUNA. I want to especially thank Jack Oliveira and the team at LIUNA 183, and Joe Mancinelli, who spoke there as well.

I want to also thank the incredible associations who were there, the operating engineers—Mike Gallagher—who stood with us and delivered a passionate speech about the importance of 413; the ironworkers, who joined us; UA; the associations—so many it's hard to mention them all. They stood with us for that announcement.

These skilled trades workers are the backbone of our economy. They're the carpenters who build our homes, the electricians who keep our lights on, the plumbers who ensure our water runs and the welders, mechanics and technicians who keep our industries running smoothly. In short, they are the unsung heroes who grow and keep our society growing and prosperous, and they're in high demand.

It's no secret that Ontario is facing a shortage of workers in the skilled trades. Over the next decade, Speaker, it's estimated we're going to need 500,000 skilled trades-related jobs. I think every single member of this Legislature sees that and recognizes that, and I'm confident that we'll see support for measures we're taking to get more men and women into the trades.

This means we need to act now. We must attract, train and retain people in the skilled trades. That's why our Working for Workers package includes measures that would make it easier for people to enter careers in the skilled trades, especially youth and second career workers.

So this bill would make changes to the Building Opportunities in the Skilled Trades Act, or BOSTA, to increase access to apprenticeship training for people who have prior experience but cannot meet the academic entry requirements to register as an apprentice.

I've met countless Ukrainian refugees who are here. If you told me, Speaker, that I had to leave Canada tomorrow, I wouldn't know where on earth my degree is; I wouldn't know where—I think it might be my mom who has my Ontario secondary school diploma, to be honest. I couldn't get that, Speaker.

So recognizing those who fled war-torn spaces around the world, we're making sure that, through working with employers, we're removing barriers, through employer attestation, through competency-based assessment to make sure people are working in the field in which they have expertise, because nobody here is pushing a low-skill economy, where people are working in jobs that they, quite frankly, are way overqualified for. People who can be an engineer, the cab driver who's a doctor or a nurse—I'm sick and tired of getting in an Uber and seeing that.

We're also including measures in this bill with the Fairness Commissioner and our regulatory bodies to remove those barriers, and I would welcome any other ideas from members in this place to remove those barriers, so that we can get more people working in those careers.

That's not it, though. That's not it. We're also doing more. We're proposing to add a new accelerated stream to the popular program, our Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program. I want to thank the incredible Minister of Education. Speaker, there's a theme here. I've mentioned about a quarter of our caucus already, and I'm just on page 3. That's because we're a team: a team that comes together

to contribute to landmark legislation, like this largest labour bill since we formed government.

The member for King–Vaughan, the Minister of Education is a leader in this game-changing initiative, and what are we calling it, Speaker? It's the Focused Apprenticeship Skills Training, or FAST for short. The government likes their acronyms. FAST will enable grade 11 and 12 high school students to participate in more apprenticeship learning through co-operative education credits while completing high school.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Great idea.

Hon. David Piccini: It is a good idea. Graduates would receive a new seal on their OSSD, on their school diploma, to signify their successful completion of the program and to distinguish them for their dedication and learning in the skilled trades. This is part of the Premier's 2023 commitment to expand options for students entering the skilled trades.

For years, we talked about it. I would go into high schools and I would see the brightest and the best taking an advanced placement, taking courses that would count towards a university degree. Why can't those same students take experiential learning opportunities that would count towards their level 1 apprenticeship? Why not, Speaker? If you're going to tackle the stigma, as I think everybody in this place agrees, you've got to start treating the trades equally as a valuable profession, as they do in jurisdictions like Germany. That's what this Premier's doing. That's what we're doing with this measure, and we're the first province to take this sort of leadership.

We're making it easier for people in Ontario to find apprenticeship opportunities. In fact, for rural Ontarians in communities like mine—Herb's Plumbing, Fred the electrician, who I spoke to the other day and so many more. It's called the silver tsunami. One in three journeypersons are over the age of 55. How are we going to attract the best and the brightest in rural Ontario to take over these businesses?

0920

When you have a job in the trades, you can start to run your own business; you can become an entrepreneur.

To better connect apprentices with employers and better connect those employers with apprentices who are seeking that apprenticeship, we plan to launch a new online job-matching portal for our potential apprentices, journeypersons and employers. Currently, we do not have a dedicated provincial system to help apprentices find employers and sponsors who are looking for apprentices, so we're filling that gap with a new platform that will help streamline the process for potential apprentices to find interested sponsors, register and begin their training. We're just starting with that portal, but I look forward to building in mentorship opportunities along the way.

I've got to give another shout-out—the theme is growing—to Minister Williams from Brampton, who has been such a champion for women in the trades.

We had a women-in-trades round table, and I think it was Victoria Mancinelli from LIUNA who introduced me to a number of workers. I think of my time down in

Grimsby, where I met some remarkable women who are trailblazers, who are breaking down barriers—single moms she introduced me to. And do you know what? They talked about having more mentorship opportunities.

So I look forward for this portal to be that one-stop shop to get your hours towards your level 1, 2, 3 etc., but also to unlock mentorship opportunities that can continue to break down barriers for women in the trades.

We're not stopping there. Another important measure supporting the trades is a new technological education requirement to earn your OSSD. This requirement will expose Ontario students to at least one tech ed course that could guide them to a future career in the skilled workforce, including the skilled trades.

When we have youth who are graduating not ready for the job market, that is not a failure of youth, that is a failure of us, that is a failure of decision-makers, that is a failure of us as a society to not better connect them to remarkable job opportunities.

This new tech ed course—previous governments could have done that, but they didn't; we did.

Mr. John Yakabuski: They chose not to.

Hon. David Piccini: They chose not to. It speaks about their value systems.

We know that the previous Liberal government wanted to turn Ontario into a service economy. I didn't believe it until I went to the forum for ministers in charge of skills development, for that skills development component of my portfolio. I looked back at the previous minutes and I looked at what Ontario said, and, colleagues, you would never believe—certainly, colleagues on this side would never have believed it.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I was here.

Hon. David Piccini: You were here, yes. The member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke remembers.

In the minutes, they said, "We're going to transition Ontario into a low-skill service economy." That's shocking.

I, actually, in the record, made a point of saying that under the leadership of this Premier, under the leadership of this Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, we're bringing game-changing investments that are life-changing.

I was down in Niagara for the carpenters, to kick off their bargaining, and I had a great conversation with the carpenters. It was just a few nights ago. Josh Neville from Port Hope carpenters said to me that these sorts of legacy investments that this minister—who is the number one salesperson in Ontario—has brought into our province are not just game-changing, they're life-changing. They're life-changing for the men and women who are going to work on the automotive lines that are going to build the EVs of tomorrow. It's life-changing for the Indigenous who are taking an equity-building stake in critical minerals in the north. It's life-changing for those companies that are working to extract those critical minerals that are going to be the backbone. It's game-changing for the building trades that are building these buildings. This minister keeps bringing these new investments in—I think the largest was NextStar in Windsor; then it was the largest

again at Volkswagen, and now it's the largest again with Honda.

I remember, in Windsor—it's 16 times the size of SkyDome. What's the size of the new building, Minister? It's even bigger. If you think of something 16 times the size of SkyDome—I remember because I had family that worked on SkyDome. That was a massive amount of building trades coming together to build that big SkyDome. And now we are building buildings 16-plus times the size of that. Just think of the opportunities for men and women in the building trades.

Speaker, we're also removing barriers for employment. It's not just tradespeople we need in this province. An important part of our plan to fuel economic growth is improving job access for newcomers, and helping put internationally trained professionals on a path to success.

More proposed changes in this bill, if passed, would help fill thousands of jobs in Ontario going unfilled and close gaps in the labour market. As part of this bill, I'm proposing that regulated professions be required to have a policy to accept alternatives where applicants cannot obtain standard registration related documents for reasons beyond their control such as war or conflict or natural disasters. I mentioned this earlier.

I want to specifically acknowledge the leadership of my community in Northumberland–Peterborough South, who have welcomed Ukrainian refugees en masse, building on the incredible work we did to welcome Syrian refugees in our community. I recently visited Café Lviv for Mr. G's birthday the other day—he's the partner of the mayor of Port Hope—and I met a number of remarkable women working at that restaurant. I will encourage any member of this place, if you're in Port Hope, visit Café Lviv. It's an amazing restaurant. I was eating Ukrainian food, and I was speaking to one of the women who works there. Speaker, do you know what she is? She's a pediatrician. She works in pediatrics, and she is working at a restaurant. I dedicate measures in this bill to her because we're going to work hard to ensure people like her are actually practising on the front lines in health care, where they belong.

We're proposing that regulated professions must have a plan to enable multiple registration steps to happen simultaneously. Imagine learning a new language, as these Ukrainian refugees have done, just to literally run a hurdle race like Perdita Felicien. It is insane. They are jumping hurdle after hurdle after hurdle. And do you know what happens, Speaker? They give up because of the ridiculous barriers put before them. So we're talking about taking all of those steps, moving all of those steps, moving them concurrently, working with Fairness Commissioner Glasberg and working with these regulated bodies to make sure we're slashing these barriers, doing concurrent approvals, making sure that we're proposing to give the Fairness Commissioner a regulatory power, because we have to do better for these newcomers.

These proposed changes to the Fair Access to Regulated Professions and Compulsory Trades Act would remove barriers for foreign credential recognition and

speed up registration. We already, in many respects, lead the nation in speeding up that registration process, but we can do more. Importantly, they would help newcomers transition to work in their field in which they train faster, again, leaving no one behind.

To complement this proposal, I'm proposing a regulatory change under the Ontario Immigration Act to expand occupations eligible for the in-demand skills stream of the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program.

Speaker, I'm looking forward to meeting with my federal counterpart, Minister Miller, to talk about this. Working with the federal government, we've expanded the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program. When it comes to processing times, we do it in 90 days here in Ontario. The minister in Manitoba with the cool new Premier over there—that minister said—she just sent me an email that she's coming to visit Ontario, and we're going to welcome her in this place to talk about better welcoming newcomers and the work Ontario is doing. I think all of us in the place can take pride in those processing times. I thank her for her leadership, and I'm looking forward to working with her to bring those same types of time guarantees to people immigrating to Manitoba too.

Further changes proposed as a part of Bill 190 would, if passed, improve internal review efficiency for the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program by allowing for the delegation of internal review functions to ministry officials.

And, finally, to complement this bill as a part of the Working for Workers package, we're planning a new trusted employer model to make it easier for employers and nominees to access the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program.

0930

I wanted to give a big shout-out to all those employers out there, including many in my own riding, who do so well by these newcomers. It's not just a job; it's a family. It's a support network. It's so much more that these employers are offering these newcomers, and we want to recognize their leadership by those who have exemplary records, by recognizing them with a new trusted employer model, ensuring that newcomers can join the front lines of our workforce faster.

It's going to reduce the administrative burden on employers that are trusted or experienced partners of this government. These changes mean better efficiency welcoming newcomers to our province, and they would further respond to the needs of businesses to better open Ontario to more people willing and eager to help us build a better and stronger Ontario, those great employers.

But, Speaker, we're not stopping there. There's so much more. Fairness for workers: That's another important hallmark. Before I pass my time to the great member for Ajax, I would like to talk about working for workers who are already here in Ontario. It's not just those who are currently working, but those who are currently looking for jobs too. I'm proposing to amend the Employment Standards Act to increase transparency for job seekers in two major ways: first, by requiring employers to disclose

in publicly advertised job postings whether or not a vacancy currently exist.

Ghost jobs—the Toronto Star reported on that, and I had a great chat with them as we looked to implement these measures. A recent survey of hiring managers conducted by Clarify Capital in October 2023 found that 50% reported creating job openings to keep the talent pool at the ready for when they are hiring, without the actual intention to hire in the immediate future.

Speaker, think about what we have done as a government: requiring salary transparency in job postings; removing Canadian work experience requirements in previous Working for Workers bills; recognizing that sometimes it's like a new job just to apply for another job, and that you're running through and hopping over many hurdles to apply for that new job, just to find out it's a ghost job and it doesn't actually exist—that is not right—or just to find out that the salary being offered is one that is less than what you earn today. We took care of that in Working for Workers 4. They deserve to know whether their applying may get them a call back in the short term.

But, Speaker, we're not stopping there. I'm also proposing changes to the Employment Standards Act to require employers to respond to interviewees for publicly advertised job postings. After the stress of an interview, the work preparing for it and the hope it raises, people deserve to know whether or not they got the job or if they'll be called back another interview within a reasonable amount of time. We'll work in regulation to specify that.

We're saying an important thing in legislation here. We're elevating the societal contract. We're elevating that contract for many of the people here who look like they are going to be embarking on a great career ahead, who go for those interviews. You probably want to hear back if you got the job. You probably want the courtesy of knowing if there is something in that interview process that is an inhibitor for future jobs. Let's get you the feedback you deserve, so that these young Ontarians—so that anyone in this place—can improve themselves in that process. It's elevating that societal discourse. It's a mutual responsibility.

Speaker, we don't talk enough about accountability and shared accountability: accountability for those applying for the job, accountability to those employers to ensure that they're giving that feedback. And so, I look forward to working with employers and with job seekers as we roll this out, Speaker.

It has been an honour of a lifetime, just the last seven months in this role and the role in environment prior. I'm just scratching the surface on what this bill is doing. I know the member for Ajax will elaborate on other measures—getting tough on bad actors, doing so many more things in the legislation. But I'm incredibly proud, as someone who has grown up in rural Ontario, who was just recently at ENSS in Brighton, who looked to a graduating class I would say 50% of whom want to get into the trades, but have been told for too long that trades are perhaps for someone who is less academically inclined or are told a

variety—and I don't even want to perpetuate the stigmas here in this place, so I'll stop right there.

But what we're saying, and I think I speak on behalf of everyone in this place, is that we are treating the trades as a profession. We disagree, I'm sure, when it comes to health care, schools, education and how we get there. But I think everybody in this place, at their core, recognizes we do need new med schools. We do need new hospitals. We do need state-of-the-art campuses of care that I'm fighting for in Campbellford. I never miss an opportunity, folks, to bring up the new hospital I'd like to see in Campbellford. I'm advocating to my own government to get that for Campbellford. But we all agree, and this ambitious plan for health care that this Premier has led is putting the dollars to make that, hopefully, a reality for us.

We all agree we need those hospitals, we need those schools, we need those highways so that you can spend more time with your loved ones at home, so that you're not stuck in gridlock. Honestly, I dread sometimes coming into Toronto in the gridlock. I breathe a sigh of relief when I hit the county of Northumberland. I see the rolling hills, I see the clear streets in front of me, and I know I'm that much closer to my wife, to the dogs and to getting home, to seeing my family. We can alleviate gridlock.

But it's not just the highways and the roads, it's public transit. For every \$1 we spend on roads and bridges, we're spending \$2 on public transit. The largest low-carbon public transit project taking place in North America today is the Ontario Line. Who's going to build all of this? Who's going to lay the track? Who's going to work underground—the labourers working underground, doing these tunnels?

I was at 183 the other day and saw the state-of-the-art tunnel system. I want to give a shout-out to Sandro Pinto, the training director, for showing us that incredible training opportunity for the tunnels at 183. Again, they're doing such great work.

But for us to do these projects on time and on budget, for us to just get these shovels in the ground, we need men and women in the trades. This Premier and this government are smashing the stigma. We're increasing paths. We're breaking down the barriers, bringing core fundamentals back to high school: math, budgeting, STEM, tech trades—all of these things that, quite frankly, should have been done years ago. But we're doing it. We're bringing those fundamentals back to high school, and it's going to better equip our next generation.

Again, when you have a job in the trades, you've got a career for life, but it's so much more than that. You're entrepreneurs. You're running businesses. I think to friends of mine in my community. I was just with Tom Behan, Behan Construction. I was just with Steve Henderson, Henderson Construction. They're starting work. They're giving back to our community.

Where did I see Tom? I saw Tom at the youth wellness hub fundraiser. Why does a contractor get involved? So many of them give of their time for these important community efforts. It's not even just about all that infrastructure I talked about. It's those men and women in

the trades who give of their time and their remarkable craftsmanship for free to support incredible initiatives like a youth wellness hub.

A big shout-out to Port Hope who got the 23rd youth wellness hub in Ontario—of course, under the leadership of Premier Ford and our government, we started 22 of them. We've now increased a new 10 in the budget to increase that number. I was proud to stand with colleagues the Minister of Health and the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions in Port Hope to announce that new youth wellness hub.

But behind all of these incredible initiatives, I again want to take it back to the workers—the workers who get up each and every day. I got up the other day at 4 to come into Toronto—it was mostly pickups on the 401 that I saw. It was men and women going to job sites early in the morning, those same men and women who build our hospitals, build our schools, build our public transit, build our roads, highways and bridges, and will be responsible for the 1.5 million homes we've set the ambitious target to build in Ontario. We see them, we hear them, we value them, and we're removing barriers for youth in this province to become them.

I want to close with this. We announced recently in Mississauga at M City—and a big thank you to Steve Chaplin, the team at EllisDon and especially Michelle. Michelle was nervous; she was told just a few minutes before that we had asked her to speak. She said she would. Michelle did more than just speak to measures we're doing to ensure bathrooms have a proper cleaning schedule. I think you will hear from the remarkable member from Ajax a bit more on that. We are doing common-sense changes to elevate, to bring the same quality you experience in a washroom on Bay Street to Main Street, and we're doing it for workers across Ontario.

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She said that common-sense changes like that, having washrooms for women but most importantly PPE—“I'm sick and tired of hearing from women who are wearing coveralls that are down to their knees and tripping, working doubly as hard to try to keep up with their counterpart.” We're saying, you've got to have properly fitted PPE. It's in regulation.

We are one of the first provinces to ever do that, these common-sense changes. Michelle stood at the podium to not just speak about important measures in this legislation that we're doing—she and that team at EllisDon are supportive of the measures we're putting in this bill—but she, more importantly, stood as a role model for women across Ontario.

We saw last year the largest number of women registered to become apprentices, among the largest in Ontario's history. It is a proof point that the work we're doing is working. We saw a 116% increase in women in the building trades.

Still, they only represent a small percentage of those on the work lines. But thanks to people like Michelle, who stand as a role model for young girls who look up to them, they know that there is a remarkable career ahead of them,

that they can enter those jobs. Imagine, all of the things I mentioned we're building in Ontario, doing that and ignoring 50% of the workforce. That doesn't make any sense. So I'm proud of the work that this government is doing to break down barriers for women in the trades, to listen to them and to work with them to remove these barriers.

I want to close by saying it's been a remarkable opportunity, working with the team at MLITSD—it's a mouthful—on this bill. I just want to thank everybody who has contributed to this. This is so widely stakeholdered. It's the voice—this is not just paper, these are the voices of thousands of Ontarians who have provided feedback to this bill. I want to thank them.

The best days are yet to come in Ontario. Under the leadership of this Premier we're building a stronger Ontario. We're leaving no one behind. We are a welcoming place for newcomers, we're bashing down barriers for men and women to enter the skilled trades, providing a beacon of light for youngsters looking to enter skilled trades, and we couldn't do it without the leadership of Premier Ford.

I just want to close by thanking everyone for giving me this opportunity to speak. I want to turn things over to my incredible colleague and partner in all of this, the distinguished member from Ajax.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further debate?

Ms. Patrice Barnes: I'm pleased to rise today to debate Bill 190, the Working for Workers Five Act, 2024, alongside the Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. I want to acknowledge the leadership of the minister and the entire team at the ministry, who are working to support workers in our province. I see, every day, the minister's passion to make things better for the workers of the province of Ontario and I applaud his work with the measures contained in this bill.

I'd also like to thank the Premier for his leadership and support of our government's actions and trail-blazing legislation for Ontario workers. He truly leads by example, working for workers to make sure we keep the Ontario dream within reach of more people.

Thank you also to the members of caucus and workers who have advocated and consulted on the changes in this bill. As a professional and also as a woman, I am proud of the proposals we are making to the Working for Workers Five Act to further support women at work.

Canadian research, as recent as 2022, has shown that women are more likely to be subjected to workplace harassment, including online harassment, than other workers. People who face multiple intersectionalities such as gender, race or disability are also very likely to be harassed. This includes online harassment. As many workers now work from home all or part of the time, virtual harassment is something we increasingly need to ensure we are protecting workers from.

We need to recognize that, with the change in our technologies, our legislation has to change as well. That is why, as part of this bill, we are proposing to modernize the Occupational Health and Safety Act to include virtual

harassment. We're acting to reflect the realities of modern work in our legislation and to better protect workers no matter where they perform their work.

To complement this proposal, our ministry is also planning consultations on more potential changes to prevent and address complaints and incidents of workplace harassment. Harassment is unacceptable. It makes going to work very difficult. Whether it's online or face-to-face, our government's message is simple: It has to stop. And we are working to ensure that it does.

While addressing virtual harassment is an incredibly important change for all workers, especially women, I'd also like to talk about some other important changes our ministry is proposing to specifically support women in the trades, particularly in construction.

We have seen an increase in women working on construction projects, and we've heard their requests to make their workplaces more inclusive. In fact, a 2022 survey of Ontario tradeswomen in construction cited better washroom facilities as one of the things missing to make this type of work more appealing to women. Some of us in here can relate to that. To help, we are proposing a change to the construction regulation to require constructors to provide menstrual products on many construction sites. Those construction sites affected would be those with 20 or more workers and expected to last three months or longer—sites where it would be feasible to have a reasonably private place to access menstrual products.

While only 13% of workers in Ontario's construction industry are women, we want to increase this number. Changes to ensure that their needs are met on the job site will help.

To bring better washrooms to all workers as part of our Working for Workers package, we're proposing new requirements under the Occupational Health and Safety Act for washrooms provided for workers. While in construction it's already a requirement for washrooms to be kept in a clean and sanitary condition, we're now proposing to roll it out to similar workplaces all across Ontario. And to ensure that this is a regular practice, constructors and employers will be required to maintain an up-to-date cleaning log for each washroom, to be prescribed by regulation in the future. This will allow workers to see when the washrooms were last cleaned and to keep the people in charge accountable.

Washrooms need to be kept in a clean and sanitary condition, not just for workers' health, but for their dignity as well. No worker should be confronted with a dirty washroom while they're at work, where you have to make the choice to either stay on site or go off-site to use the washroom. It should be that way for every workplace.

These hard-working people are showing up day in and day out to do their jobs, and we all need constructors and employers to do their part.

To further protect workers, we will also consult on expanding the types of equipment to be provided on construction sites. Equipment like defibrillators—something that can make the difference between life and death in the event of a sudden cardiac arrest—is important on the job

site. This is in addition to a comprehensive review of traumatic fatalities in the construction sector.

We have heard some of the sad stories of workers that have gone to work and have not come home, and so we're charging the Ontario Chief Prevention Officer, Dr. Joel Moody, to do a comprehensive consultation, as well as incorporating asbestos-related data into the ministry's forthcoming Occupational Exposure Registry to improve our efforts to prevent future asbestos-related illnesses.

Earlier, the Minister of Health made this announcement: To better protect workers, increase fairness and, importantly, reduce unnecessary burden on health care providers, we're proposing a change to the Employment Standards Act to prohibit employers from requiring sick notes for the three unpaid sick days employees are entitled to under the act. This change to put patients before paperwork would, if passed, help people avoid unnecessary trips to the doctor's office when sick. This means fairness for employees who can better recuperate at home. It means better safety for health care workers who would now see less exposure to people with communicable diseases looking to complete paperwork, and for patients in waiting rooms. It would mean many hours saved for primary care providers, which we have heard from the Ontario Medical Association.

Family doctors spend approximately 19 hours per week on administrative tasks, including four hours of that writing notes or completing forms for patients. Let's get those paperwork hours back for them to, instead, spend those taking care of patients.

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I want to emphasize that employers would still have tools available to maintain staff accountability around sick days off, such as requiring attestations or asking for pharmacy receipts, depending on the circumstances. This is about reducing unnecessary burden on our health care system while continuing to support both workers and employers. And it complements other actions by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board efforts to collaborate with health sector organizations as they explore additional measures to reduce administrative burdens for sick or injured workers and health care professionals.

Speaker, we continue to do more. I would like to talk about workplace fairness—the minister mentioned this earlier. We want to send a message that employers who break the rules and exploit or endanger workers will face the consequences. That is why we are proposing changes to the Employment Standards Act that would, if passed, double the maximum fine for individuals convicted of violating the act from \$50,000 to \$100,000. This would make Ontario's maximum fine for individuals the highest in the country and send a message to unscrupulous employers that it's unacceptable.

We're also increasing the penalty that an employment standards officer can issue for certain repeat offenders by five times. It's a change from \$1,000 per penalty to \$5,000. That is less than the price of an iPhone to a more substantive penalty, especially when it's multiplied by each employee affected. And it would be available for

officers to issue on third or subsequent contraventions of the same provision.

These changes are designed to make bad actors think twice before they violate the act, and to give the courts and our officers more leverage to appropriately penalize those that do, levelling the playing field for Ontario's majority of responsible employers.

So to recap, all of these changes have one goal in mind: putting workers first, because an economy that doesn't work for workers, does not work at all. Through our Working for Workers packages we have been, and plan to continue, making common-sense changes that put workers in the driver's seat.

The themes that the minister and I have spoken about today are not new. In fact, this government has shown its support for workers in several of its Working for Workers packages. For example, in 2022, we stood up for members of the Canadian Armed Forces by expanding military reservist leave to cover time spent in Canadian Forces military skills training and reduce the amount of time military personnel need to hold a job before they can take the leave. We reduced that from six months to three months. And again, in 2023, we improved military reservist leave yet again, expanding reasons for the leave and further reducing the time reservists need to be employed before taking leave.

The firefighter presumptive coverage improvements outlined today also build on improvements in 2023 when we expanded presumptive occupational cancer coverage for firefighters and fire investigators to include thyroid and pancreatic cancers, as well as further improvements this year when we reduced the time firefighters and fire investigators need to have been employed prior to diagnosis to receive presumptive coverage for esophageal cancer, from 25 years to 15 years. That is substantial.

We have been protecting the safety and dignity of workers from the very beginning of the Working for Workers series. Legislation passed by this House in 2021 gave delivery workers the basic human dignity of access to a restroom at businesses they are serving. And in 2023, we improved washrooms for construction workers by mandating clean, well lit and properly enclosed washrooms on all construction sites, and improved job sites for women by requiring women-specific washrooms on larger sites, as well as properly fitting personal protective equipment and clothing be available for workers of all body types, making construction work safer and more inclusive. We know that when women are on site with ill-fitted protective gear, it puts them at risk.

And to demonstrate our seriousness about safety and bad actors, in 2022 we increased the maximum fine for corporations convicted of Occupational Health and Safety Act violations to \$2 million, emphasizing our dedication to putting worker safety above all else.

We have also been proactive around the opioid epidemic's effect on workplace safety, mandating that certain at-risk workplaces have life-saving naloxone kits on site, and workers must be trained on how to use them. This was passed in 2022.

Fairness for employees and job seekers has been an ongoing theme for this government's improvements since 2021. To protect vulnerable workers, we introduced mandatory licensing for recruiters and temporary help agencies, and followed up last year with changes that, once proclaimed, will require employers to disclose the expected compensation or rate of compensation in publicly advertised job postings to ensure job seekers have clear information about the pay they can expect before they decide to apply. There's nothing like going through the entire process and finding out that what you're getting paid wasn't even worth the time.

We also ensured fairness for hospitality and services sector staff by clarifying and introducing some important employment standards. These include:

- clarifying employers cannot deduct wages when customers dine and dash, gas and dash, or otherwise leave without paying. Those workers should not be penalized;
- clarifying that employees must be paid for trial shifts;
- requiring employers to disclose if they have a policy of sharing worker tips and post it in the workplace; and
- requiring employers who pay tips using direct deposit to allow their employees to select which account they want them to be deposited.

This continues, Speaker: To ensure fairness for Ontario workers, it's important to keep our laws current to new technology and applicable to real life. That's another thing we've been doing through Working for Workers. Technology in the workplace has transformed how we operate, communicate and innovate. We addressed this in 2021 by introducing a requirement for larger employers to have a written policy on disconnecting from work to safeguard people's personal and private time in an era where work can easily follow you home. And we followed up in 2022 to protect privacy with a requirement for large employers to disclose how they're monitoring their employees electronically, as well as a change to the Employment Standards Act to ensure that employees who work solely remotely are counted for when mass termination provisions happen, and that they receive the same protections as their in-office counterparts—because they are, after all, employees.

This government has also been working to get people into jobs through Working for Workers packages to ensure red tape and unfair practices don't stand in the way of newcomers who aspire to contribute to our communities. It is unfair that people come with a dream and have those dreams dashed because they encounter challenges around their experiences and their job that they bring to Canada. In our last package, we made changes that, once proclaimed, will prohibit all provincially regulated employers from including a requirement for Canadian experience in job postings or application forms. This was a natural extension of our 2021 prohibition on Canadian experience as a requirement for registration in the more than 30 regulated professions and compulsory trades.

We are helping put newcomers on a path to success by enabling them to start careers in Ontario that match their skill sets, including skills that we need in sectors like

health care and the skilled trades. This is why we have also been addressing barriers internationally trained individuals may face when having their qualifications assessed, such as changes to improve transparency and accountability for the assessment of qualifications by the regulated professions and third parties.

Speaker, as you can see, this package extends the groundbreaking supports and improvements already helping millions of workers across the province by protecting the health and dignity of workers and front-line heroes, ensuring fairness for employees and job seekers, supporting women at work, removing barriers to employment and making it easier for more Ontarians to start a career in the trades. We are using every tool in our tool box to work harder for workers each and every day, to not only to protect workers but to also keep and attract more workers in the province to ensure our economy remains strong. As I said, the themes aren't new. We are building on the past bills we have introduced under the leadership of the Premier, and we will always keep working to support and protect workers.

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I call on all members of this House to join me in supporting Bill 190, the Working for Workers Five Act, 2024. Thank you, Speaker, for the opportunity.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): It is now time for questions.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: My question is actually to the minister. Certainly, he will recall during COVID when the government brought in the infectious disease emergency leave, and that gave 10 days of leave. Two days of those were to be paid, and it also eliminated sick notes. So while we are pleased to see the long-overdue elimination of sick notes in the bill, we do not see any change to the 10 days of personal emergency leave, we don't see any requirement for paid sick days. Even in the COVID bill, it had two paid sick days. We've been advocating for 10 paid sick days, which is what they have at the federal level.

Can the minister let us know why they took the elimination of sick notes but did not put in a requirement for paid sick days?

Hon. David Piccini: Thank you to the member for that question. The government has taken a number of big steps here, again, putting patients over paperwork. I would also highlight to that member important work we've done—it's posted for consultation now, and I hope she provides feedback—on leave provided for those battling critical illnesses and leave for those caring for those battling critical illness. Again, work that this government, under the leadership of Premier Ford, has done.

I've got to say, these are breaking down barriers, providing people with the stability to care for their loved ones. But also, this bill speaks to so many things we're doing to break down barriers for people to get into the workforce.

I appreciate what that member is calling for, but we've included strong measures in this bill, and I'm very proud of it.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Questions?

Ms. Laura Smith: Through you, Speaker: The minister talked about the importance of skilled trades and it literally being the backbone of the community. I know that's the case in my riding of Thornhill.

He also talked very passionately about Fred the electrician and also the silver wave that's upon us. Can he talk a little bit about how we're leading the youth into the skilled trades?

Hon. David Piccini: I'm happy to. It is affectionately called the silver tsunami, but it is serious. When we see one in three journeypersons over the age of 55, that concerns me. That concerns me for those who want a home, for everyone here who wants the ability to own a home. Too often in this place we're trying to say that that's not actually what people want, but we want the ability and the dream of home ownership to be attainable for everybody in Ontario, and that's going to require men and women in the trades.

Again, technical trades in high school, the new FAST program to get on-the-job experience, the job-matching portal for people like Fred who don't have the time, have a massive HR department to bring people on—a simple portal making it easier to match apprentices with employers to get the hours towards their C of Q are just some of the many measures we're taking.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Questions?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: My question this morning also to the minister: You brought up the notion of ghost jobs, and I appreciate that. Essentially, ghost jobs are jobs that people work for that never actually appear. I want to talk about foreign temporary workers, migrant workers, who also are in ghost jobs with the promise of a working permit that also never appears. Really, this is a form of labour trafficking. There's no other way of going about saying that. Temporary foreign agencies and contractors use this to exploit workers—absolutely no doubt that that happens. We have workers who are given the promise that they would be allowed to stay in Canada to continue to work, but that never happens.

You mentioned that your counterpart, Minister Miller, at the federal level—I'd like to hear what you will be bringing up as part of this exploitation of workers in the province.

Hon. David Piccini: I wish I had more time because there's some good stuff in that question.

First off, Speaker, this government introduced a regulation to crack down on temporary help agencies to require a licensing regime again. You'll recall this did exist in Ontario decades ago—bringing back a licensing regime, imposing some of the toughest fines on bad actors, those who withhold passports.

I would also point her to the federal government who are now shortening the ability for work permits, I believe, from 12 to six months. We're asking for a carve-out in health care, in the health space, and then we're also including measures here through FARPACTA legislation to fast-track people into employment where there's credentials and hiccups and issues there, because you have to streamline that process to have a future of permanency here.

There's so much. I wish I could include it all in—but a good question there, and we are working with the feds to crack down on bad actors.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Essex.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I welcomed the announcement with a great deal of excitement when I read that a person or a student would be able to spend 80% of their time in training and 20% in academics. I thought that was a great advancement, very important for the province of Ontario and very exciting for students who are interested in entering the trades.

But not everybody greeted this news with excitement. For example, there was this person named Cheri DiNovo—I didn't know who she was. She said, "Who needs to learn history, science and reading when you can stay uneducated"—that's what she said. She said, "You can stay uneducated by spending 80% of your time training for the trades." Now, that shocked me. I don't think somebody should be saying that you stay uneducated when you spend 80% of your time training for a trade. That took me totally by surprise.

I didn't know who this person was. I learned later on. I just want to ask the minister, is he aware of who this person is and why she hates the trades so much?

Hon. David Piccini: I, too, was very disheartened and heartbroken to read those derogatory and inflammatory remarks from that former member of this Legislature, but I think it's reflective of a bygone era of an old attitude that we're relegating to the dustbin of history and actually empowering youth to enter the trades, recognizing and treating the trades equally to those advanced placement credits, AP courses that count towards a university degree that I said. I'm proud to treat it as a profession, Speaker. We're going to continue doing that. We're not going to get distracted by that noise.

Under the leadership of this Premier and that member who has been a fantastic advocate for Windsor, we're going to keep getting people into the trades because when you've got a job in the trades, you've got a career for life.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions? I recognize the member for Niagara Falls.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to rise.

The government continues to put forward Working for Workers bills. However, my bill to end deeming in the province of Ontario—we have put forward legislation and multiple amendments in committee to have this practice stopped, and the government has consistently voted against it, voted it down over and over again. And this minister knows that deeming by the WSIB forces workers into poverty—into ghost jobs, by the way.

Why is the government supporting such a cruel policy that harms injured workers, their families and our communities?

Hon. David Piccini: Speaker, there's so much in this labour bill. I was hoping to get a question on one of those measures, but I appreciate that that member wants to bring

up something he's been advocating for, and I appreciate that.

I will say at a very high level—

Interjection.

Hon. David Piccini: Will you let me answer? I'm just going to answer the question because I appreciate what he asked.

We recognize that a lot more needs to be done with the WSIB. We've embarked on an ambitious reform. I think, at its core, what I will say is a culture where we have to get people better and where we want to support those getting back to work, but also providing dignity for those who will be unable to do so. And that's why we're expanding supports for injured workers through WSIB, and we look forward to sitting down with that member offline to talk about concerns he's brought forward.

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The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): It is now time for further debate.

MPP Jamie West: I'm going to be brief because I know we'll be going to members' statements soon.

I want to talk about one of the themes, and I'll expand on more of this when we get into the debate later on. But one of the themes of this bill is about changing things to electronic documents, and I have concerns with this. I understand the ease of use and how effective it is. I understand in some workplaces how helpful that will be. But the concern I have with electronic documents is that a lot of workplaces don't have access. And I know people will say everyone has a phone or everyone has a computer, but the reality is, not everyone has a phone and not everyone has a computer. A lot of workplaces don't have connectivity. I come from mining and the underground, and a lot of mining organizations don't have connectivity underground.

There's a requirement to have paper documents because it's the easiest way to communicate with people, especially older workers. I don't want to be ageist, because I'm old, but there are older people. We've all been in a situation helping our parents hook up the VCR in the old days or helping our parents get on the Internet. There are just some people who are not comfortable with electronic documents, and when it comes to health and safety, if we're not sharing information as easily as we can, there's an expression when it comes to health and safety that you learn because something tragic happened to you or someone told you about something happening to you.

So if you're making it difficult for workers to have access to information—for example, of who their joint health and safety committee is and who the members are and where they are in the workplace—a lot of workplaces are small and everybody would know, but at my workplace, when I was a worker safety rep, I represented the filter plant and the furnaces, I represented the converters and casting and cooling and crushing and I represented the copper end. It was the size of about two or maybe two and a half football fields: more than 400 workers, plus contractors, plus management. There were a lot of people there who might not know who I was or where to find my

office, let alone the other people on my committee from management and the workers' side. And we had a really good committee; we worked really well together to solve these issues, but not every workplace is like that. And so, Speaker, when I talk about information being posted online, it may make sense to a lot of people, but for some people, that's going to be a detriment.

A few weeks ago, we just talked about intimate partner violence, and we know it's a concern. The Conservatives, as well—I know, often, as critics, we end up pointing the finger and yelling, but the Conservatives as well embraced the idea of intimate partner violence and declaring an epidemic. If you don't have a harassment policy posted in the workplace, some people may not see that. And although it's common sense to us in this room that you shouldn't behave in that manner, there are some people who don't realize that or what to do or how to make a complaint.

All that information is on your harassment document, your policy, and the policy points to the procedures which should be easily accessible to people so they can find out how it's followed up on. What do you do when there's harassment in the workplace? Who do you contact? How do you move it forward? How do you have it addressed? And I'm not talking about how you have it addressed in the most extreme examples, it's how you have it addressed in terms of correcting behaviour, to explain to people that certain things are unwanted? Because I know sometimes people are doing things that are considered harassment or offensive and not realizing that their language is outdated and inadequate. These are things that really concern me in this bill.

The minister is here and, often, when we debate, we're not able to speak at the same time, and so I want to say, there's some really great parts to this bill, like the occupational disease section for wildland firefighters. I was just at FONOM yesterday speaking with the wildland firefighters. They knew, Minister. Already when I came up to them, they were very excited about it; they knew that the bill was coming forward. And I know that this is something we've all, as—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I apologize to the member for Sudbury, but it is now time for members' statements.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

WEARING OF RIBBONS

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Markham–Unionville.

Mr. Billy Pang: Speaker, if you seek it, you will find unanimous consent to allow members to wear purple ribbons in recognition of May 10 being Lupus Awareness Day.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): The member for Markham–Unionville is seeking unanimous consent to allow MPPs to wear ribbons in recognition of May 10 being Lupus Awareness Day. Agreed? Agreed.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: During private members' public business this evening, I will be moving my motion regarding artificial intelligence use in government.

Speaker, we are a government that is building a better Ontario, which includes building a better, more productive, positive customer service transformation for Ontarians.

Today, there is no legislation governing the safe and responsible use of AI in any provincial or territorial jurisdiction in Canada, nor within the federal government itself.

As a government, we need to ensure a secure digital future. To do this, we need to fine-tune our own data and also build our foundational model. With this, we can harness the power of AI within government, while building the necessary guardrails to protect our data.

I would like to recognize and thank the Minister of Public and Business Service Delivery for all the work performed to date, from consultations to the formation of an AI working group, to the publication of Ontario's trustworthy AI framework.

The purpose of this motion is to move the government forward with the next critical steps to adopt methods to assess potential risks, to judge the successful adoption and ethical use of AI, all the while developing measures to counter emerging cyber security threats.

I look forward to this evening's public business debate.

NIAGARA FOLK ARTS FESTIVAL

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I rise to celebrate the Niagara Folk Arts Festival, Canada's longest continuous heritage festival, now marking its 56th year. My community is so proud of the Niagara Folk Arts Festival. Each year, I look forward to the open houses, to the cultural attire, to the conversations.

Last year, I met a family who shared their journey as refugees, reminding me of my own history we share. There is nothing more Canadian than that.

Speaker, my grandmother was a quilter. Each year, she would begin a new quilt—it didn't matter the size or the colour of the cloth, because when woven together, when brought together, it made one complete, harmonious whole. I treasure these quilts. They remind me of the folk arts festival. It's a vivid reminder of the uniqueness, the inclusivity of every culture in Niagara.

No matter the debate or the division in this chamber, we should be aspiring to reflect the inclusive spirit that thrives in our own communities. It is our duty to stand for inclusion, for diversity and for making sure there are spaces for both.

I encourage all members to come to Niagara and celebrate the many vibrant communities with us. We welcome you to visit one of the many open houses that will be—for the next 15 days. Come travel the world with the Niagara Folk Arts Festival.

THALASSEMIA

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: Today is the 30th anniversary of the creation of International Thalassemia Day on May 8, 1994. Three years ago, I was proud to co-sponsor a private member's bill with my friend from Barrie–Innisfil to proclaim May 8 as Thalassemia Awareness Day each year here in Ontario, on behalf of people like Mary Alfano, a mother of twins living with thalassemia in my community of Mississauga–Lakeshore. This is a day to help raise awareness of one of the most common blood disorders in the world, the genes for which are carried by up to 2% of the world's population.

Much like sickle-cell anemia, patients with thalassemia can't produce normal red blood cells, so they need regular blood transfusions to supply enough oxygen to the heart, brain, lungs and other organs. This is sometimes called Mediterranean anemia because it most often affects people from the Middle East, North Africa, Greece and Italy—especially the regions of Sardinia, Sicily and Calabria.

1020

Just like patients with sickle-cell disease, thalassemia patients have had to deal with stigma and discrimination. I want to thank the Thalassemia Foundation of Canada for everything they do to advocate for thalassemia patients and to support scientific research into new treatments. I ask all members here to join us to raise awareness for thalassemia and to support the foundation's work to ensure that all patients can live a long and healthy life.

PAULINE SHIRT

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I rise to commemorate a friend of mine, a community leader and wise spirit, Pauline Rose Shirt (Nimikiiquay), who died this week. Pauline was beloved in our Toronto–Danforth community. I cannot do full justice to her story or her impact in this statement, but I want to note a few things.

Pauline was a Plains Cree Elder from Saddle Lake, Alberta, Red Tailed Hawk Clan, and member of the Three Fires society and Buffalo Dance society.

In 1974, Pauline and her then husband, Vern Harper, led the Native People's Caravan. The caravan travelled from Vancouver to Ottawa to deliver a manifesto to the government on the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Pauline was the Elder at George Brown College in Toronto, and in 2023, she was appointed to the Order of Ontario. Pauline served on the Elders Council of the Urban Indigenous Education Centre, starting in 2008.

In our community, she was best known for being the founder of Kapapamahchakwew, Wandering Spirit School. In 1976, after unsuccessfully trying to find a public school that was culturally appropriate for her son's education, Pauline started the Wandering Spirit Survival School. In 1983, it was officially recognized as a cultural survival/native way school. In 2019, there was a remaining ceremony to return it to its origins: Wandering Spirit School.

She was a warm presence at powwows and First Nations celebrations throughout our community.

I want to convey my condolences to her remaining family and thank her now for all she did to build our community.

DAN MACKAY

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: My statement today is about Honorary Colonel Dan MacKay. Dan, of course, is a decorated reservist, having served 44 years in uniform and having commanded the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa twice. He served as the deputy director of history and heritage at the national defence department and he served as the aide de camp to our Lieutenant Governor for over 30 years. He is a Knight of Justice of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John Ambulance and he is one of the most humble men that I have ever met.

He is dedicated and he is committed to all things Ottawa, but he's also—and this will surprise you when I say it—an unlikely feminist. Dan has been a girl dad. He has been the biggest defender and champion of his wife, Fran, who is now, in her own right, the Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel of the Governor General's Foot Guards.

He is a big champion of the Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel of the Cameron Highlanders, Barbara Farber, and he is a steadfast reminder to all of us of how important our history is by recognizing Lillian Freiman, the “poppy lady,” who first brought the poppy to Canada, who founded the Royal Canadian Legion, and whose home is now the army officers' mess in the city of Ottawa.

Dan has been a champion and a reminder that women are important in Canada, and as much as he has accolades in the military and throughout the city of Ottawa, he has always quietly stood behind every woman he has supported.

HOMELESSNESS

Miss Monique Taylor: A recent Hamilton Spectator article broke down the homelessness death data published by research group Hamilton Homeless Morality, data that tells a daunting story driven by lived experiences of those living rough in our streets.

Ninety-one deaths in two and a half years is horrific. Half of those deaths were caused by drug overdoses and half suffered from mental illness. If those numbers are not disturbing enough, the story continues: 90% of homeless people who died were men and nearly 50% of these deaths, they had lived on the streets for more than a year. Homelessness is killing Hamiltonians. In fact, the average age of death among homeless Hamiltonians is 46, what some would call mid-life. The numbers do not lie.

This story could have a different ending; an outcome that meets at the intersection of love, hope and support; a story that our communities want to tell and share. Housing impacts people's lives. It can lengthen their lives and it can save their lives. Many community members, partners and

organizations are doing just that. They are tirelessly doing the heavy lifting to provide shelter, stability and health care. Together, we must meet people where they are at. Everyone deserves a place to call home.

YOM HA-SHOAH

Mrs. Robin Martin: Earlier this week, Jews in Ontario and throughout the world observed Yom ha-Shoah, the day of commemoration for the six million Jews who were murdered by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during the Holocaust.

Known in English as Holocaust Remembrance Day, Yom ha-Shoah also commemorates the members of the Jewish resistance who fought against the Nazis during the Holocaust. Yom ha-Shoah reminds us that the Holocaust is both a lesson from the past and a warning for the future. It shows us the perils of indifference and the horrific consequences when hatred is allowed to flourish unchecked.

On October 7, to quote Rex Murphy, “a cowardly, medieval murder cult (campus heroes), Hamas took the lives of over 1,200 Jews” and others in Israel. Since then, we're facing an anti-Semitic increase in events beyond acceptable levels here even in Canada, because really the only acceptable level is zero.

Anti-Semitic incidents take many forms—hate speech, vandalism and intimidation—but they are all manifestations of a broader attack on the fundamental idea that all Ontarians should be treated equally with respect and feel safe to live their lives freely in Ontario.

The mass murder of the Holocaust lasted from 1941 to 1945, but it is important to remember that it started long before then, almost a decade before, in 1932. The best way to stop anti-Semitism is to ensure it never starts. As human beings, we all share a duty to all other human beings to treat them with dignity and respect, because they are human beings. We cannot forget the terrible tragedy of the Holocaust and the lessons learned. We must always stand up against anti-Semitism and all forms of hate. Never again is now.

EDUCATION ISSUES

Mr. Vincent Ke: Last week, I heard from many people in my riding of Don Valley North, including parents and teachers. They applauded the government for its tough and necessary actions of restricting cellphone usage and banning vaping, along with all tobacco, nicotine and cannabis products in schools. Now, they feel much more confident in our education system.

Speaker, excessive cellphone usage and vaping are two issues that have long plagued students' physical and mental health and productivity levels. A third of the world's population is at risk of smart phone addiction, which has negative impacts on a student's short-term and long-term information retention and overall academic performance. As well, in Canada, one in four older high school students reported vaping in the past month, even though it is clearly illegal for those under age 18.

From zero tolerance and mandatory learning and prevention campaigns to security cameras and vaping detectors, this government is taking concrete action to protect our province's students so that they may have the greatest chance to succeed, for the sake of their future and ours.

VISION HEALTH MONTH

Mr. Deepak Anand: Vision is vital, offering direction, purpose and motivation, driving action toward fulfillment and growth. In contrast, recent data shows a staggering 2.1 million Canadians are grappling with blindness or partial sight, while over 5.6 million contest with vision-threatening conditions.

1030

In Ontario, only 65% of children receive an eye examination before their seventh birthday, and only 2% adhere to the recommendation for age-appropriate eye assessments, including many residents from Mississauga–Malton. This could lead to undetected vision problems, hindering children's academic performance, social interactions and overall quality of life.

Thanks to former senator Dr. Asha Seth, due to her efforts, May is national Vision Health Month and aims to increase the awareness of the importance of eye health and methods to prevent vision impairment.

My sincere gratitude to the CNIB for their continued work on supporting the education and awareness on vision-related needs in Canada. They're here today, so I urge all MPPs to join them in room 228 between 12 p.m. and 2 p.m. to delve deeper and explore actionable solutions to support our Ontarians.

Speaker, together let's strive towards a prosperous Ontario. This is a non-partisan issue. We have the same goal: to serve the people of Ontario, where everyone receives the necessary support and service to flourish.

CADETS

Mr. Will Bouma: Colleagues, as many of you are aware, my riding of Brantford–Brant is home to a vibrant, motivated and active cadet movement.

Today, we welcome the top cadets, as chosen by their commanding officers, for their dedication, for their excellence and for their willingness to make our community the best that it can be. The cadets of Brantford–Brant not only improve themselves but also improve the communities that we serve together.

I know that the son of my executive assistant joined the cadet program as a shy boy and emerged as a confident and refined young man. Sorry to embarrass you, Daniel.

For the Navy League Cadet Corps Admiral Landymore, we have Ordinary Cadet Matthew Kelly and Able Cadet Nayla Anderson, joined by Lieutenant Richard Carpenter, Midshipman John Sinden and Lieutenant Kathryn Lapointe.

For the Royal Canadian Sea Cadet Corps Admiral Nelles, we have Joshua Ocampo and Chief Petty Officer

Second Class Julia Kocis-Ristanovic, joined by Lieutenant Rendle Robb.

For the 2659 Royal Canadian Army Cadets, we have Chief Warrant Officer Kyrianna Jorgensen and Master Warrant Officer Christian Kuan, joined by Captain Jenne.

For the Royal Canadian Air Cadets 104 Starfighter Squadron, we have Flight Corporal Arthava Saraswat and Sergeant Shayne Chapin, joined by Officer Cadet Craig Shaw.

Cadets, officers, the people of Ontario salute you for your hard work and contribution to Brantford–Brant. Thank you very much.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Today, I'd like to welcome the marine council of Ontario: Frank Montecalvo, Jean Aubry from the St. Lawrence Seaway, Mike Riehl, Wes Newton, Larissa Fenn. Thank you, and welcome to your House.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I'd like to welcome a constituent from my riding, Niko Pupella, with Community Living, along with his fiancée, Amber. Welcome to Queen's Park.

MPP Jill Andrew: We're incredibly lucky to have the CNIB in our St. Paul's community, and they're here today. I want to welcome representatives from CNIB here: Dr. Asha Seth, Arun Seth, Suzanne Decary-van den Broek, Alice Clark and Larissa Proctor. Welcome to Queen's Park. Thank you for recognizing Vision Health Month.

We invite everyone to join at 12 p.m. for the CNIB's reception, where they're advocating for every kid in Ontario to have access to full, comprehensive eye tests before school.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Again, I'll remind members we don't make political commentary during introduction of visitors.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: It's a real honour today to welcome members from Community Living Ontario and Community Living Toronto for your advocacy day, and a special shout-out to my friend and constituent Judy Noonan, from Guelph.

Hon. Michael Parsa: Good morning, colleagues.

Speaker, I want to welcome Community Living Ontario CEO Chris Beesley, Jo-Anne Demick and Lisa Tabachnick to Queen's Park; also, from Community Living Toronto, CEO Brad Saunders, Cooper Saunders and Jennie Chanda and everyone else who is here from the variety of Community Livings across the province.

Welcome to Queen's Park. I look forward to seeing you at your reception.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I'd like to welcome, from Extend-A-Family Waterloo Region, Allan Mills, executive director; Ryan Voisin, board director; Rob Jemmett; and Mary Tindale. They bid on lunch here at Queen's Park for Hockey Helps the Homeless, and they will be dining later on today.

Also, not here yet is Ann Bilodeau, chief executive officer at KW Habilitation.

Welcome to your House.

Mr. John Fraser: This month is vision month, and I'd like to welcome members of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. They're here to talk to us today about things like vision screening for kids. They have a reception at noon.

Welcome to Queen's Park.

Ms. Patrice Barnes: Today, I'd like to welcome to the House the 2024 crop of summer interns to the Legislature. Thank you for being here. Have a great summer session.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'd like to welcome guests from Fort Erie Community Living: Nikki Boon, Ryan Blanchard, Austin Kientz, Michael Matthews, Penny Adams and Aaron Mcphee.

Welcome to Queen's Park. I'm looking forward to our meeting at 12 o'clock.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I'd like to welcome to the House my friends Jennie Chanda and Trish Morris from my riding of Haldimand–Norfolk, representing Community Living Access.

Mr. Deepak Anand: It's always a pleasure to welcome the residents of Mississauga–Malton: Raju Devis, Sheeba Raju, Annlynn Maria Raju, Aarktwain Raju Devis—the proud parents of page captain Aaldrian Raju Devis.

Welcome to Queen's Park.

Miss Monique Taylor: I would like to thank and welcome some folks from Community Living who I had the pleasure to meet with this morning—Brad Saunders, CEO of Community Living Ontario, and Valérie Picher, board chair for Community Living Ontario—and welcome them to our reception this evening in rooms 228 and 230.

Also, I'd like to welcome—and I look forward to meeting with them this afternoon—Thomas Simpson, a vice-president of the CNIB, and Larissa Proctor, director of community relations and engagement with the CNIB.

Welcome to Queen's Park.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I'd like to also welcome Community Living and thank them for all the great work they do in Ontario to make it a better place to be—and especially jazzy Jonathan Bradshaw, a beautiful Beaches–East York resident and no stranger to this House.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'd like to welcome Karen Bolger and other representatives of Community Living Essex to the House. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I'd like to welcome Vicky Pearson, who is here from Community Living London, along with a group of amazing advocates from New Vision Advocates. Welcome to Queen's Park. I'm looking forward to our meeting this afternoon.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: I'd like to welcome William Hulme from my riding of Newmarket–Aurora, who's here today with Community Living Ontario for their advocacy day. Welcome, William.

Hon. Victor Fedeli: I'd like to welcome my two summer interns, Khalil Jamal and Jaydan Khosid, to the Legislature.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I'd like to welcome Lorri Detta from the wonderful organization Rygiel Supports for Community Living in my riding of Hamilton West–Ancaster–Dundas. Welcome to your House.

1040

Hon. Greg Rickford: All I want to say is a warm welcome to Woods Parent from Fort Frances High School, a page here; Matthew Kelly, a cadet from Cayuga Nation; and of course, Brynn Rawn, who works as an intern in my office and is from Kenora. Welcome to this magnificent place.

Hon. Michael A. Tibollo: I'd like to welcome my two new interns for the summer, Nimrit and Aflin, who are here for question period this morning. Welcome to the people's House.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Just building on my colleague from Essex, inviting Karen Bolger to the House, I also have Marilyn Godard, Liz Raffoul, Tim Davidson, James Washington, John Klassen and Paul Brennan from Community Living, Windsor and Essex. Thank you for being here. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Hon. Vijay Thanigasalam: It's my pleasure to introduce in the Legislature today representatives of the Ontario Marine Council: Guillaum, John, Dave, Kevin and Wes. Also, introducing the chair of the Ontario Marine Council: Steve Salmons is in the gallery.

I invite all the members to join them at their annual reception this evening from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. in the legislative dining room.

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: Speaker, I wanted to introduce a staff member of mine. Many of you will know him and probably have been on his podcast: Vincenzo Calla, who is a University of Ottawa student, and he's joining me up here today from Nepean.

Hon. David Piccini: I want to welcome a constituent of mine who is here, Robert Smith, to the Legislature today. I'm looking forward to seeing you after question period. And also, a shout-out to Connor, Hayden and Marshall, who are here today as well. Welcome.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I also want to extend my personal and warm welcome to Community Living Toronto—I look forward to your reception this evening.

And a very special welcome to Winston Lee, who is my new intern. I hope you've made it into the chamber. I want to say thank you for all you're doing so far.

Mr. Billy Pang: May 10 being Lupus Awareness Day in Ontario, today, I'm thrilled to welcome the amazing delegation from Lupus Ontario. They are Diana Bozzo, Melissa Bozzo, Ashley Bozzo, Tanya Mahadeo Conacher, Eric Castro, June Alikhan, Linda Keill and 12 others.

Mr. Deepak Anand: I would like to welcome former senator the Honourable Dr. Asha Seth, Dr. Arun Seth, Suzanne Decary and Larissa Proctor from the CNIB. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: At this time, I'd like to welcome all of the members from Niagara's Community Living. I'm looking forward to your reception this evening.

QUESTION PERIOD

HEALTH CARE

Ms. Marit Stiles: This question is for the Premier. Today, the Ontario Medical Association confirmed what we all suspected, that this government has no plans to address the primary care shortage. In fact, if they keep it up, they're on track to make the crisis in health care worse.

Family doctors are concerned that this government—and I want to quote them here—will “further erode the ability of family doctors in Ontario to build viable practices, and continue to put access to family medicine out of reach for a growing number of Ontarians.”

Further, we know that the number of physicians that are retiring far exceeds the number of graduates into family practice.

So the people of Ontario want to know, does the Premier agree that a strong recruitment and retention plan is necessary to care for the more than 2.3 million Ontarians who do not have a family doctor?

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

Hon. Sylvia Jones: I'm going to use this opportunity to do a bit of compare and contrast, shall we? So I look at what the NDP government did under Bob Rae. They actually cut the number of nurses and residency positions. Under the Liberal government, they cut 50 residency positions available for family physicians, for physicians looking to match a residency. What does that mean? That means today, we have over 300 less physicians practising in the province of Ontario.

Now, let's compare that to what we have done since 2018. Since 2018, under the leadership of Premier Ford, we have seen a historic high of 12,500 physicians licensed to practise in the province of Ontario—a historic high. We are ensuring through last month's matching of residency positions—those are young people, those are medical students who are matching with their residency specialty of choice—a 100% match in the province of Ontario. And, of course, we've actually increased—

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: Here's the reality: 2.3 million Ontarians without a family physician in the province of Ontario under this government's watch.

While this government is ignoring the crisis in primary care, we are seeing private, for-profit clinics popping up all over this province. They're promising 24/7 access to primary care. But the catch is patients have to pay hundreds, even thousands, of dollars. This is all about making money off of very sick people, Speaker. It is shameful. There is something very seriously wrong with that.

The government is doing nothing to stop these so-called executive health clinics from gouging patients. So my question to the Premier is, is this government eroding the public health care system to help line the pockets of private clinic operators?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

Minister of Health.

Hon. Sylvia Jones: We have more to share in terms of expanding our publicly funded health care system in the province of Ontario. I'm not sure if the member opposite remembers that in February we announced an expansion of 78 primary care multidisciplinary teams.

Since February, we have already seen in Minto-Mapleton, in Innisfil, in Kingston that these primary care multidisciplinary teams have recruited and started taking on new patients. Those are patients who are being attached to primary care practitioners in the province of Ontario—78 that we announced in February. Of course, under the leadership of the Minister of Finance, we have made an additional investment of over \$500 million in our most recent budget.

We're getting the job done.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, the family doctor shortage has had ripple effects across this entire province and the whole health care system. With fewer family doctors, patients are spending longer in waiting rooms, in emergency rooms and in walk-in clinics. Many of them are forgoing preventive care screening altogether.

Physicians have been warning successive Liberal and Conservative governments for years about the consequences of not investing in primary care. So, Speaker, back to the Premier of this province, why is this government ignoring the solutions that are being proposed by family doctors?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

Minister of Health.

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Speaker, we are taking a system-wide approach to ensure that we have capacity. We have 50 hospital capital builds that are in the pipeline right now today: new hospitals, expanded hospitals, renovated hospitals. We have two new medical schools that are starting in the province of Ontario, in Scarborough and in Brampton.

The Northern Ontario School of Medicine today has 51% of their students wanting a match for a primary care practitioner position. The scope-of-practice changes that we are making to ensure that people see the right clinician when they are looking for assistance—we know that those changes, specifically with pharmacies, have led to a decrease in people going to emergency departments, because they have access at their local community pharmacy.

We will continue to do that work and make sure that Ontario continues to lead the Canadian federation in the number of physicians who are matched with patients—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Stop the clock, please.

1050

Once again, I need to remind the House that it has long been the established practice of this House that members should not use props, signage or accessories that are intended to express a political message or are likely to cause disorder. This also extends to members' attire where logos, symbols, slogans and other political messaging are not permitted unless the House has granted unanimous consent. This Legislature is a forum for debate, and the expectation in the chamber is that political statements should be made during debate rather than through the use of props or symbols.

I'm going ask the member for Toronto–St. Paul's to come to order.

I'm going to warn the member for Toronto–St. Paul's.

I must name the member for Toronto–St. Paul's. Jill Andrew, you must leave the chamber for the duration of the day.

MPP Andrew was escorted from the chamber.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Start the clock. We can resume question period.

Once again, I recognize the leader of the opposition.

REGION OF PEEL

Ms. Marit Stiles: Back to the Premier: Global News has just reported on the chaos and confusion that surrounded the Premier's reckless decision to restructure and dissolve Peel region and then his—of course, we'll all remember this—partial reversal, another giant flip-flop just months later. Billions of dollars in taxpayer costs were at stake, and the Premier either didn't care or had no clue.

It seems like neither the transition board nor anyone in the ministry had any idea where the Premier was going with his plans for Peel. So when it comes to the restructuring of Peel, does this government have any idea what they're doing?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, absolutely, Mr. Speaker.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, I don't expect that minister to have to continue to answer for this, but the chaos and the confusion doesn't end. The people of Peel have real problems that need to be addressed by this government. Brampton Civic, one of the busiest emergency rooms in the country, continues to operate over capacity because Peel Memorial is not funded to operate 24/7. The Premier could implement an NDP solution right now to hire more staff for that hospital, but he refuses to do so.

Is the government solving problems for the people of Peel, or just insiders and land-hungry developers?

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

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Let's talk about Brampton, Mr. Speaker, and what this Premier and this government have done for that city. In fact, it's that same

leader who lost three of her own MPPs because of the neglect that they have shown to cities like Brampton.

Let's talk about the 413. Your position on that is to oppose it while the entire city and region needs it.

When it comes down to investing in new hospitals for Brampton, what did you do? You voted against that.

When it comes down to opening the new medical school, the first one in the GTA in over 100 years, what did the NDP do? They opposed that, Mr. Speaker.

We will continue to invest in Brampton, and I hope the NDP get out of their downtown bubble, come to the streets of Brampton, Mississauga and Peel region, and listen to the people and what they are saying. They want us to build roads, highways and transit, and that is exactly what we will do.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

And the final supplementary?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, this government can keep making all those hollow promises and hollow claims, but the people of Peel, I can tell you, see right through it. They're spending more time in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the 401 than they're spending time with their kids at home. The Premier could implement an NDP solution right now: Remove the Highway 407 tolls for truckers—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats. The government side, please come to order so I can hear the member who has got the floor and is asking the question.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

The Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity.

Hon. Charmaine A. Williams: Yes, let's talk about Peel. Peel doesn't want the NDP to represent them, because Peel voted in all PC members to represent the Peel region. Why? Because the Liberals, supported by the NDP, for decades neglected the region of Peel: one hospital; didn't rebuild the second hospital. But what is happening? We are building the second hospital in the region of Peel. We are making a highway to get people home faster so that they could spend time with their families. That is happening under the leadership of Premier Ford and this government.

So, yes, we will continue to represent the people of Peel, because we actually listen to the people of Peel, and we will continue to get the job done for the people of Peel.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Stop the clock. I made a mistake, and I apologize to the Leader of the Opposition.

Start the clock. The next question.

FOREST FIREFIGHTING

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: My question is to the Minister of Natural Resources. There have been over 14 wildfires recorded in Ontario already in 2024. This is in comparison to two fires recorded in the same period last year.

According to wildfire fighters, we are still short 200 forest firefighters. Minister, what is your plan to fill the gap?

Hon. Graydon Smith: If the member opposite wants to talk about statistics, the number of hectares is way down over a 10-year average already this year.

But, Mr. Speaker, we've been clear. I've been very clear in this House about the respect and support we have for our wildland fire rangers in Ontario. We have our crews ready to go. We have our aircraft ready to go. We have the people on the ground, doing the logistics, ready to go. In fact, we're ready to help not only Ontarians, but other jurisdictions all throughout this great country of ours, should they be suffering during their forest fire seasons.

We have always made it a priority to look after the well-being of communities, infrastructure, individuals all throughout Ontario. That's what our wildland firefighters do. We've got the crews on the ground, in the air and ready to go when the time calls for it.

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

Mr. Guy Bourgoïn: Well, Minister, I think your cuts in the budget will reflect my next question. Minister, the ministry is not only short-staffed, they are also missing three water bombers out of six to properly cover the fires. Let's not mention the other planes that are not ready.

In the words of Noah Freedman, provincial fire crew leader, "If you don't have enough, you have to decide what burns and what doesn't."

Minister, how will you decide which community the water bombers will go to first?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

Hon. Graydon Smith: You know what? We're ready to go. All our equipment is ready to go. All our people are ready to go. I just visited the base in Thunder Bay 10 days ago. I went in and talked with all those fire rangers, the people who are doing the logistics, the pilots. They're ready to go, absolutely ready to go, so to insinuate otherwise is doing a disservice to Ontarians, quite frankly.

We've got our attack bases all throughout the north, again, ready to go—ready to go to make sure that Ontarians stay safe. That's the mission of this government. That's always been the mission of this government.

Previous governments did not make the investments that we make today to make sure that we're supporting our firefighters, to make sure that we're doing the things that want to bring people into forest firefighting in Ontario. But the conclusion of all of this is that this government is the only government that is making sure that northern Ontario stays safe, grows and has opportunities.

TAXATION

Mr. Lorne Coe: My question is for the Minister of Energy. The Liberal carbon tax continues to not only increase our energy and gas bills, but also drive up the cost of food, housing and so much more. That's why, Speaker,

it should be a given that all members in this Legislature oppose this tax. Unfortunately, that's not the case.

1100

Rather than join our government in calling for the federal Liberals to scrap this disastrous tax, the NDP and independent Liberals are choosing to play politics and ignore their constituents.

Our government stands with the families and people of Ontario, which is why we will not stop until the federal government finally listens and eliminates the carbon tax.

Could the minister please explain what steps our government is taking to support our clean energy future without resorting to the carbon tax?

Hon. Todd Smith: Speaker, the member opposite knows exactly what we're doing because he's a huge champion of the investments that we're making in our nuclear sector, coming from the Durham region, Canada's clean energy capital—the refurbishments that are going on at places like Darlington and soon will be going on at the Pickering Nuclear Generating Station; also the new development of small modular reactors.

Mr. Speaker, we know we don't need a punitive carbon tax in Canada or in Ontario. It's simply not working. But the queen of the carbon tax, Bonnie Crombie, and the king of the carbon tax, Justin Trudeau, are continuing to make people pay more. They're making them pay more on their home heating bills. They're making them pay more on their gasoline fuel-ups. They're making them pay more on their groceries.

My parliamentary assistant and I were even saying this morning that the Queen's Park media gallery spring fling next week has even doubled in price, up to \$80 next week, Mr. Speaker. Now, I don't know if we can blame Bonnie Crombie and Justin Trudeau for that, but it's 80 bucks this year.

So we can do this without increasing the carbon tax—

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Member for Beaches–East York, come to order.

Supplementary question?

Mr. Lorne Coe: Back to the Minister of Energy: We hear it time and time again: The Liberal carbon tax only stands to punish Ontarians.

As people in our province continue to struggle with high interest rates and a rising cost of living, all governments should be putting forward measures that provide financial relief for individuals and families. Instead, the federal Liberals, supported by their provincial counterparts, are choosing to drive up the prices of day-to-day essentials like gas in the tank and groceries. Speaker, Ontarians have had enough. It's time to scrap the tax.

Could the minister please explain to the House why the federal government must end this unjust carbon tax?

Hon. Todd Smith: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the great member from Whitby again for his question.

Interjections.

Hon. Todd Smith: Obviously, the carbon tax is having an impact on everything in our province, and I continue to get heckled by queen of the carbon tax Bonnie Crombie's

crew over here. The Liberal Party of Ontario continues to support Justin Trudeau's federal carbon tax.

There's no bones about it. It's costing everybody more to live in our province and the carbon tax is driving that, not just in Ontario but right across the country.

But our plan is working here in Ontario. Our energy plan is called Powering Ontario's Growth, investing in new and refurbishing our nuclear reactors, investing in multi-billion dollar refurbishments of our hydroelectric facilities, building the country's largest energy storage in a competitive process and other non-emitting renewables that are coming onto the grid in the future that are going to continue to ensure that we are the economic powerhouse in North America.

We're landing deals like \$15-billion Honda deal—

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Beaches–East York will come to order.

The next question.

EDUCATION FUNDING

Ms. Catherine Fife: My question is to the Minister of Education. Speaker, this government is deliberately and chronically underfunding education in Ontario and children are paying the price. This year's budget included no meaningful increase in base funding to address the complex needs of students in Ontario, particularly the funding for special education in Ontario. It was a drop in the bucket and does not even cover the deficit of most school boards. Last year, the TDSB spent \$67.6 million more on special education than what they received. Kids are hurting, teachers are struggling. It has never been this bad in Ontario before.

My question is to the Minister of Education. Why is this Conservative government so adamant about underfunding the education sector which is at a crisis point?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about an investment we have made to improve public education. I'm proud that our government has increased funding for special education by \$659 million. When compared to the former Liberals, that is the highest investment—\$3.5 billion—ever recorded in Ontario history. We've also increased funding to \$29 billion overall for education. We've increased the staffing by 9,000 more education workers, 3,000 more teachers.

But let's listen to what a student had to say on the front page of the Waterloo Record just a few days ago: Kian Mirzaei, a 16-year-old youth mental health advocate said, "I think that the Ontario government is doing the right thing, backed by the right data," when it comes to the imposition of restrictions on cellphones, the banning of vaping and the removal of social media from school devices—common sense back in the classroom. Join us as we restore focus and discipline in Ontario's schools.

Interjections.

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

Ms. Catherine Fife: [*Inaudible*] Minister of Education that cameras do not replace educators. That's what's needed in our system.

Speaker, recently a constituent of mine who works at a local elementary school in Waterloo region as a child and youth worker said, "Violence in schools is at a crisis point." She detailed the abuse she faced at her school, and it was shocking: being injured or degraded on the job; being spit at; having scissors thrown at them; being punched, kicked, pinched.

On top of this, there is a lack of support to cover sick or injured staff. The Conservative government's significant underfunding of the education system means that EAs and support staff—shows the lack of respect they have for these workers. They weren't even mentioned at all in this latest budget.

To the minister: When will the Conservative government give the education sector and education workers the funding they desperately need and the respect that they deserve?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We understand how important it is to make sure our schools are safe and places of academic achievement. It's why we've invested a 577% increase in mental health since we started in 2017-18. We just added funding, Speaker: 15 million more dollars to leverage community-based mental health supports in partnership with the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, because we have a plan to restore focus in the classroom and safety and common sense by restricting cellphones, banning vaping and removing social media from school devices.

I would hope that members opposite, parents and legislators, would stand with the government as we implement this plan to finally establish academic rigour back in Ontario's schools. We've added more staffing. We added more funding, and we're asking for higher expectations in our school boards to deliver safety and academic achievement and excellence back in Ontario's schools.

TAXATION

Mr. Kevin Holland: Good morning, Speaker. My question is for the Minister of Indigenous Affairs and Northern Development. We've heard it from Ontarians, from Premiers of all political stripes and from experts that the Liberal carbon tax needs to be scrapped, but the federal government is not listening. Instead, they hiked the carbon tax by another 23% last month—

Interjections.

Mr. Kevin Holland: While we listen to the heckling from across the floor, further emphasizing that they're completely out of touch with reality, the impacts of this disastrous tax are felt in communities across our province, including in the north, where the cost of transporting goods is already higher. Now, they are being penalized with higher gas prices. That's simply unacceptable. The federal Liberals need to scrap this tax today.

Speaker, can the minister further share with the House how the Liberal carbon tax negatively impacts northern and Indigenous communities?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It's one thing for us to say it here in this place, it's another thing to hear it from municipal and First Nations leaders from across northern Ontario, which is precisely what happened at the northern Ontario municipal association meetings just about 10 days ago and, of course, FONOM yesterday. All we heard, Mr. Speaker, was the costs associated with the carbon tax on just about every aspect of a municipality's operation and, for isolated and remote First Nations communities, that additional cost on their fuel.

Now, despite the Prime Minister's inculcations that this is good environmental policy, there is an overwhelming number of people who are opposed to it. When the leader of the provincial Liberals took the throne, you would have thought that she would have said no to the carbon tax. She sat back and she did precisely the opposite. It's what makes her the queen of the carbon tax. Everybody in northern Ontario says they're out of touch. It's too expensive in northern Ontario. Scrap the tax.

1110

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

Mr. Kevin Holland: Ontarians are feeling the impact of the carbon tax on everything from their groceries, their gas, their heating bills, and so much more. It is driving up costs and making life unaffordable for individuals and families in northern Ontario and across the province. But, Speaker, the opposition members representing these communities remain silent as the federal government hikes this tax time and time again. The people of northern Ontario deserve better.

While the NDP and independent Liberals continue to downplay the impact of this regressive tax on northern communities, our government is fighting to ensure their voices are being heard.

Can the minister tell the House what communities and businesses across the north are telling him as to why they want an end to the Liberal carbon tax?

Hon. Greg Rickford: Just getting back from Sudbury, I met a couple of folks as part of the Renewable Resources Recovery company. These are an extraordinary group of entrepreneurs and inventors, and they've paired up with the Coniston seniors housing complex, and they've been able to develop a geothermal-type technology that draws the heat off of sewage pipes. It heats at least one heat pump in the seniors complex.

If they get five more heat pumps, they'll be able to power heat and cool the entire first floor of this multi-storey building—fantastic technology. It's attracting PhD students from top universities.

My only question is, why don't they wrap those sewage pipes coming out of the Prime Minister's office and understand what everybody really thinks of this tax, and that is to scrap it.

SERVICES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Miss Monique Taylor: May is Community Living Month. In Ontario, we have over 100,000 people with

intellectual disabilities accessing developmental services. Over 11,000 people have added their name to #5ToSurvive campaign online. Their ask is 5%—5% base funding to keep the lights on, accessible vehicles running and qualified staff during a human resource crisis.

Premier, will you commit today to provide the 5% that Community Living is asking for?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The members will please take their seats.

To reply, the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services.

Hon. Michael Parsa: Good morning and thanks so much for the question. Mr. Speaker, I'm very appreciative of the Premier and our government and our partners who are doing great work with Community Living across the province here, which is why we backed them up with support.

We are investing more than \$3.4 billion on developmental services this year. That, Mr. Speaker, is over a billion dollars more than the previous government was doing. Now, why do I mention that? It's because the NDP held the balance of power for three years. You've been here long enough to know what you can do when you hold the balance of power. They could have forced the Liberals to invest more in amazing partners who are doing great work across our province. They didn't. They failed the people of this province. It took this Premier, it took this caucus to stand up for people with developmental disabilities across the province and say, "We will have your back," just as we have since we formed government.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

The supplementary question?

Miss Monique Taylor: That's awfully rich coming from a minister who's been in government for six years. We have heard about group homes in Ottawa, Toronto, Hamilton. Windsor and more that have had to close their doors—14,000 people are sitting on wait-lists, and 80% of those same organizations are expecting a deficit this year.

Aging parents need to know that their now adult loved ones will be in safe, supportive housing with consistent staff. Their ask, their plea, was for 5%. Your government gave them 2%.

Premier, when will you take responsibility for the absolute crisis you are creating and properly fund our supportive housing living homes?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats. I'll remind the members to make their comments through the Chair.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Ottawa South, come to order. The member for Waterloo come to order. The member for Hamilton Mountain come to order.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

The Minister of Children, Community and Social Services can reply.

Hon. Michael Parsa: Mr. Speaker, I wish this member and her party had shown the same passion when the previous government failed the families across the province, other than talk. There must be cameras running, Mr. Speaker. There must be cameras, because when the cameras are off, Mr. Speaker, you will never see the NDP.

In fact, I will tell you what they have done. They have voted against every single measure that we have put forward to make sure that the service providers have the tools and resources to serve the people of Ontario. This member has been here long enough, but of course, when the cameras are running, you'll hear the NDP get up and talk a big game, Mr. Speaker—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

The member for Hamilton Mountain is warned.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

The minister can wind up his response.

Hon. Michael Parsa: Mr. Speaker, in budget 2024, I am proud and thankful to the Premier and the Minister of Finance for increasing the support to our partners who are doing amazing work. There's still more work to be done. I assured our partners we will never stop standing up for them, who are doing great work across every single community in our province. They've been—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Stop the clock. Members will take their seats.

The member for Hamilton West–Ancaster–Dundas, come to order. The member for Windsor West, come to order. The member for Essex, come to order.

Restart the clock. The next question.

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

MPP Andrea Hazell: Mr. Speaker, my question is to the Premier. Last week, I met with seniors from my community of Scarborough–Guildwood to discuss their concerns. Living on a fixed income means that every day, they are falling further and further behind in this affordability crisis. They are concerned about what the future looks like for their grandchildren and future generations and whether their grandchildren will ever be able to afford a home. They are concerned about having to use their credit card instead of an OHIP card to access the health care they need.

At a time when Ontario families are struggling to pay the bills, the Premier is more concerned with helping wealthy, well-connected insiders. My question to the Premier: When will the government stop putting themselves and their wealthy friends first, and focus on making life more affordable for families in Ontario?

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

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Through you, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to thank the member opposite for that question.

I'm sure, as we go to vote for the budget, the member opposite will dutifully consider supporting what's in the budget, which includes the Guaranteed Annual Income System, which is indexed to inflation for the first time ever for low-income seniors.

And I'm sure the learned member opposite will also take a look at how we cut the gas tax for many people who have to move around this province, Mr. Speaker, and my colleague over here, with One Fare, for those taking transit, saving daily riders \$1,600 a year. This is real money for the people of Ontario, and I'll have more to say in the supplementary.

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

MPP Andrea Hazell: Mr. Speaker, it is clear from that answer that this government is more focused on wealthy insiders and not the people who are struggling to make ends meet—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Stop the clock.

The member will take her seat for a moment. Take your seat, please.

The government side will come to order.

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke will come to order.

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke will come to order.

Start the clock. The member for Scarborough–Guildwood has the floor; I apologize.

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MPP Andrea Hazell: Mr. Speaker, groceries have never been more expensive. It is impossible for our young people to even dream of buying a home and our hospitals are overcrowded—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Stop the clock.

Sorry; the member will take her seat. I had to stop the clock.

I can't hear the member who has the floor and is asking a question. The government side will come to order. The member for Ottawa South will come to order.

Start the clock. Member for Scarborough–Guildwood.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Instead, this government is focused on an \$8.3-billion backroom deal with the greenbelt and selling out ServiceOntario to American corporations. This government does a great job of taking care of their friends and wealthy insiders, but when it comes to working families, they could hardly care less.

Premier, are you going to keep letting the affordability and housing crisis spiral out of control, or are you going to put a stop to the Conservative gravy train once and for all?

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke is warned—yes.

The Minister of Finance.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Again, Mr. Speaker, I'm sure the member opposite has read and will consider

voting for the budget, Building a Better Ontario. And had she actually read the budget—she seems to be referring to the additional 100,000 low-income seniors who will now qualify for the Guaranteed Annual Income System.

While we're at it, Mr. Speaker, let's think a little bit about the area she represents, Scarborough: I hope she's going to support building the subway to Scarborough for the first time in 50 years or the extension for the Sheppard East line, or perhaps health care and the hospital that we're building in Scarborough.

I feel like Columbo today, because I almost forgot one thing: the medical school right in Scarborough, the first one in a hundred years.

While they talked about things for 15 years, we are getting things done right now.

TAXATION

Mr. Billy Pang: Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Energy. The carbon tax continues to drive up the cost of living for all Ontarians, from fuelling our cars to heating our homes and feeding our families. Instead of addressing inflation, the federal government wants to keep saddling Ontarians with higher gas, energy and grocery bills.

Ontarians are having a tough time, and they want to see a light at the end of the tunnel. But they are concerned that there is no end in sight for the carbon tax as the federal Liberals plan to triple the tax by 2030. The federal Liberals, supported by the opposition NDP, and the queen of the carbon tax, Bonnie Crombie, will continue to make life more expensive for everyone. This is unacceptable.

Speaker, can the minister please explain why Ontarians cannot afford the NDP-Liberal carbon tax?

Hon. Todd Smith: Speaker, I want to thank the great member from Markham for that question. It made a lot of sense.

And the previous question that we heard, from the Liberal member from Scarborough-Guildwood, was actually a very fair question as well. She was talking about the fact that it's difficult for people right now to afford paying their heating, paying for the price at the pumps. Their groceries are going up in price. I can almost sense a little bit of a chasm forming in the teeny, tiny Liberal caucus led by the queen of the carbon tax, Bonnie Crombie, because the queen of the carbon tax, Bonnie Crombie, is in full support of the federal carbon tax, which is driving up the price of gasoline and home heating and groceries. Maybe this member is going to stand up to Bonnie Crombie and Justin Trudeau and talk about the issues that are facing Scarborough, because I'll tell you right now, her leader isn't doing that, Mr. Speaker, and her leader just got wiped out in Milton and just got wiped out in Lambton-Kent-Middlesex.

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

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you to the minister for his response. As my constituents become increasingly concerned about the stacking impacts of the carbon tax, it is

reassuring to hear that our government is looking out for the people of Ontario, through affordable and reliable energy measures.

But, Speaker, Ontarians deserve better. They deserve a federal government that works for them, not against and punishing them. Rising gas, heating and grocery costs are weighing on many households, and the last thing they need is another tax hike. The federal government must do the right thing now: End the carbon tax and the suffering it is causing Ontarians.

Speaker, can the minister please explain what a real plan for building Ontario's clean energy advantage looks like?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Ottawa South is warned.

The member for Orléans, come to order.

Minister of Energy.

Hon. Todd Smith: We do have a plan for powering Ontario's growth. It's called Powering Ontario's Growth, and we're investing in nuclear, and we're investing in hydroelectric and we're investing in other non-emitting resources and the storage that we need and biomass facilities to power our forestry sector in northern Ontario.

What does that plan not include? A carbon tax, which is driving up the price of everything in our province.

And it's these Liberal quixotic points of view—unrealistic, unpragmatic views—that have cost our province in the past and are continuing to cost our province now. It's just a different group. It used to be Kathleen Wynne, and it used to be Dalton McGuinty bringing in the Green Energy Act, now it's Justin Trudeau, supported by the queen of the carbon tax, Bonnie Crombie, who's driving up the price of everything.

In spite of that, our plan is working. Again, it's called Powering Ontario's Growth, and we're seeing multi-billion dollar investments in our—

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

The member for Parkdale-High Park has the next question.

PHARMACARE

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: My question is to the Minister of Health. My constituent Jane, an ODSP recipient, paid more than \$1,000 for life-saving diabetes medication that Shoppers Drug Mart told her was not covered under the Ontario Drug Benefit Plan. She submitted a claim to the ministry for reimbursement but received over \$100 less than her total payment. When my office inquired, the ministry said pharmacies are allowed to charge more than the ODB listed price for cash-paying customers.

Why is the minister allowing this?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: I'm happy to look into the individual example that the member opposite raised. But I want to reinforce and remind people that we have done a lot of work with pharmacists across Ontario to expand their scope of practice to make sure that people have

access to treatment of those minor ailments that are so important.

But specifically to your constituent's concerns, I'm happy to take them away and do further investigation.

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

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: Speaker, predatory billing practices are becoming the new normal under this Conservative government's push to privatize health care. People like Jane are being forced to seek reimbursement for costs that should have already been covered and hope that Shoppers Drug Mart does the right thing and refunds the extra charges.

Minister, will you crack down on Shoppers Drug Mart for trying to profit off of vulnerable people?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: I'm not sure if the member heard my initial response, but I said I was happy to take away the individual example that you have raised with me and look further into it.

I don't think that we can compare all of the 5,000 pharmacies that operate across Ontario with one specific example. I will look into it, and then we will have further conversations.

JUSTICE SYSTEM

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: My question is to the Premier. For those who have been in an automobile accident or know somebody who has been, they are well aware of the added stress dealing with an insurance company can cause.

In 2020, this government undertook a consultation on eliminating the use of civil juries in Ontario, because many felt civil jury trials were creating inconsistencies, delays and unfairness to those involved in motor vehicle accidents, as well as to the average taxpayer. In over 95% of car accident cases, it's the insurance company for the at-fault driver requesting a jury.

Speaker, this system does not allow victims timely access to justice, and the Attorney General's office appears to understand this and went so far as to draft legislation in 2022 that hasn't made it to the floor of this House.

1130

Fast-forward to 2024, and now the backlog of civil cases has grown to levels that are out of control. In some cases, jury trials are delayed until the end of 2025 or early 2026.

Speaker, through you to the Premier, what is the roadblock that is stalling a piece of legislation that would address the backlog and provide injured victims access to the justice they deserve?

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

Hon. Doug Downey: As the member opposite knows—and I thank her for the question—we have been working very hard, even pre-pandemic, through the pandemic and now post-pandemic, to make sure that the system is operating as well as it possibly can.

I'm very proud of the modernization that we've done. We're bringing in a backbone system in co-operation with

the Chief Justices at all three levels, the Ontario Court, the Superior Court and the Court of Appeal. We are adding resources in FTEs. We're adding resources in terms of technology.

Mr. Speaker, we're looking at all aspects, and this is one aspect that we're engaged in. We're talking to our partners at the Ontario Trial Lawyers Association. I was speaking with the Ontario Bar Association just last week, the Advocates' Society, the Toronto Law Association. We're all engaged in making the system better, and this is one piece of the puzzle. I'll have more to say in the supplementary.

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I thank the member opposite for the response. As legislators, we should be making the lives of Ontarians less stressful and more affordable.

I'm sure the consultation actually proved this, but nobody can seem to get their hands on it. In fact, there's an outstanding FOI request from 2022 from a lawyer in Thunder Bay. The FOI requested all of the submissions provided to the AG for and against the elimination of civil juries.

The ministry has advised that this request was lost, then it was reassigned, then an extension was requested and then it was reassigned again. And as of today, 19 months later, 19 months after the request was filed, not one single record, file or submission has been received. I have the file number right here if that helps get this moving along.

We know developers have a foothold in the Premier's office and I'm wondering who else might have undue influence. Speaker, again, through you to the Premier, who is instructing the Attorney General to sit on this important legislation that would clear the backlog and help accident victims?

Hon. Doug Downey: I mean, the member opposite is right in the first part of her question, which is that we're all engaged in making the system work better. She started off talking about victims in the system, and that is a very important part of what we're doing. And it's not just in the Attorney General's office. It's the Minister of Community and Social Services—it spans about five different ministries, Mr. Speaker.

We're doing a number of things to support victims. It's a high priority for us—not just intimate partners, but whether it be car accidents, whether it be people that find themselves in unfortunate situations. So I'd be happy to talk about more of those supports, Mr. Speaker.

But I do reject the second half of her question that there's some malfeasance or some sort of tomfoolery happening, Mr. Speaker. It's simply not true. We're working hard, we're working together and we are making the system better.

TAXATION

Mme Dawn Gallagher Murphy: My question is for the Associate Minister of Housing. The federal carbon tax is forcing Ontario families to stretch out their household budgets.

As housing affordability continues to be top of mind for Ontarians, the carbon tax is driving up the cost of building materials and the fuel prices to transport these materials to the building site. This ludicrous tax is imposing more obstacles in housing construction, leaving more families waiting to achieve their dream of home ownership.

While our government is standing up for Ontario families and addressing their housing needs, Bonnie Crombie's Liberals are standing up for the carbon tax.

Speaker, can the associate minister please explain how our government is continuing our progress in building Ontario despite challenges from the carbon tax?

Hon. Rob Flack: Thank you to the member from Newmarket–Aurora. Since 2018, we have averaged 20,000 starts more than the last 10 years of the former Liberal government. We know, though, there is so much more to do. That is why we introduced Bill 185, Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Act. That is why we reduced the HST on purpose-built rentals. That is why we've seen a 27% increase year over year, 2022-23. And that is why we've seen more housing starts in the last three years than since the 1980s.

Building a house is an expensive proposition. What is the number one component today that is punitively hurting the building of those homes? The carbon tax. In the articulate words of the Minister of Energy, I ask the members opposite to talk to their friends in Ottawa and scrap the tax.

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

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you to the minister for his response. It is unfair that the Liberal carbon tax is exacerbating the housing crisis by driving up building costs for new housing.

When the carbon tax queen, Bonnie Crombie, was mayor of Mississauga, she built less than 40% of the housing targets she promised to hit. Now, she and her Liberals are propping up the costly carbon tax implemented by their Liberal buddies. It is clear that Bonnie Crombie's Liberals don't have Ontarians' best interests at heart, and Ontarians don't want Bonnie Crombie's broken housing promises. Our government continues to stand behind the hard-working people of this province, and we will keep building for Ontarians looking for a home of their own.

Speaker, can the minister please explain how our government is building more homes faster across—

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

The Associate Minister of Housing.

Hon. Rob Flack: Thank you for that intelligent, logical and important question. You know, Speaker, I feel for everyone in Mississauga. My parents live there. My brothers and their families live there. Under Mayor Crombie—she had an abysmal housing record, as the member pointed out.

In fact, there was an 1,100-unit housing unit that was proposed to be built. They wanted density, they wanted height, but it interfered with the mayor's thoughts. She didn't want her local bakery to be disturbed. So what

happened? We don't have these houses because of height and cookies and cake. It's sad. Shadows, cookies and cake are why we don't build houses in Mississauga—shameful.

Speaker, here's the difference: We're getting the job done for Ontarians. Think of what those 1,100 units would cost today with the added carbon tax. It's terrible. Everything about housing is touched by the carbon tax. Scrap the tax.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: My question is for the Premier. Thousands in Toronto's west end rely on the UP Express for their daily commutes. Airport workers, families and many others are stuck paying higher fares because UP Express riders don't get to benefit from the One Fare program.

Can the minister tell us why UP Express riders and west-end commuters have been excluded from One Fare? Will he commit today to including them?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Associate Minister of Transportation.

Hon. Vijay Thanigasalam: It's ironic to hear from the NDP and Liberals about affordability for transportation. When this government, under the leadership of Premier Ford, brought forward One Fare, which eliminates the double fare and saves commuters \$1,600, both the NDP and Liberals voted against this not just once, they voted against One Fare twice. Now, One Fare is a successful program. Over five million users use One Fare right now. They have benefited from millions of dollars in savings.

We won't take lessons from parties who vote against affordability like One Fare, which saves \$1,600. Under the leadership of Premier Ford, we'll continue to build transportation, we'll continue to increase the service and we'll continue to put more money back into people's pockets.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question? The member for University–Rosedale.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Back to the minister: The 15,000 Pearson airport workers, the thousands of commuters who use the UP Express and the thousands of people who use the UP Express to get to Pearson to take a flight are not part of the One Fare program, and they desperately want to be. We are calling on the government to include the UP Express in the One Fare program and increase service on the UP Express to meet demand.

Can you do this? Yes or no?

Hon. Vijay Thanigasalam: When the Liberals and NDP were in government, they built nothing. They left people on crowded buses and trains, and they never eliminated the double fares. When Premier Ford brought One Fare, the NDP and Liberals chose to vote against this twice.

1140

On this side of the House, we got One Fare done. We are getting transportation built right across Ontario. Not just One Fare—we are bringing back the Northlander that the NDP and Liberals shut down 12 years ago.

We'll continue to make sure we'll make life more affordable for transit riders in Ontario.

TAXATION

Mr. Robert Bailey: My question is to the Associate Minister of Small Business. Ontario's retail and hospitality industries are fundamental to the prosperity of my local community and to our economy. However, the costly carbon tax continues to impose challenges on small businesses that have a crucial role in our cultural heritage and economic success. The businesses in these important industries add life to our main streets, many of which are cherished multi-generational family businesses. It is unfair that they are currently facing significant uncertainty as a result of the direct and indirect cost pressures from the federal carbon tax.

Through you, Speaker, can the associate minister tell this House how our government is championing these vital businesses by standing up against the federal carbon tax?

Hon. Nina Tangri: I want to thank the great member for Sarnia–Lambton for his advocacy for all of the small businesses in his riding.

Speaker, our government understands that small businesses on our main streets are economic drivers, but they're also a source of immense community pride. Local small businesses like Little Rose Cookie Co. and Hobby Hobby in my riding of Mississauga–Streetsville are some of the reasons why we have been unrelenting in our efforts to advocate for these businesses against the devastating impacts of the carbon tax.

We've already taken concrete steps. When this government and this Premier cut red tape and we lowered taxes like the gas tax, how did the Liberals and NDP vote? No. Well, it's time to get on the right side of history and stand up for small businesses in all of our ridings.

Speaker, I'm asking the federal government to scrap the carbon tax now.

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

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thank you to the parliamentary assistant for that response. The Liberal carbon tax negatively impacts small businesses across all sectors, including the construction and trade sectors, which are vital to my community. It is hiking up the cost of their operations and transport.

Speaker, our government, under the leadership of Premier Ford, has always stood shoulder to shoulder with the hard-working women and men in the skilled trades. We know we have the best workers in the world, and they work tirelessly to ensure businesses in Ontario continue to thrive and grow.

I know the associate minister recently held a round table with representatives from small businesses within the skilled trades. Speaker, can the parliamentary assistant please tell the House what they had to say about the detrimental effects of this carbon tax on their operations?

Hon. Nina Tangri: Thank you again to the great member for the important question. Speaker, it's a shame

to see carbon tax Crombie and the opposition Liberals here in this House supporting a disastrous policy that is making life more unaffordable for families and businesses across our province.

Speaker, in London, I hosted a round table alongside Associate Minister Flack and representatives from construction and skilled trades associations. The message was loud and clear: Construction and skilled trades businesses want to build affordable homes for Ontarians, but the carbon tax is driving up costs for operations, transportation and forcing these companies to choose between cutting staff or increasing prices. So you can thank a Liberal the next time a young family in any of our ridings can't afford to buy a home.

The opposition needs to call on their federal counterparts to scrap this disastrous tax.

LONG-TERM CARE

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: My question is to the Premier. A family in Tecumseh received a bill for \$8,400 from the hospital, because of Bill 7. Michele Campeau refused to accept the long-term-care placement chosen by the hospital, because it did not meet her mother's needs. Now the hospital says they will continue to be charged \$400 a day. We warned that this would happen. Patients, advocates and workers warned it would impact the most vulnerable people in our communities.

My question is, why did this Conservative government ignore these warnings and continue to charge seniors and their families for care?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To reply, the Ministry of Health.

Hon. Sylvia Jones: I want to be very clear: A hospital is not a home. Hospital leadership, hospital staff, work very closely with patients and their families to match an appropriate and alternative level of bed, and that, in some cases, means in community with home and community care support. In some cases, it means a long-term-care placement.

I want to reinforce, as well, that that individual actually continues to have their first choice there, so that when there is an available bed at their first choice, they can have that option made available to them. But we don't have the same level of engagement in a hospital, in an acute-care hospital, as we do in a long-term-care home, which is exactly why we brought forward these changes.

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

Mrs. Lisa Gretzky: It is clear this government just does not care that patients are being charged hundreds or thousands of dollars. It was their legislation that's allowing it to happen.

In this particular case, when the daughter went to the home that the hospital was trying to send the mom to—not a home that was even in their top five choices—the keypad for the security code to get into the home was taped to the outside of the facility for anybody to be able to get in. Michele wandered around that facility for 15 minutes

before even spotting a staff member. The conditions were dirty. There were bugs. There were rodents.

Respectfully, Minister, this is not about getting seniors into appropriate care, this is about pushing them out of hospital as fast as they can and placing an incredible financial burden on these families. The government doesn't care about the immense pressure on families and caregivers. The Campeau family said the stress and financial burden that families are experiencing is exactly why this legislation needs to be revoked. Michele said it's time to actually stand up and protect the elderly.

I'm asking the Premier: Will you listen to patients and caregivers and immediately repeal Bill 7?

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

The response? The parliamentary assistant and member for Mississauga Centre.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you so much, Speaker. I'm so proud to rise today to answer my very first question as the parliamentary assistant to the wonderful Minister of Long-Term Care.

As a result of Bill 7, nearly 20,000 patients have found a place to call home in long-term care. Of those, only 0.04% had a bill issued by a hospital to pay for post-discharge services. On this side of the House, we trust doctors to know what is right for their patients when they medically clear them for discharge into long-term care, as was the case with this patient who was medically cleared many days ago.

Don't take my word for it. Bill Mara, the CEO of Hôtel-Dieu Grace hospital, where the patient is staying, had this to say: "Bill 7 is important legislation that is necessary to free up essential resources. As of Tuesday afternoon, there are at least two dozen people in Windsor emergency rooms waiting for a bed." That is two dozen patients that could be very, very sick, maybe even in life-threatening conditions, like having a stroke, a heart attack or from a motor vehicle collision. I can tell you, Speaker—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Member for Spadina–Fort York, come to order.

That concludes our question period for today.

VISITORS

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Point of order: the Associate Minister of Small Business.

Hon. Nina Tangri: I just want to welcome a great teacher, Payal Kakar, who's here with her grade 5 class from Willow Way Public School in my riding of Mississauga–Streetsville.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Point of order: the member for Markham–Unionville.

Mr. Billy Pang: I would like to invite members to join the delegation for Lupus Ontario for a group picture on the grand staircase after question period and the votes.

DEFERRED VOTES

GET IT DONE ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 POUR PASSER À L'ACTION

Deferred vote on the motion for closure on the motion for third reading of the following bill:

Bill 162, An Act to enact the Protecting Against Carbon Taxes Act, 2024 and amend various Acts / Projet de loi 162, Loi édictant la Loi de 2024 sur la protection contre les taxes sur le carbone et modifiant diverses lois.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Call in the members. This is a five-minute bell.

The division bells rang from 1150 to 1155.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'm going to ask the members to please take their seats.

On April 25, 2024, Mr. Sarkaria moved third reading of Bill 162, An Act to enact the Protecting Against Carbon Taxes Act, 2024 and amend various Acts.

On May 7, 2024, Ms. Scott moved that the question be now put.

All those in favour of Ms. Scott's motion will please rise one at a time and be recognized by the Clerk.

Ayes

Anand, Deepak	Harris, Mike	Rae, Matthew
Babikian, Aris	Hogarth, Christine	Rickford, Greg
Bailey, Robert	Holland, Kevin	Riddell, Brian
Barnes, Patrice	Jones, Sylvia	Sabawy, Sheref
Bethlenfalvy, Peter	Jones, Trevor	Sandhu, Amarjot
Bouma, Will	Jordan, John	Sarkaria, Prabmeet Singh
Byers, Rick	Kanapathi, Logan	Sarrazin, Stéphane
Calandra, Paul	Ke, Vincent	Saunderson, Brian
Cho, Raymond Sung Joon	Kerzner, Michael S.	Scott, Laurie
Clark, Steve	Kusendova-Bashta, Natalia	Skelly, Donna
Coe, Lorne	Leardi, Anthony	Smith, Dave
Crawford, Stephen	Lecce, Stephen	Smith, David
Cuzzetto, Rudy	Lumsden, Neil	Smith, Graydon
Dixon, Jess	MacLeod, Lisa	Smith, Laura
Dowie, Andrew	Martin, Robin	Smith, Todd
Downey, Doug	McCarthy, Todd J.	Surma, Kinga
Dunlop, Jill	McGregor, Graham	Tangri, Nina
Fedeli, Victor	Mulroney, Caroline	Thanigasalam, Vijay
Flack, Rob	Oosterhoff, Sam	Thompson, Lisa M.
Ford, Doug	Pang, Billy	Triantafilopoulos, Effie J.
Ford, Michael D.	Parsa, Michael	Wai, Daisy
Gallagher Murphy, Dawn	Piccini, David	Williams, Charmaine A.
Ghamari, Goldie	Pierre, Natalie	Yakabuski, John
Grewal, Hardeep Singh	Pirie, George	
Hardeman, Ernie	Quinn, Nolan	

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): All those opposed to Ms. Scott's motion, please rise one at a time and be recognized by the Clerk.

Nays

Armstrong, Teresa J.	Glover, Chris	Rakocevic, Tom
Bell, Jessica	Gretzky, Lisa	Sattler, Peggy
Blais, Stephen	Harden, Joel	Schreiner, Mike
Bowman, Stephanie	Hazell, Andrea	Shaw, Sandy
Brady, Bobbi Ann	Hsu, Ted	Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie)
Burch, Jeff	Karpoche, Bhutilla	Tabuns, Peter
Clancy, Aislinn	Kernaghan, Terence	Taylor, Monique
Fife, Catherine	Mamakwa, Sol	Vanhof, John

Fraser, John
Gates, Wayne
Gélinas, France

McCrimmon, Karen
McMahon, Mary-Margaret
Pasma, Chandra

Vaugeois, Lise
Wong-Tam, Kristyn

The Clerk of the Assembly (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 73; the nays are 32.

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

Mr. Sarkaria has moved third reading of Bill 162, An Act to enact the Protecting Against Carbon Taxes Act, 2024 and amend various Acts.

Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard some noes.

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.

Call in the members. This is a five-minute bell.

Interjections: Same vote.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Same vote.

The Clerk of the Assembly (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 73; the nays are 32.

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

Be it resolved that the bill do now pass and be entitled as in the motion.

Third reading agreed to.

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

The House recessed from 1200 to 1500.

REPORTS BY COMMITTEES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HERITAGE, INFRASTRUCTURE AND CULTURAL POLICY

Ms. Laurie Scott: I beg leave to present a report from the Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy on the estimates selected and not selected by the standing committee for consideration.

The Clerk-at-the-Table (Ms. Meghan Stenson): Ms. Scott from the Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy presents the committee's report as follows:

Pursuant to standing order 63, your committee has selected the 2024-25 estimates of the following ministries for consideration: Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing; Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport; Ministry of Transportation; Ministry of Infrastructure; Ministry of Citizenship and Multiculturalism.

Pursuant to standing order 64(a), the 2024-25 estimates of the following office not selected for consideration is deemed to be passed by the committee and is reported back to the House:

Office of the Lieutenant Governor: 1701, Office of the Lieutenant Governor, \$2,652,400.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 64(b), the report of the Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy is deemed to be received, and the estimates of the office named therein as not being selected for consideration by the committee is deemed to be concurred in.

Report deemed received.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Mr. Speaker, I beg leave to present a report from the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs on the estimates selected by the standing committee for consideration.

The Clerk-at-the-Table (Ms. Meghan Stenson): Mr. Hardeman from the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs presents the committee's report as follows:

Pursuant to standing order 63, your committee has selected the 2024-25 estimates of the following ministries and offices for consideration: Cabinet Office and Office of the Premier; Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade; Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development; Ministry of Finance; Treasury Board Secretariat.

Report presented.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: I beg leave to present a report from the Standing Committee on the Interior on the estimates selected by the standing committee for consideration.

The Clerk-at-the-Table (Ms. Meghan Stenson): Ms. Gallagher Murphy from the Standing Committee on the Interior presents the committee's report as follows:

Pursuant to standing order 63, your committee has selected the 2024-25 estimates of the following ministries for consideration: Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry; Ministry of Energy; Ministry of Mines; Ministry of Northern Development; Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs; Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

Report presented.

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: Mr. Speaker, I beg leave to present a report from the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs and move its adoption.

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

Bill 180, An Act to implement Budget measures and to enact and amend various statutes / Projet de loi 180, Loi visant à mettre en oeuvre les mesures budgétaires et à édicter et à modifier diverses lois.

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

Report adopted.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The bill is therefore ordered for third reading.

PETITIONS

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I have a petition here titled “Raise Social Assistance Rates.”

The recipients of Ontario Works are receiving a rate that has been frozen for decades. There have been very, very small increases to the Ontario Disability Support Program rates. And the rates for both of these programs leave people well below the poverty line.

So, this petition is signed by residents from Hamilton, from Stoney Creek, from Lincoln, from Stratford, from Ancaster, all calling on this government to immediately double social assistance rates.

I fully support this petition, will affix my signature to it and give it to page Kai to bring it to the table.

HOSPITAL SERVICES

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank the 7,600 people from south Muskoka who signed this petition. Basically, what they’re saying is that their hospital, the South Muskoka Memorial Hospital, is under the board of governors of the Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare board. None of the people on the board of directors was actually selected by the people of south Muskoka and, given that they did not have a say as to who sat on that board, the community, all 7,600 of them, strongly disagree with the recommendation that has been made by that board.

The board is recommending that the emergency room not act as an emergency room anymore. The board is recommending a 35% decrease in the number of in-patient beds although the demand for in-patient beds has been going up and they are seeing a 12% admission rate increase.

They would like to make sure that the Ministry of Health does not accept any of the changes to hospital services Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare has made on behalf of the good people that are served by South Muskoka Memorial Hospital because they are not being represented by that board and they disagree.

They want the government to give them a process that would allow the community to elect who will be on their board of directors. By allowing the community to elect who will be on their board of directors, the board of directors will do what it’s supposed to do: be the eyes, ears and conscience of the community when it comes to

making decisions about South Muskoka Memorial Hospital.

I support the 7,600 people that have signed this petition and will ask Rhys to bring it to the Clerk.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Petitions? The member for—

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Point of order.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Point of order: the member for London West.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I seek the unanimous consent of the House to wear this kaffiyeh that was gifted to me by London’s Palestinian, Muslim and Arab community as I present the next petition.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for London West is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to permit her to wear a kaffiyeh while she presents a petition in the Legislature this afternoon. Agreed? I heard some noes.

WEARING OF KAFFIYEHs

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to thank the Palestinian, Muslim and Arab community in my riding of London West for this petition urging the Legislature to reverse the kaffiyeh ban and allow for this culturally significant article of clothing to be worn everywhere in this Legislature.

Signatures on this petition were collected last Friday when my London MPP colleagues and I met with leaders from the community to hear their concerns about the message conveyed by the banning of the kaffiyeh in this very heart of Ontario democracy. They feel that the ban singles out Palestinian history, culture and identity as being lesser than other cultures. It opens the door to legitimizing anti-Palestinian racism in schools, workplaces and across the province.

The community told us that the ban feels like the erasure of their Palestinian identity at a time when identity has never been more important, as they watch with pain and horror the humanitarian catastrophe under way in Gaza and the escalating death toll of innocent civilians, mostly women and children.

The petition recognizes the kaffiyeh as a garment that dates back centuries as a symbol of the spirit and resilience of the Palestinian people. Its patterns have deep meaning, representing the olive trees, fishing nets and historical trade routes of Palestine. It represents the Palestinian people’s right to exist and to express their cultural heritage.

1510

Although the signatures collected on this petition were signed prior to the Speaker’s wise decision to allow the kaffiyeh in other parts of the building, until kaffiyehs are permitted in this chamber and in the visitor galleries, we will continue to present these petitions calling for the reversal of the ban.

I fully support this petition and want to thank London’s Palestinian, Muslim and Arab communities for their advocacy.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll remind the members of standing order 42(b), the new standing order with respect to petitions. I would ask that the members keep their explanations of their petitions brief.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It's my honour to present the following petitions on behalf of Sally Palmer from McMaster University. This petition is to raise social assistance rates.

If we take a look at the rates for Ontario Works, they have been frozen since 2018, and the increases that this government has made to the Ontario Disability Support Program are still meagre. People are struggling. This government would pat itself on the back for indexing these rates, but they have indexed them below the poverty line, so they are keeping people in poverty forever.

Keeping people in poverty is an active choice by this government. The people who have signed this petition would like to see social assistance rates doubled, so that people can live with dignity.

I fully support this petition, will affix my signature and deliver it with page Raisa to the Clerks.

AIR QUALITY

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I have a petition here titled "Improve Air Quality for Our Children." It is signed by members of family councils in schools in my riding of Parkdale–High Park.

This petition has a very simple ask: Clean air for our kids. It is asking that the House support and adopt the Improving Air Quality for Our Children Act, 2023, a bill that I have co-sponsored. The bill would require carbon dioxide level monitoring in public schools and licensed child care centres in order to measure and then improve air quality. It is backed by experts, educators and parents, and it will help ensure that kids have the best learning conditions possible.

I'm proud to table this petition, will affix my signature to it and give it to page Woods to bring it to the table.

GASOLINE PRICES

M^{me} France Gélina: I would like to thank Mrs. Lorraine Charbonneau, who happens to be a good friend of mine from Lively, for this petition: "Gas Prices."

You know, Speaker, that the price of gas varies wildly. In my riding, if you can buy gas on a Sunday or on a Monday, I guarantee you that it will be cheaper than on a Wednesday, Thursday or Friday. I was in my riding last week during the constituency week and went to Foleyet. Gas in Foleyet is \$1.89 a litre. Gas in other parts of my riding is also very high, yet you will go a few kilometres to the west to Espanola, and gas is at \$1.64. A few kilometres to the east of Sudbury, and gas is at \$1.66.

Why? Because companies sell at what the market can bear, and unfortunately, in my riding we are deemed as a

market who can bear a lot of gas price increases. Most people work in the mines; my riding has the most mines in Ontario. You have to travel a long distance to go to the mines. Most of them drive trucks, because they have to travel early to make the cage down to the mine, and they have no choice but to take gas.

So they ask that the government does what 49—I forget exactly how many—many other states and provinces have done, and that is to regulate the price of gas. Set a ceiling at which gas in Ontario cannot be sold any more expensive than this. There is no reason for the people of Nickel Belt to always pay 20, 30, 34 cents more per litre of gas than people 20 kilometres one way or 35 kilometres the other way. We're being gouged. Please, listen to the thousands and thousands of people who have signed this petition. Regulate the price of gas.

I support this petition. I will affix my name to it and demande à la page Charlise de l'amener à la table des greffiers. Merci.

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I am proud to present a petition that has been signed by hundreds of Londoners; in particular, those who work at Western University as faculty or staff, as well as at Fanshawe College.

This is a petition calling on the Legislature to stop Bill 166. The petition notes that this government has made significant cuts to community mental health services, which has increased the pressure on post-secondary institutions to provide mental health supports to students. It also notes that the government disbanded the Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous racism subcommittees under the Anti-Racism Directorate, which has severely limited the fundamental work that needs to go on in this province to address racism and hate, and has also underfunded our post-secondary institutions to such an extent that the equity and diversity offices and the mental health offices on campus are being very limited in the kinds of support that they can provide to students.

Bill 166, instead of providing the funding necessary for those campus offices to do that vital work of supporting students who are in mental health distress and addressing racism and hate on campus—instead, this legislation allows the minister to unilaterally dictate policies on campus, opening the door to unprecedented political interference in the autonomy of our post-secondary institutions.

These petitioners—and I fully agree with them—are calling on the government to stop Bill 166, to use its powers under the Anti-Racism Act to effectively deal with equity and anti-racism in the province, and to significantly increase funding to post-secondary institutions so that they can provide the support that students need.

I affix my signature—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. If someone wishes to raise a point of order at any time, they may—

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): But I will say again the standing order asks that members keep their petitions brief.

I'll ask once again that the members keep their explanation or summary of the petitions brief.

Petitions.

RARE DISEASES

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: This petition is titled "Ontario Needs a Rare Disease Strategy."

Speaker, Ontario does not have a rare disease strategy, and that has left people living with rare diseases without access to the supports and services that they need.

The Ministry of Health established a Rare Diseases Working Group in 2016. The group did their work and presented a report to the minister with recommendations for action. That report has been ignored, has been sitting there collecting dust. So this petition is calling on the Legislature to adopt the report and to start implementing the report, as is suggested by a bill that I have tabled titled Rare Disease Strategy Act. We need to implement the recommendations so that people living with rare diseases get the support they need.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I have a petition to raise social assistance rates.

The rates for Ontario Works have been frozen since 2018, as we're all aware, and small increases to the Ontario Disability Support Program, ODSP, have left recipients struggling well below the poverty line.

The people who have signed this are advocating for doubling the rates of both OW and ODSP, which I believe in.

I'm signing my signature and sending it with new page Lise.

1520

ÉDUCATION EN FRANÇAIS

M^{me} France Gélinas: J'aimerais remercier Nicole Bessette d'Azilda dans mon comté pour ces pétitions : « Soutenez le système d'éducation francophone en Ontario ».

Comme vous le savez, monsieur le Président, les enfants francophones ont droit à aller à l'école en français. Nous avons des écoles francophones du côté public et catholique pas mal partout en Ontario. On voit également une augmentation des inscriptions dans les écoles francophones, ce qui est quelque chose qui me fait plaisir et qui fait qu'on a besoin d'environ 1 000 enseignants ou enseignantes supplémentaires à chaque année.

Malheureusement, avec les changements qui ont été faits par le gouvernement, il y a seulement 500 nouveaux enseignants ou enseignantes francophones qui graduent à chaque année. Donc, on voit que dans toutes les écoles francophones, il y a eu une augmentation de 450 % des

gens qui enseignent dans nos écoles francophones qui ne sont pas qualifiés comme enseignants ou enseignantes. Donc, des centaines et des centaines de personnes, surtout des parents francophones, ont signé la pétition pour demander au gouvernement de mettre en place le rapport qui a été fait par le groupe de travail sur la pénurie des enseignants et enseignantes dans l'éducation de langue française qui nous aiderait à combler ce déficit et à s'assurer que tous les enfants francophones reçoivent une éducation de qualité.

J'appuie cette pétition. Je vais la signer et je demande à Aaldrian de l'amener à la table des greffiers.

TENANT PROTECTION

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: This petition is titled "Bring Back Rent Control." Rent control existed for all units occupied by tenants regardless of what year they were built until this government came into power in 2018 and rent control for buildings built after 2018 was removed. As such, many renters in Toronto and across Ontario who are living in these units built after 2018 do not have protections of rent control. When you don't have any cap on rent increases, it puts tenants in precarious housing. Massive, unpredictable rent increases also take away stability and predictability to build a life and to plan a life.

As such, this petition is calling on the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to pass my bill Rent Control for All Tenants Act so that we can ensure all tenants can live with rent control protections in safe, affordable homes.

HOUSE SITTINGS

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Orders of the day? I recognize the member for Chatham-Kent-Leamington.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Good afternoon, Speaker. First, on a point of order, please—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Member for Chatham-Kent-Leamington on a point of order.

Mr. Trevor Jones: Pursuant to standing order 7(e), I wish to inform the House that tonight's evening meeting has been cancelled.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

KEEPING ENERGY COSTS DOWN ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 VISANT À MAINTENIR LA FACTURE ÉNERGÉTIQUE À UN NIVEAU ABORDABLE

Resuming the debate adjourned on May 7, 2024, on the motion for third reading of the following bill:

Bill 165, An Act to amend the Ontario Energy Board Act, 1998 respecting certain Board proceedings and related matters / Projet de loi 165, Loi modifiant la Loi de 1998 sur la Commission de l'énergie de l'Ontario en ce

qui concerne certaines instances dont la Commission est saisie et des questions connexes.

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

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Speaker, just so that you're entirely clear about this, this bill is about making sure that Enbridge customers pay more and get poorer and that Enbridge makes a lot more money and gets a lot richer. That's what this bill is about.

The Premier is planning to raise your gas bill this year. That's what this bill makes possible. That's what this bill is set up to do.

The Premier decided to protect Enbridge to make sure it could bring in billions of dollars from its customers and take money out of the pockets of those customers across this province. His buddies at Enbridge are being protected, and he's sticking you, each and every Enbridge customer in this province, with the bill. That bill is calculated to be between \$300 and \$600 over the next four years.

Everyone in this room is well aware of how stretched people are, well aware of how they're pushed hard by high rents, by mortgages that are difficult to cover, by rising grocery prices. They need this like they need a hole in their wallet. They need protection from Enbridge, and this government is not only not protecting them, it is making sure that Enbridge gets to collect billions of dollars from them—billions of dollars.

If you think that you should be paying more on your Enbridge bill, then you should support this legislation that's come forward. And if you don't think you should be stuck with those extra charges, if you think that Enbridge should be the body that actually coughs up the few billion dollars that they want to expand the gas supply system, then you should oppose this bill. Enbridge pays. That's the situation that we would have if this bill did not go through. If the bill goes through, the customers pay, just as they have in so many other circumstances.

I don't think I've made it plain enough: This bill is about raising your gas charges, making life more expensive for you and making sure that Enbridge shareholders make a lot more money.

This bill reverses the decision by the Ontario Energy Board—the agency set up in this province to regulate utilities and protect customers—the decision they made in December to protect people in Ontario from higher gas bills. Now, it's the job of the Ontario Energy Board, that regulator, to look out for consumer interests when energy companies apply to raise their rates, as they do constantly. The job of the Ontario Energy Board, their mandate, is to protect the customers. They're told, "Look out for the consumers. Look out for the public. Make sure they aren't gouged, they aren't ripped off, they aren't pillaged, they aren't silently stolen from. Look after those customers." That's their mandate, and that's whether that utility is electrical or gas: protect the customers. And that is what the Ontario Energy Board did last December in, I would say, a Christmas surprise, a Christmas gift. They stood up and said, "We can read our mandate. We think this charge against the customers can't be justified. We're not going to approve it."

Now this government is completely horrified that those customers are being protected. They're horrified that Enbridge will not continue to make the crushingly huge profits that they've been making. And this government wants to reverse that. They know what has to be protected at all costs, and that's the profits going to Enbridge. The customers? Not an issue, not a concern.

Since we had this bill before committee, the news service Narwhal published an article on the close operation between senior Conservative government staff and Enbridge. It was as if they were working in collusion. It was pretty clear from the article that the first concern of the government was to protect Enbridge and its profits. In what they reported, there weren't big issues about, "How do we protect rural ratepayers? How do we look after small businesses? How do we make sure that new home buyers don't pay more than they would have paid before?" No, their focus was on Enbridge's profits and how expensive this decision was going to be for Enbridge, and then they looked for stories that would buttress the argument that they made.

Enbridge is a multi-billion-dollar company, and frankly, the one that we deal with in Ontario is a subsidiary of the larger Enbridge that runs gas transmission lines across North America—both of them multi-billion-dollar operations with multi-billion-dollar profits, not exactly on the edge of poverty. These companies have a few bucks available if they wanted to actually help customers, but that is not what we're dealing with here. This is not about the government trying to protect customers and trying to keep energy bills low. This is about making sure that the company that wants to squeeze every last penny out of you is protected and given licence to do that. In fact, this government will ensure that your gas bill is going to go up.

Two weeks ago, we asked the Premier about his government's efforts to ensure that Enbridge was protected and consumers got stuck with the bill. What do you have to say, Premier, on this?

1530

So we asked: "In December, the Ontario Energy Board ruled that consumers should no longer have to subsidize Enbridge's gas expansion. But instead of listening to the experts, the government decided to keep forcing consumers to pay the subsidy.

"Yesterday, the Narwhal revealed that the Premier's top officials weren't just communicating with Enbridge on this; they were actively coordinating their response together."

Question for the government: Did the government give preferential treatment to Enbridge when it intervened preemptively to undermine the regulator and drive up costs for customers?

I'll go on to the other two questions that were asked because I'll summarize the response of the government.

The next question: On the morning of the Ontario Energy Board ruling, the chief of staff to the Minister of Energy reached out to the Premier's staff and called an urgent meeting to prepare a response in case the OEB ruled against Enbridge in favour of consumers. Oh,

horrors, protecting consumers; what has the world come to?

It just happens that the minister's chief of staff is a former lobbyist for Enbridge. Was this chief of staff in a conflict of interest when he decided to put the interests of his former employer ahead of Ontario's gas consumers?

Third part: Government lawyers warned the Premier's staff and the former Enbridge lobbyists now working as the minister's chief of staff that intervening in the OEB decision carried legal risks. They did it anyway. That's why we're debating this bill today.

They announced the plan to overrule the Ontario Energy Board, the regulator acting to protect customers—overrule them only 15 hours after the decision was published. I've never seen a government so determined to overrule an independent regulator and drive up gas bills for Ontario consumers.

Why is the government risking legal action in order to give preferential treatment to a gas monopoly over the interests of hard-working Ontarians?

Speaker, you had to be there to enjoy the show. No one will be surprised to hear that the Minister of Energy was bobbing and weaving like crazy to avoid answering the question. There were all kinds of diversions. Rabbits were pulled out of hats, red herrings were dumped on carpets, smoke was blown. The minister was a cat on a hot tin roof.

My experience around here is that when a minister can't answer a question—and I've seen many over the years not be able to answer a question—then you have a minister with a big problem on their hands, because they like to be able to say, "You're totally wrong; here's the reason," but when they dance and bob and weave and get into the red-herring stuff, you know that they understand they have a big problem on their hand.

We all remember the kind of—and I'll just call it ambiguity in answers from ministers at the start of the greenbelt scandal. They wandered all over the landscape, sort of like a subdivision with no clear idea where it wanted to go. Why? Because what they were doing was wrong, wrong enough that they had to back off, bring in legislation to nullify those decisions, wrong enough that there's now an RCMP investigation of the whole thing.

So far, we haven't heard about Enbridge executives showing up at a wedding hosted by the Premier, but we've heard enough to know the government's whole efforts are directed at enriching Enbridge and making life harder for families in this province.

This bill will strip Ontarians of protection from Enbridge's attempts to gouge customers across Ontario. The minister, the Premier don't have to do that. The Premier could take another course. The Premier could protect you, the Enbridge customers. He could protect your families and protect families across this province.

He knows that people are having a tough time. He talks about it regularly. We have debates, discussions, here in the Legislature, about the difficulties people are facing. People are pushed hard, as I said in the beginning. They're facing rising rents. My colleague from Parkdale–High Park raised that just a few minutes ago. People are pushed to the limit.

They're having a tough time with grocery bills. You've got major retailers that have engaged in squeezing people, squeezing their suppliers, squeezing the customers. The Premier knows that people are having a tough time staying afloat, and yet, today, we're debating a bill that will protect the profits of Enbridge and raise gas bills that people will have to pay. It will take money out of people's pockets. That's the reality.

At the committee meeting a few weeks ago, we brought forward a number of amendments to protect people from higher bills, and I want to thank Unifor for suggesting two very useful amendments that would help reduce people's Enbridge bills, one of which was to set up a system for monitoring and preventing leakages of natural gas from the system.

Let's face it: Having gas leaks is bad in terms of safety, it's bad in terms of people's health, but it's also bad in terms of the bills that people pay, because all of the customers are charged for the total cost of the gas coming through the system. Enbridge wants people to burn as much as they can: The more they burn, the more money is made. If the gas leaks into the atmosphere, well, hey, that's just another form of consumption.

So did the government support that amendment which would be good for the environment, for health and for people's bills? No, they did not.

Unifor also asked for action on the contracting out of utility functions. I raise this because a little more than two decades ago, there was a landmark hearing at the Ontario Energy Board about how Enbridge was hiving off parts of its operations to become what one would call a "virtual utility." The ability to actually regulate the utility and control the costs they were taking out of people's pockets was dramatically reduced when they contract out. In fact, it was alleged at the time that Enbridge was contracting out work—both direct maintenance and administration—to companies that they, in turn, controlled but which were outside the regulatory framework; in other words, there was no price control on them, which is why a regulator is there.

That was a good amendment, one put forward by Unifor which would protect customers from being gouged. No one will be surprised to know the government voted that down.

Now, we brought forward another amendment, and I want to thank Environmental Defence and Stand.earth for their suggestions for protecting customers from higher bills and that Enbridge pay for their own expansions. Pretty straightforward. Enbridge's consultants know that there is a time limit to the gas distribution system in Ontario and across North America, and if the system starts phasing out more quickly—and it's headed in that direction—the remaining customers get stuck with higher bills.

The amendment was to ensure that Enbridge, its investors, paid those extra costs, not the customers. No one in this room will be surprised to learn the government voted it down.

This bill is about making customers pay more, it's about Enbridge getting richer, and when we actually get into the

details of the bill in committee with amendments that would protect customers, they were refused by the government. It is focused on making sure Enbridge makes as much money as it possibly can.

I'm going to go back a bit to the decision by the OEB, the Ontario Energy Board, the regulator responsible for protecting customers from utilities.

Just before Christmas, the Ontario Energy Board announced the decision that would make Enbridge Gas responsible for the cost of expanding its gas system and protect almost four million customers from hundreds of millions of dollars in higher heating bills. Actually, I'm understating—we're talking billions.

This is a very important point: Enbridge has investors. It has cash flow. If it wanted to put money into those new connections and collect from those new customers over 40 years, they could do that; no problem. They don't have to take the money out of your pocket. They don't have to take the money out of the pockets of the constituents that you represent. They could take it out of their own cash, but instead, they want it to come from existing gas customers.

I should say—again, I refer back to that 2002 decision by the Ontario Energy Board: They noted a pipeline Enbridge had been built that was uneconomic, one that actually drained money out of existing customers, and they said, “No, you can't take that money from customers. The shareholders have to pay for that.” This is not unprecedented.

If Enbridge wants to put money in, they can put their shareholder money in and see if it comes back. But no, they treat customers like an ATM. They get permission to go to the machine, hit the button and take the money out of your pockets. That's what's going on.

1540

The Ontario Energy Board, whose job is to protect customers from gouging, whose job is to protect customers from being taken advantage of, said, “No, we're not going to support the increase that you're asking for, billions of dollars for expansion of the system. It's going to cost \$300 to \$600 per customer over the next four years.” They said, “Enbridge, it's your expense. You pay. It's yours”—entirely legit and something that's been done before. The very next day in December, the minister announced that this government would be taking steps to reverse the decision of the Ontario Energy Board, the regulator they put in place.

Now I have to say, for those who have been around for a while, I used to refer to the Ontario Energy Board under the Liberals as glove puppets, as Muppets, and I think I was accurate, because I watched the performance. Those on the other side who were upset at many of the decisions made by the Liberals should be well aware that the Liberals skirted around the OEB. The OEB was there for a lot of show and display, but when it came to the fundamental questions, the Liberals said, “Well, very nice to have you, glad you enjoy your pay, but we're going to make this decision. You're not going to be part of it.”

So when this regulator actually stood up and said, “Hey, we're going to follow our mandate and protect the

customers of Enbridge,” I was astounded. They actually did their job. They had read their mandate. They listened to the evidence that was presented to them over a year—thousands of pages of evidence—and they said, “Damn, we've got to protect people.”

Of course, the party that used to attack the OEB for not standing up for customers realized that and said to themselves, “Boy, if this decision is allowed to go forward, then we've got Enbridge—a big company, very profitable—going to be very cranky with us.” That's why we have this bill before us today. Enbridge and the government came together very quickly to protect Enbridge—within hours—and give the minister talking points, and obediently, the minister used those talking points and does to this day.

But, Speaker, wait; there's more. Not only did the government decide right then to protect Enbridge, but they wrote the law to ensure that the regulator would no longer actually regulate. The bill restructures things so any well-connected lobbyist or team of lobbyists can get around the regulator. What kind of heaven have they created for utilities who want to pillage the public? The regulator, the Ontario Energy Board, is now there in many ways as they were for the Liberals: for display and not for protection of consumers. It's an expensive decoration. It disguises where real decisions are made about your hydro and gas bills.

This is straight out of this government's greenbelt playbook: decisions made in backrooms to protect powerful private utilities; not to protect you, not protect the Enbridge customers who are out there, not to protect the constituents who you represent, but to protect Enbridge.

The Premier is going to raise your gas bill. When you get the bill in the mail later this year with a notice saying, “We've got an increase,” I think you should remember who made sure that that happened. Make sure you remember who put their thumb on the scale to ensure that the price is higher. This Premier has acted and is acting to protect the very wealthy Enbridge and stick you and your family with the bill.

Not only is this decision that was protecting gas consumers going up in smoke, but future decisions will be in trouble. There were a few people who had comments. The Toronto Atmospheric Fund made a presentation. What was interesting to me was that typically they're much more focused on environmental and climate issues, but in this presentation to us at committee their focus was on the reality of ending effective regulation. They wrote:

“We have reservations regarding the extent of the new ministerial authority proposed in section 96.2. As noted above, the OEB has a mandate to protect ... consumers' interests”—I noted that before; that's their job. That's what they did—“while facilitating rational expansion of gas infrastructure....”

“The OEB does this using a well-regarded transparent and evidence-based process in which all stakeholders are invited to participate, introduce evidence and challenge evidence introduced by other parties. This quasi-judicial standard of decision-making provides a safeguard, ensur-

ing balance and alignment with goals of keeping energy costs down and expanding the energy system.

“Proposed section 96.2”—which is in the bill that’s before us—“permanently supersedes this transparent, evidence-based process with unrestricted ministerial authority to decide which gas infrastructure projects are in the public interest and who should bear the cost of the projects. Unlike the OEB, there is no obligation for the minister to consult stakeholders and transparently weigh evidence in an open process before issuing directives. This change also encourages project proponents to focus efforts on ministerial advocacy instead of putting forward rationale arguments and credible evidence in OEB applications and proceedings.”

What they’re saying is that the regulator is fully and truly just *The Muppet Show*; that everyone who can afford a lobbyist goes around that Muppet, goes to the minister, makes their pitch and, if they’ve been to a wedding or a stag, probably is successful.

Similarly, the Society of United Professionals, which represents the actual OEB staff, the Ontario Energy Board staff, spoke about the end of regulatory independence and they talked about the impact on investors coming to Ontario of the Muppet-ization of this regulator:

“At the heart of the society’s opposition to the proposed Bill 165 is the removal of regulatory independence from the OEB. Publicly traded companies that rely on regulated rates, and credit-rating agencies that determine credit quality in the province’s utility sector, need to trust that the regulator maintains its independence and does not become a political arm of the government.”

In a recent analysis, Standard and Poor’s Global, the bond-rating agency, laid out the four pillars of Ontario’s natural gas and electricity regulatory environment. They are regulatory stability, tariff-setting procedures, financial stability and regulatory independence. They further state that they “believe the Ontarian regulatory framework is the most credit-supportive kind, benefiting all key stakeholders.” However, they warn their assessment of the province’s regulatory framework could change if there was “a loss of regulatory independence or instances of political interference in the framework.”

Well, I’ll tell you right now, if you’re a credit-rating agency and someone is applying to invest in energy infrastructure in Ontario, and you know that you no longer actually have an independent regulator—that you actually just have a lobby machine that determines energy decisions based on who is most effective at getting to a minister—then you have an impact on the credit rating of investments made in this province. That is an argument that I would have thought would work on the government, because the argument was made in front of government members in committee, but it was ignored.

Also interesting were the words of the Industrial Gas Users Association—so you’re talking big employers in Ontario, major industries who use a lot of gas. They said there were two unintended consequences of the bill. I think they were overly generous, because I think they were entirely intended, but they said “unintended,” I think be-

cause they’re polite. They said that selective approvals—the ability to approve projects by going around the regulator—would push up costs for industry in Ontario; that uneconomic, nonviable projects would be subsidized by the industries that we depend on right now to employ tens of thousands of people.

So the big industries that this government talks about all the time didn’t like this. You should understand that they were not fans of ending regulation in Ontario. They said that the independent regulator has been useful in keeping costs down, but what we’re seeing now is going to drive costs up.

They also said they couldn’t understand why procedural fairness was something that was ruled out by the bill. I didn’t get into that, but there actually are rules in Ontario that governments and bodies should follow to ensure that decisions are made on a fair basis. Those were wiped out in this bill when it comes to energy regulation. They suggested that it was not a good thing to have that happen.

1550

So, the Premier is planning to raise your gas bills this year, and in future remove any protection that Ontarians may have from lobbyists reshaping energy policy in backrooms. Man, I feel like I’m back in Dalton McGuinty’s Ontario. It is amazing. For anyone who was here for the gas plant scandal—

Interjection.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Yes. It just totally—that’s where we are again. Amazing.

I want to dig a little further. There’s a subsidy that gas customers do not even know they are funding. If you talk to most people, they look at their gas bill and they see “gas”—it’s there—and they see “distribution,” another piece. That distribution is the cost of getting the gas through the pipes to their houses. They don’t spend a lot of time analyzing their bills. Most normal people don’t. What is going to be happening to them is that part on distribution is going to be going up because they’re going to pay the cost of expanding the system—not the shareholders, but the customers. The customers working long hours, getting as much overtime as they can, where they can, sometimes working second jobs, people who are cutting corners all the time, are going to get higher bills because this government wants to make Enbridge richer.

This past Christmas, I was talking to my nephew over Christmas dinner, and I said—because that’s the kind of weird uncle I am, to discuss these things over Christmas dinner—“You know that your gas bill is going to go up so that Enbridge can expand its gas system?” He put down his turkey and he said, “You’ve got to be kidding me—pass the cranberry. You’ve got to be kidding me about that. Why am I paying for that?” And I said, “Well, it’s the way it’s working.”

The independent regulator, the Ontario Energy Board, decided to put a stop to the subsidy because it raises energy bills for existing gas customers—and for new home buyers. This is not a wonderful gift for them. It sets them up for higher costs in the years to come, and it also

increases financial risks for the whole of the gas system. Ending the subsidy to new developments alone would save gas customers over \$1 billion over the next four years in avoided pipeline subsidy costs—a billion bucks.

So when this government says, “No, no, we’re going forward; it isn’t going to affect people’s gas bills,” tell me where the billion is going to come from. Because Enbridge is going to get permission to actually charge it to their customers. It isn’t some magic group of elves and leprechauns somewhere that are going to be coughing up. It’s going to be people with real bank accounts who are trying to get through their daily lives who are going to be charged this extra money. It comes to about \$300 per customer. Some calculations show it at \$600 over the next four years, so let’s say \$300 to \$600. There are about four million customers on the system. Now, I note that that \$1 billion doesn’t include any interest or profit payments that go to Enbridge. I’m talking bare minimum. I’m just talking the minimum number that was cited by the Ontario Energy Board.

What ending the subsidy would do, aside from protecting customers from being gouged, is it would encourage developers to install electric heat pumps in new homes instead of gas. I note the Minister of Energy has his home heated by a heat pump. He doesn’t have any gas connection. He talked about it when we were going through second reading. He talked about how comfortable it was, how he was happy. He didn’t talk about the water in a cat dish freezing over because he couldn’t keep the heat up in the winter. He didn’t talk about the end of civilization or his teeth chattering while he watched Netflix on a Saturday night. No. The heat pump kept him warm. He wasn’t in downtown Toronto. Belleville is still on the shores of Lake Ontario, but it’s a bit cooler than down here.

Ending the subsidy would be a win for customers who otherwise get charged that amount. It would be a win for new home owners, who’d get a far more cost-effective heating and cooling system. And it would be a win for the environment—I’ll detail that later. It would lower energy bills for existing customers, something I think is wildly popular, lower energy bills for new home owners because they’d be getting a less expensive system, and it would lower carbon emissions. And it would avoid costs further down the road when people move away from natural gas.

But there is a loser in the OEB decision, and the government picked it up within seconds; probably on their phones to the loser saying, “Enbridge, you’re going to lose money here.” Well, maybe it was the other way around. Enbridge may have phoned them and said, “Hey, we’re going to lose money here. Jump to it.”

Enbridge can afford, frankly, to finance any expansion they want. They don’t need to use the customers as an ATM. Many tenants and homeowners, by the way, are going to have a tough time dealing with those bills. So our task, I believe, is to protect those tenants, those homeowners, and not protect these multi-billion-dollar multinational corporations. Well, well.

Now, the minister is trying to pass this legislation, the bill before us, to overturn that decision, the decision to

protect customers. The government has decided to stand with Enbridge and its lobbyists, using the argument that change will reduce housing supply and affordability.

But developers can just forgo gas and install heat pumps instead. If they have a customer who really wants gas, they can do that, but everyone gets an electrical connection in any event. You’re not building new subdivisions without electrical connections, frankly. And if you’ve got an electrical connection, you can put in a heat pump.

So why wouldn’t one take the opportunity to install an electric heat pump and forgo the extra cost of putting in gas? And even if you didn’t want to go there, why do people around this province have to subsidize this? Why do people in Sudbury or London or Kingston or Thunder Bay have to pay more to subsidize a multi-billion-dollar corporation?

You don’t have to take my word for any of this. Ian Mondrow is a partner with the law firm Gowling WLG, practising in the area of energy regulation policy. He wrote an op-ed that was published in the *Globe and Mail*. He can see that leaving the regulator’s decision in place would protect current gas customers and new homeowners. Now, Gowling is not an environmental group. They’re a pretty straightforward corporate Bay Street law firm, and they understand the economics of this whole system. I’m going to quote the op-ed from the lawyer who specializes in energy regulation policy:

“While including gas connection costs to developers up front would marginally increase the cost of a new house, an offsetting rate credit recognizing the upfront payment would lower ongoing gas rates, resulting in a wash for homebuyers. The other choice would be to forgo gas servicing in favour of electric heat pumps, thus lowering the operating costs of the house—a win for homebuyers.”

The member from Perth–Wellington, back when we were talking at second reading, was talking about new home buyers. Well, we’ve got someone who specializes in energy policy saying this would be better for new home buyers.

“Either choice would reduce Enbridge capital costs, and potential stranded assets, in the range of \$1 billion over the proposed five-year gas rate plan period, significantly reducing delivery rates and customer risk.”

Two associate professors, Brandon Schaufele and Adam Fremeth of the Ivey Business School, wrote a post about this as well: “The government’s decision to override the OEB should have virtually no effect on affordable housing in the province.” So the government’s whole argument that their bill is one that will keep the cost of housing down does not bear scrutiny from academics who work in this field.

If this bill passes, it’s not going to make housing any cheaper. It’s not going to be to the advantage of homebuyers. In other words, the government’s actions will make you, Enbridge customers, pay more and will not help those new home buyers. But it will mean higher rates for your gas bills. The Premier is going to raise your gas bill.

Don't be confused. Be very clear and plain about this. The Premier is going to raise your gas bill.

Now, gas is no longer the cheapest heating source. Investing in new gas pipelines for heating is financially foolish because they will become obsolete and a massive cost to all current and future customers as we stop burning gas to heat our homes and other buildings.

Even the minister was talking about the electrification of home heating. He knows it's coming; in fact, his whole plan for providing electricity to Ontario is based on the idea of a massive increase in electricity demand for home heating. He knows that the demand for gas is going to fade dramatically, or at least he's willing to bet several billion dollars on that analysis.

So you've got the minister saying, "I need to spend billions of dollars on new generation for home heating," and at the same time saying, "No, no, I've got to protect the gas utility." Well, the reality is, you're moving from one technology to another. What his plan means is that over the next few decades, fewer and fewer people will be burning gas, and the people who leave the system will not have to carry the burden of the cost of those pipes that are in the ground, but the ones who stay will be stuck with it.

1600

There are cheaper alternatives to what has been before us. The OEB recognized that. Like rotary-dial phones, like Blockbuster Video, natural gas furnaces are coming to the end of their time—not tomorrow, not in 2025. But over the next 20 years, cheaper alternatives such as home heat pumps are undermining Enbridge's market for home heating.

Even the parliamentary assistant, in his comments on third reading the other day, said the time for natural gas, in the near term, the middle term—yes, in the next 10 years, the next 20 years, it will probably be around; the next 30 years, it won't. I appreciate the comment from the parliamentary assistant on that.

So the minister said exactly that—we're going to be electrifying our homes. He's betting a lot of money on that.

The OEB ruled that Enbridge can't spread the cost of hooking up new homes over decades or charge it to current gas customers like you, like the people who are watching this, because those who are Enbridge customers are going to be stuck with a bill that's going to be pretty significant. But that's what the Premier wants to do—he wants to raise your gas bills. He will increase your gas bill. The OEB said that Enbridge or new home developers could take the risk if they want, but not new home buyers or current Enbridge customers. They recognize this would likely mean many more people installing cheaper heat pumps to provide heating.

As I've said before, the minister has an electric heat pump; he has got an electric resistance coil to back it up. And as I said before, the bowl of water for the cat has not frozen in the kitchen. He's still alive. There are many debates, but he's still there. So, apparently, an electric heat pump does work outside of downtown Toronto.

I'm going to go back to Ian Mondrow, the lawyer working for Gowling, about the question of how we can

actually deal with the issues before us, because passing legislation to reinstate a subsidy that's completely out of step and that risks financial disaster down the road doesn't make sense.

The minister, in his statement in December and his speech at second reading, said the decision of the OEB would increase the cost of energy, increase the cost of a new home. The facts do not support that claim. When you look for those facts, when you round them up, when you put them together and you compare them to the minister's statement, they are not related; they are not even distant cousins. There is no blood relation between the facts and the minister's statement; it's just not there.

I'm going to go back to the energy regulator lawyer from Gowling, Ian Mondrow, who had this to say about the claim by the minister—he writes in a more formal style than me, but I think he's quite good:

"Early the following day after the release of the OEB decision, Ontario's Minister of Energy released a statement expressing that he was 'extremely disappointed' with the OEB's decision.... The minister asserted that the OEB's determination on this point ... 'could lead to tens of thousands of dollars added to the cost of building new homes, and ... would slow or halt the construction of new homes, including affordable housing.'"

Good God. That's a scary thought. You've got to sober up when you hear that kind of statement.

Interestingly, the energy lawyer went on:

"If those facts were true"—and I like the way he slips in the "if"—"then the minister could well have a legitimate and immediate housing policy concern. The facts as determined in the OEB's decision do not, however, support a 'tens of thousands of dollars' increase in home costs, and it does not appear that the decision will in fact 'slow or halt the construction of new homes.' The conclusions expressed in the minister's statement"—and, frankly, his speech on the bill, according to the lawyer—"are inconsistent with the facts relied on, and determinations made, by the OEB's three-member expert panel of commissioners as a result of the comprehensive hearing process undertaken."

I want to say a few other things about the area of charges. I'm speaking to you gas customers who will get stuck with a higher bill if this legislation passes. One is that claim that gas heating is the cheapest option. Numerous studies now show that when you compare the combined costs of equipment and energy, heat pumps provide cheaper heating than gas heating. Just putting in a heat pump or putting in a furnace or an air conditioner, those capital costs and the cost over a lifetime—it's cheaper to go with a heat pump. In fact, the minister referenced that in his speech, that Enbridge, which keeps spreading the claim about gas being cheaper, is now facing an investigation and hearing at the Competition Bureau for false advertising, for making that claim that gas is cheaper.

The National Observer reported on this case: "Enbridge has a new fight on its hands as Competition Bureau Canada officially launches an investigation against the gas giant over allegations the company is misleading cus-

tomers about the role of gas in the energy transition.” I don’t think the Competition Bureau picks up frivolous cases. It will be interesting to see what their decision is. But on the face of it, there is enough credibility for the hearing to go forward. “Specifically, Enbridge has promoted new gas hook-ups as the cheapest way for Ontarians to heat homes, while branding natural gas as ‘low carbon’ and ‘clean energy.’” That’s being challenged by the environmental organization Environmental Defence.

National Observer reports: “‘Enbridge’s dishonest marketing is duping people into installing new gas hook-ups and spending thousands of dollars on new gas furnaces and other appliances, falsely claiming its cheaper than heating with electricity, which is just not true,’ said Environmental Defence programs director Keith Brooks in a statement. ‘It is good that the Competition Bureau has agreed to investigate Enbridge.’”

“The ... complaint filed by Environmental Defence, Ontario Clean Air Alliance, the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment and a group of Ontario residents in September accuses Enbridge of falsely claiming gas is the most cost-effective way to heat homes. Enbridge has made this claim online and in communities pegged for expansion in an attempt to increase its customer base.”

Environmental Defence summarizes the situation this way: “Enbridge is misleading consumers into connecting to its gas system using false and misleading representations.... Enbridge is telling potential customers that gas is the most cost-effective way to heat their homes and suggesting”—and this I find totally entertaining—“that it is ‘clean energy’ and ‘low carbon.’ None of these representations are true.” That lack of honesty about what’s real and not real when it comes to home heating is something people should keep in mind.

But the other issue, and this is a big one because as the minister has said, we’re moving away from gas heating our homes—again, this government is committed to spending billions of dollars on new electricity generation to heat homes. If they’re doing that—if they are successful in their plans, there will not be a market for Enbridge. Those who are hooked up to the system will be stuck with the cost of a system that is increasingly expensive. We’ve had these transitions before. It’s not unique. It’s not novel.

If you look at the energy history of this province, you can see that at about 1958-59 TransCanada pipeline came from Alberta to Ontario with natural gas. This opened a whole new way to heat homes. It was cleaner. It was more convenient. It was probably cheaper than coal. From 1960 to 1970, the portion of homes that used coal for home heating went from 30% to 1%. Within a decade, 30% of Ontario homes no longer used what had been a very popular fuel.

So I want to note you can have a very rapid transition from one technology to another, frankly, with probably very little in the way of governments programs in that case. People looked at it and said, “Hey, handling coal is pretty dirty. We spend a lot of money on it. I put in gas. I just got a thermostat on the wall. I move it around when I

want more heat. I don’t have to go in the basement and shovel coal into the furnace.”

I have to say, a reduction from 30% of homes being heated by coal in 1960 to 1% by 1970: These transitions happen, they happen rapidly and those who stay with the old technology get stuck with bills.

We’re facing a situation in Ontario now where, as we move away from gas home heating, something that the minister has said we’re doing because he has his own electrification plan for Ontario—people who stay out in the gas system, who get sold onto the gas system are going to be stuck with higher bills. The pipes that are put in the ground are going to be paid for by those who can’t afford to buy a new heating system, ones whose furnace is, say, eight years old. Those furnaces have a 15- or 20-year lifespan. If your furnace is eight years old, you’re not going to get rid of it and buy a new furnace. Mostly people can’t. They only buy when they have to—normally in January, when their furnace dies and they phone desperately to get a new one. They will be stuck with higher bills as the system becomes more and more expensive. It’s a risk for homeowners; it’s a risk for tenants. It’s a problem people are going to have to face in the future.

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Frankly, continuing the subsidy from existing consumers—and remember, the Premier wants to raise your gas bill. He will drive up your gas bill. He will make you pay more so he can create deeper problems for you in the years to come.

Now, another reality that we need to face is the volatility of gas prices in this world. Quite a few people who are gas customers, about four million in Ontario, know that around 2022, the price of gas went up dramatically. What was happening in world events at the time? Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the disruption of the supply of natural gas to Western Europe, and frankly, with that disruption and the rocketing increase in the world price for gas, you had a situation where the world market was setting the price.

We in Ontario generally have paid a much lower price than people do on the world market, but you need to know that 60% of the gas that we burn in Ontario is imported from the United States. It used to come from western Canada, now mostly from the United States, and in the United States there are large numbers of liquefied natural gas export terminals that are shipping that gas out. In fact, recently, within the last few months, there was a pause put on a few of those liquefied natural gas terminals because industrial manufacturers in the United States were saying, “These exports are killing us. They’re killing us. You need to stop exporting all the gas because it’s changing our cost picture.”

Well, that’s right. The world price is a lot higher than we pay. The more you integrate into the gas system, the more you’re tied into a very volatile pricing framework, one that can give price shocks. And we’ve had them. I don’t know when we’ll have another spike or a price shock, but wars happen, disruptions of energy supplies happen, and people suffer as a result.

I need to emphasize something that I mentioned at the beginning. The OEB, the Ontario Energy Board, the regulator, didn't say you can't have a gas connection to a new house. They didn't ban it; they don't have the power. If Enbridge wanted to install new gas connections to new homes, they could do it with the capital that's provided by their investors, and they could try and recover it over the next few decades. But actually, I don't think they take that as a good bet. I think they realize that there's a huge risk to putting that money down into expansion of the system, and instead of them putting their money on the table and watching the wheel spin, they're putting the money of customers across this province on the table. No one knows what the outcome will be other than this: Gas will fade out over the next 20 to 30 years and the people who are last in the system will be paying a lot of money.

Speaker, there's no doubt that high prices are the number one thing that we're dealing with here. I would say that you go out there and people who are trying to make sure their rent is paid on the 1st or who have mortgage payments, who have to get groceries, are very focused on immediate costs, and I don't blame them. But we need to keep in mind that there's another reality, something that is coming at us, and that's that the world is steadily getting hotter. Every year, we are seeing more extreme weather events, which is driving up the cost of insurance, which actually puts a burden on public treasuries. Because insurance doesn't cover all those costs, it means that we're going to be paying more through our taxes, either higher taxes or reduced services, to cover the damage from climate change.

In Ontario, the second-largest number in terms of greenhouse gas emissions is from heating buildings. So in order to actually meet any targets to stabilize the climate to avoid the worst of extreme weather, we actually have to move away from gas. It isn't just that heat pumps are cheaper, which they are; that they have a future, which they do, but also that we need to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions to stabilize our climate so that we do have a future, so that our children have a future.

There are places now where the impact of climate is having a very direct impact. Sorry, impact—

Interjections.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I apologize to the member. There are conversations taking place and they're disrupting the member who is speaking. If you could please keep your conversations a little bit lower. Thank you.

I apologize. The member can continue.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I follow climate issues, and you should know that there are three jurisdictions in North America right now facing really severe problems around insurance costs: Florida, Louisiana and California.

Now, Florida and Louisiana, because of the impact of hurricanes, the increasing power of those hurricanes, the frequency of those hurricanes, insurance companies are saying, "It's not worth it to us to insure because we're going to have to replace these houses pretty regularly," so they're actually pulling out of those jurisdictions.

In California, it's forest fires that are causing insurance companies to say, "We're not taking any more business." In those three jurisdictions, three state governments are setting up a low—

Interjections.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I apologize to the member. Would we please keep the conversations to a minimum. Please? Thank you.

I apologize. The member from Toronto–Danforth can continue.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Thank you.

The reality is that people are having a harder and harder time getting insurance, that they're seeing their insurance bills double, triple and quadruple because, simply, the cost of replacing buildings on a regular basis because of fire or hurricanes is an awfully expensive process.

Those are the most vulnerable spots, but we're going to see that here in Ontario. I was talking to one of my colleagues from the north today, talking about the increase in insurance costs because of wildfires. This is a reality. We are going to see increasing impacts on our standard of living from rising temperatures. It's not just going to be insurance. It's also going to be food production because more drought and more floods reduce food production. You get more diseases in a hotter world, more exotic diseases.

And already in Canada, the Insurance Bureau of Canada has said that something like a million homes are facing potential for losing home insurance because of flood risk. Speaker, we actually have to deal with the climate issue seriously, and we have an opportunity because of technological advances to actually help people contain or reduce their heating and cooling bills, while at the same time reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This bill will undermine that because the simple reality is that when a developer is putting in a new subdivision, if they're getting all these new pipes paid for by customers in the rest of Ontario, they're going to do that and put in a gas furnace.

If they weren't getting this subsidy, they would probably put in a heat pump because it's the cheapest option—pretty straightforward. But in doing this, in passing this bill, the government is undermining its own climate plan as well as reducing people's standard of living and putting all of us at much greater risk in the years to come.

So, Speaker, I think I've made most of the arguments that I want to make, but I need to touch on a few other things. I think that the undermining of the independence of the regulator is something that is not at the top of most people's minds.

I was talking to a reporter the other day who was trying to cover this story and they said, "I don't know how to report this story. No one has heard of the Ontario Energy Board." Yes, I'm seeing an opposition member nod his head, because he's right. Who has heard of the Ontario Energy Board? I mean, you've got to be a pretty exotic bunch of people—sorry, 124 of us in this room and maybe a thousand in the rest of the province who have heard of it.

And there's all kinds of stuff talked about with this 40-year amortization of the cost of hookups. Very few people spend a lot of time thinking about amortization of utility infrastructure—very few sane people who talk to neighbours and are considered fun.

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But this is going to be a big issue for people when they get their higher gas bill. Because they don't deserve to get a higher gas bill; they deserve to have their interests protected by the regulator. I think it's entirely reasonable that you give a regulator instructions to protect customers from unreasonable costs. And when they see that the costs are changing, that the parameters that they relied on over decades are no longer there and they act to protect those customers, that decision should be upheld. It is entirely reasonable to uphold it.

If we proceed with this bill as we have, then we will undermine the financial well-being of gas customers today. We will undermine the financial well-being of those who buy new homes that have gas furnaces installed in them, because they will get stuck with higher costs in the years to come. And we will undermine our chances of actually stabilizing the climate and having a future that is more benign than is likely to be the one we're getting right now. So there are some very good reasons for not doing this.

I was astounded, going through the bill, at seeing the removal of independent regulation. I thought there would be some messing around—there's no getting around it. I thought there would be an instruction saying, "This one time, you're going to be able to charge them and soak them." But that isn't where we ended up. What we ended up with was a system of energy regulation by lobbyists.

That is not defensible. It's not defensible in the rest of Canada. It's not defensible in the rest of North America. If you actually want to regulate and protect customers and have a rules-based system where evidence is presented and adjudicated, then you don't have the kind of bill we have before us, and you also don't have the removal of procedures that require governments to operate in a fair and transparent way.

Very few people have heard of the Statutory Powers Procedure Act—in fact, probably less than the people in this room now. But it's an act that requires governments to actually inform people of decisions that are going to come down, give them an opportunity to make a presentation, give them information about the basis upon which a decision is made. And with regard to this legislation, that act is of no effect whatsoever. It is taken out. That is an extraordinary movement towards arbitrary decisions. The Statutory Powers Procedure Act is not the most thrilling piece of legislation in the world, but it actually requires some small level of fairness in decision-making that one would expect in a democratic society.

So what we have here is a bill that will increase people's Enbridge costs, that will gut actual regulation in Ontario, that will reduce the use of fairness requirements in government, and make our environment far more perilous in the years to come. This bill needs to be defeated.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): It's now time for questions.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I listened with great interest to the critic from the opposition, as I always do. And he said a couple of things that—one, I want to take exception to. He talked about people who were accountable, that the government essentially said that we are not accountable. Well, is there anybody more accountable than those that go to the polls every four years—in fact, like we did in Milton this past week? The government is accountable; it's called an election.

The member also said something about, "The government doesn't like to answer questions." Well, I'd like to ask him a question. Maybe he can do it the way that he says the government doesn't do. Is it not in fact that the way that this legislation would put back into place the same system that we've had for decades, ensuring that natural gas distribution as it is built is spread across the distribution network, the customer network, so that no one is left with a bill that is exceeding what they can afford—it's spread across the gas network, the same way it's been for decades: Yes, or no?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I actually appreciate the question.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Try answering it.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I will. As long as I don't get cut off, I'll give you a good answer.

The decision to charge customers is based on the idea that the lines will be in the ground for 40 years, but they won't be. We're talking about a system that will not be functioning in 40 years. It cannot; not only because, technologically, gas furnaces are expensive compared to heat pumps—so, again, like rotary dial phones or Blockbuster Video, they are on their way out. That ain't going to be here. The assumption that the vast bulk of customers will be repaid over 40 years is no longer true.

And in fact, Enbridge's own consultants, in their presentation to the OEB, said that Enbridge was in the situation where they were headed towards going down, because people were going to abandon the system. There won't be customers to pay in the future. Forty years ago, it was true; they were going to pay. It isn't going to be true in the future.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I first want to thank my colleague from Toronto—Danforth for his presentation—I would say, an hour of good, solid argument as to why this legislation should not move forward, and if the government wanted to do the responsible thing for Ontarians, they should not proceed with this bill.

The member reminded the House that when the Liberals were in power, the Conservatives criticized the politicization of electricity planning and the Liberal disregard for evidence and professional, independent analysis. The Liberal government directed IESO to write blank cheques for new gas plants and sign hundreds of overpriced, private contracts with no OEB hearing to find out if these were a good deal for consumers, and what happened? Hydro bills skyrocketed.

So my question to the member is, are we seeing history repeat itself, and what is going to happen to consumers with this legislation moving forward?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I want to thank my colleague for the question.

Yes, we are seeing history repeat itself. The Liberals had a different technique. They would define where the OEB could make a ruling and then they would make their decision in another space, and it was always quite something amazing to watch, that major decisions were shifted out of the OEB, into ministerial area of discretion. But what's happened here is they're not even doing that, they're just saying, "The minister can overrule. The minister can make these decisions. That's the simple reality." It's even less of a regulator than it was in the past.

And you're quite correct: If energy companies get the chance to write their own cheques on your bank account, man, they're going to write a lot of cheques. That's where we're headed. That's what this is all about.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Questions?

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thanks again to the member. I have another question here. First of all, he didn't answer that question. It was a yes or no question; he didn't answer it. So I guess he's training to be in government. I guess he thinks he's going to get here someday.

But I want to ask you a little bit about rural Ontario, because you're talking about—you were saying marginally increasing the cost of housing, if we come back with this system that's been in place for decades. But I come from rural Ontario; you don't. And I know what it costs, and we're hoping to get natural gas moved into many of our rural communities. People are begging for it. Farmers are begging for it.

So do you believe that it's fair, then, that the cost of a new home in a riding like mine, in Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, should go up by tens of thousands of dollars for that person, just because they have to absorb all of the costs of bringing natural gas to that home when the distribution gets there? Are you saying that, in rural Ontario, you've got to pay the full cost, where all over—the last 30 years or more—it's been shared by everyone?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: There are two things. The first is that, if Enbridge wants to provide a pipeline to a development anywhere in Ontario, they can do that tomorrow. They haven't been blocked from doing that. If they think that they will actually get paid back, they should do it. Their investors put in money, they can get paid back on that.

But I'll say the other thing: I don't think that, in the future, this is going to be very different between rural and urban Ontario because both jurisdictions will be moving away from gas. There is no good financial reason to go to gas at this point. There is no good financial reason.

In fact, when you look at the studies done by the federal government, it is more expensive to go to gas than it is to go to a heat pump. That's the simple reality. It was cheaper in Montreal to operate home heating and cooling on a heat pump than it was with gas. Montreal is not a hot place.

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The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank my colleague from Toronto–Danforth for a very interesting one-hour debate on this bill. It's becoming more and more obvious that all that the bill does is it gives this government the power to force gas consumers to pay costs that the Ontario Energy Board believes they should not have to pay. The Ontario Energy Board is a consumer protection board. It exists to protect the consumer from being gouged by any kind of company, be it natural gas—so why, with this bill, does the government give itself the power to do this? I feel like the title of the bill should be "pushing energy costs up act"—not down. What do you think?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Well, that would be the non-Orwellian title for it, but unfortunately, some cousin of George Orwell works for the minister and was delegated the task of writing this bill and decided to go the opposite way. I agree with you that this bill is the "more expensive energy act" and "Christmas for Enbridge shareholders act, 2024," and should be recognized as such.

This bill is not meant to protect customers. This bill is not meant to keep energy costs down. This is meant to keep people's disposable income down. It's meant to keep investor profits up. But it's not going to be helping people, not a bit.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you to my colleague and neighbour in the east end of Toronto. That was a fantastic, informative speech.

My question to you is, since the Minister of Energy actually has a heat pump—which is a huge revelation to me. Like, wow, wonder of all wonders, he actually believes in it. He must believe in climate change and climate action to do that. Would you like a tour of his house and a field trip there with me some time, if he would invite us?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Well, I appreciate the question. If invited by the minister, certainly I would go. I've gotten along with the minister lots of times. We disagree over stuff. We had fun when we were both in opposition and grilling Liberal ministers in estimates.

But I can't say I think that the minister believes in climate change, because if he did, he'd be acting in a very different way. He wouldn't be expanding the gas-fired generation fleet in Ontario, because frankly, he's undermining our climate goals, but he's also undermining the clean interests of this province in having an electricity system that doesn't belch out a lot more greenhouse gases.

I suspect, my colleague from Beaches–East York, that we'd have a lot of fun. The minister was pretty clear; he said he loved his heat pump, that he didn't have any troubles when it got really cold. The resistance heater came on board. He didn't have propane backup. He didn't have gas backup. I think that other people in Ontario should have the same opportunity as the minister has.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): It is now time for further debate.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: As the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Energy, it is my pleasure to rise this afternoon to speak on the third reading of Bill 165, Keeping Energy Costs Down Act, introduced by the Minister of Energy.

Speaker, as the minister said, the changes proposed in Bill 165 will help to protect Ontario's energy consumers and get housing and energy infrastructure built faster, while ensuring that families and businesses continue to have access to energy that is reliable and affordable, now and in the future. I'm proud of the work that the minister and our government are doing on a pragmatic approach to energy policy that provides customer choice and is also one of the cleanest in the world.

Speaker, just last week, I was proud to represent the minister at the Niagara Parks Power Station to celebrate 100 years of hydroelectric power in Niagara Falls with our friends from Hatch, a global engineering firm based in Mississauga–Lakeshore; Niagara Falls mayor Jim Diodati; and the Niagara Parks Commission CEO David Adames.

We're extending the life of these stations by at least another 30 years, providing up to 1,700 megawatts of clean, reliable hydro power with a billion-dollar refurbishment plan to help Ontario meet our growing energy needs and to ensure we have the power we need for the homes we're building.

For the next major international investment: Thanks to all the work our government has done to attract investments, Ontario is quickly becoming a leader in electric vehicles and battery manufacturing and green steel-making, with over \$43 billion in investments from global automakers like Stellantis, Volkswagen and Umicore, and just two weeks ago, another \$15 billion from Honda, the largest auto sector investment in the history of Canada.

The investments don't stop there. We're also attracting massive investments in advanced manufacturing, life sciences and more. In fact, last September, in my own riding of Mississauga–Lakeshore, the member of Oakville North–Burlington and I were proud to welcome a \$6.5-million investment by Eurofins, a global leader in bioanalysis, in a new lab that will support groundbreaking research while creating new well-paying jobs in Mississauga.

Across the province, we have been able to attract over \$3 billion of investment in the life sciences sector in the last three years alone.

Since 2018, Ontario has added over 725,000 new jobs—more new manufacturing jobs last year than all 50 US states combined. That's one reason why we're seeing manufacturing move to electrify their systems, which will reduce emissions even further.

Adding to that, Speaker, Ontario's population is growing faster, by over half a million people last year, and we're on track for at least another half a million in 2024. That's more growth than any US state, including the fastest-growing states of Florida and Texas.

All this means that, for the first time since 2005—20 years ago—Ontario's electricity demand is rising. The

Independent Electricity System Operator reports that electricity demand in the province could more than double by 2050. That means that our entire current supply, including all our nuclear and hydroelectric capacity, would need to double to meet this expanded demand. Clearly, it is critical that we start now to build new capacity to support all the new infrastructure and homes that Ontario will need, including the 1.5 million new homes to keep up with our growing population.

In my own community, we're adding whole new communities along the Mississauga waterfront, including the site of the old Lakeview coal-fired generation plant. They will be homes for tens of thousands of people, including thousands of affordable homes. I know that the Liberal leader, Bonnie Crombie, is still livid about this, as she wanted to cut the number of affordable homes in half, but our government is moving forward on this.

Many of these new homes and businesses will require heating, and my constituents should have every choice available to them. With Bill 165, our government is ensuring that we hear from everyone to help guarantee that the right regulations are put into place.

As the minister said, the OEB made a decision last December that affects families and businesses without consulting the major players and stakeholders that understand this sector best, and without consulting the IESO about the impact this decision could have on Ontario's electricity grid.

The minister has proposed amendments to the Ontario Energy Board Act in Bill 165 that would help to ensure that this never happens again. I want to take a moment now to echo the minister's concerns about what commissioner Allison Duff had to say in her opinion. Given its importance, I'd like to read from here.

She wrote, "I do not support a zero-year revenue horizon for assessing the economics of small volume gas expansion" consumers. "The ... comparison table filed by Enbridge Gas did not even consider zero within the range of revenue horizon options." As she wrote, "Zero is not a horizon. It is fundamentally inconsistent with the intent of E.B.O. 188 by requiring 100% of connection costs upfront..., rather than a contribution in aid of construction. There was no mention of zero in E.B.O. 188," although "a 20 to 30 year revenue horizon was considered. To me, the risk of unintended consequences to Enbridge Gas, its" consumers "and other stakeholders increases given the magnitude of this ... change.

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The commissioner also asked, if we switched completely to all-electric development, would electricity generation, transmission, distributors and the IESO be able to meet Ontario's energy demand by 2025? And, Speaker, she didn't know. Obviously I share the minister's concerns about this, and I think that everyone in this chamber should be worried when the commissioner says she didn't have the evidence she needed to reach a decision, let alone such a major change for a 40-year revenue horizon set in 1998 to a zero-year revenue horizon in less than a year. To be

frank, Speaker, as the minister said, the OEB went outside of their lane when they made this decision.

Back in December, when the minister said the government would bring forward legislation to fix this change, we all understood how critical this legislation would be. The change that we're proposing now in Bill 165 would ensure that major OEB decisions, with far-reaching implications like this one, don't happen again without the appropriate stakeholder consultations. These changes, if passed, would allow for the broader stakeholder participation in all major OEB hearings.

Speaker, our government is working hard to ensure that the voices of Ontarians are heard, and it was sad to see that the voices that matter most were not even acknowledged here. To ensure that future OEB decisions reflect and support the priorities of the people of Ontario, the amendments in Bill 165 would require the OEB to provide opportunities for the organizations and individuals that are affected most to participate in the proceedings. As well, these changes would provide the government, through the Ministry of Energy, with the authority to ask for a hearing on any matter of public interest that could arise during an OEB proceeding. This would ensure that the voice of Ontarians are heard on matters that will affect their families, businesses and communities.

Speaker, it is also important to note that if the amendments in Bill 165 are passed, our government may propose regulations related to specific stakeholders or economic sectors, such as housing, transit, low-income Ontario construction and government agencies, for which the OEB should have a process in place to ensure that the stakeholders are aware of the proceedings that may significantly impact them and also that they invite the participants in the OEB proceedings and other consultations.

Speaker, I know that better public and stakeholder input into OEB decisions will be a key mandate of the new OEB chair, who the minister will appoint in the near future, and I understand that there will be some clearly defined expectations about how the OEB and their new chair should conduct themselves in a number of areas. As I said, this includes improving OEB hearings to allow for broader stakeholder participation in OEB proceedings and more stakeholder input to the OEB in general, especially related to natural gas and electricity.

Speaker, the chair of the board of directors will continue to be accountable to the Minister of Energy for the effective delivery of the OEB mandate and to ensure that independence of the decision-making by the commissioner and others that carry out the work of the OEB.

Speaker, at this point, I would like to refer to a column written by Aleck Dadson, the former chief operating officer of the Ontario Energy Board, and Ed Waitzer, the former chair of the Ontario Securities Commission, who shared their frustration with the OEB decision.

They wrote, "In our view," the OEB "should focus on deciding specific matters in a transparent, fair and non-partisan manner. They should do so by applying a legal and regulatory framework to findings based on evidence and arguments presented.... And they should avoid trying

to resolve complex policy issues, in which any decision will affect unrepresented stakeholders and other areas of concern. In short," the OEB panel "shouldn't stray."

Speaker, even the former COO of the Ontario Energy Board understands how important it is for the stakeholders to be involved in this process. Our government also understands the importance of cutting red tape and reducing costs to help get shovels in the ground faster, which is exactly what Bill 165 will help do, as we all recognize Ontario is in the middle of a housing crisis, but unfortunately, it seems that the OEB did not even take this into consideration when making this decision, and would force new families to pay higher upfront costs when buying a new home.

That's why I was very happy to hear from the Ontario Home Builders' Association, which thanks our government for introducing Bill 165. They wrote that they applaud the "government for introducing legislation to revoke the Ontario Energy Board's December 21, 2023, decision. Securing energy choices for Ontario's communities is vital to support economic development, energy access and reliability while we take a measured step toward energy transition."

As well, the Ontario Real Estate Association also reached out to tell us how much this high, upfront cost would hurt Ontarians. Their CEO, Tim Hudak, said, "If we want to create more Canadian homeowners, we should not whack them with this massive upfront bill for infrastructure that will last for generations."

And he doesn't stop there. He goes on to explain how big an overstep this was: "This head-scratching overstep by the OEB will push affordability further out of reach for Ontarians, and put provincial and municipal housing targets at risk. Such one-size-fits-all policies will be particularly harmful to Ontario's smaller and northern communities, where energy infrastructure is not well-developed."

Catherine Swift, the president of the Coalition of Concerned Manufacturers and Businesses of Canada said this decision would have the effect of discouraging badly needed new home construction, especially regarding affordable housing.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture had similar feedback. They said, "We are supportive of this decisive action taken by the Minister of Energy to address the OEB decision, which threatens to increase costs for new homes relying on natural gas for heating, jeopardizing housing affordability and future access to natural gas. This decision also challenges Ontario's efforts and current policy to bring reliable and affordable natural gas to Ontarians across the province, which has been an investment priority for agriculture and for rural communities."

They continue: "The OEB decision has the potential to stifle the growth of the industrial sector, leading to higher costs for manufacturing, agriculture and consumer goods." They wrote, and I agree, that our priority needs to be on providing infrastructure to support the growing province while minimizing unnecessary financial burdens on residents and businesses.

And again, our government did not make this decision lightly, but it is critical that we support fair and inclusive decision-making at the OEB. My constituency office in Mississauga hears daily about the housing affordability issues we're having, not just in Ontario, but across Canada. And I know that most members are hearing the same thing in their offices. Unlike the queen of the carbon tax, Bonnie Crombie, and some in the opposition, our government takes these issues very seriously. Our new members from Milton and Lambton-Kent-Middlesex take these issues very seriously as well.

1650

In addition to saving new home buyers money and creating more opportunities for economic development, the changes in Bill 165 will help to ensure that the province can continue to attract critical investments in the auto sector, life sciences, technology and much more. Through Bill 165, our government is seeking to do what we always do: to grow Ontario's economy, cut red tape and get shovels in the ground to build the homes and infrastructure we need, while also ensuring the Ontario continues to be a place where the people's voices are heard on the issues that matter most to them.

Speaker, access to affordable and reliable energy is critical to our province's growth, and the changes that we're proposing in Bill 165 will help to preserve customer energy choices and to ensure that all voices are heard when the OEB makes any major decision. In fact, Bill 165 would improve the OEB and ensure its decisions are based on feedback from the entire sector and consistent with government policy to protect ratepayers.

Ontario is in an excellent position. We have one of the cleanest electricity systems in the entire world, and we have been able to attract tens of billions of dollars of investment from companies who want to do business here in Ontario. And I want to thank the Minister of Economic Development for all the businesses that he's been able to bring into the province of Ontario: \$43 billion of automotive investment to build the cars of the future right here in Ontario, for the world. This has never happened with any other government in the history of Ontario, so I want to thank the minister and the Premier for being able to attract all these companies here to Ontario. At the same time, our growing knowledge in nuclear technology is creating new opportunities for our province and for Canada.

The future for Ontario is bright, but we need to make the right decisions today to ensure that we continue to have access to affordable, reliable and clean energy tomorrow. I know Bill 165 an important step towards this brighter future, and I want to urge all members to make the right decision and support this bill.

I want to thank you, Madam Speaker, for this opportunity here today to speak on Bill 165.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): It's now time for questions.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you to the member from Mississauga-Lakeshore for his presentation. Less than 24 hours: This is how long it took the

minister to announce he would overturn the decision of experts at the OEB to the benefit of Enbridge. Apparently, swift action is reserved for corporations, not, say, underfunded hospitals, affordable housing and cost-of-living issues. With experts, particularly, tripping over themselves to criticize this bill, calling it Orwellian and suggesting it should be named "keep Enbridge profits high act," how can the government justify ramming this bill through without so much as a nod to comprehensive stakeholder consultations?

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank the member for that question. As you know, there are stakeholders that agree with Bill 165, because at the end of the day, we have to make homes much cheaper in the province of Ontario—when it would cost an individual house \$4,400 here in Mississauga or in Toronto, or \$8,000 to \$10,000 to hook up gas in northern Ontario.

I know that we are going to transition to electric moving forward, but at this time, we still need natural gas because if everybody today were driving an electric car, with the investments that we are attracting here to the province of Ontario, we would have blackouts here in the province of Ontario. We have to have a combination of natural gas and electricity to move forward in this province and create the jobs that we are attracting here in Ontario for the future.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Questions?

Mrs. Robin Martin: Thank you to the member for Mississauga-Lakeshore for that great presentation. I was really interested; you mentioned a former colleague of mine, Ed Waitzer, who was also chair of the Ontario Securities Commission, and Aleck Dadson, who I remember as well—I think also a lawyer—who are quite knowledgeable about this. You said that they understood the minister's reaction to this decision.

At a time of energy transformation, like this is, is this not an important time for all parts of the system to work together, to make sure that we're going to have a smooth energy transition? I note that the IESO report said that by 2030, we cannot not have gas all over the province, because we're still relying on it to make sure our system provides enough energy.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank the member from Eglinton-Lawrence for her question. As the member mentioned, we still are very far away to have the electricity that we need for the future. That's why we are rebuilding, refurbishing our nuclear plants, as well as building SMRs in the province of Ontario.

With all the investment that the Minister of Economic Development is bringing to Ontario—\$43 billion of automotive investment with electric vehicles—we are going to need electricity, and right now, if we just kept the electricity that we do have in the system, we would not be able to end up driving electric cars.

So this is what this will do moving forward. This will help us to stabilize the system as we're moving forward to the next 20 to 30 years down the road. I wish we could get rid of natural gas by 2030, but that will be impossible with what is going on right now across Canada and across Ontario.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Ms. Bhutila Karpoche: I thank the member from Mississauga–Lakeshore for his presentation. I will ask a question similar to the question I asked my colleague from Toronto–Danforth.

When the Liberals were in power, the Conservatives used to criticize their politicization of electricity planning, and the Liberals' disregard for evidence and professional, independent analysis. The Liberals directed the IESO to write blank cheques, renew gas plants and sign hundreds of overpriced private contracts, with no OEB hearing to find out if these were a good deal for consumers, and hydro bills skyrocketed.

So my question to the member is: Why is your government doing exactly the same thing with natural gas systems and driving energy costs up?

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank the member for that question. When the Liberals were in power, it's true: They were signing gas deals. They were going to build a natural gas plant right in Mississauga–Lakeshore, just to save the finance minister's seat. But at that time, we had already lost 300,000 manufacturing jobs. We didn't need the electricity that we would need moving forward with the creation of the auto industry that is happening here in Ontario—like I said, \$43 billion, creating 725,000 new jobs right now in the province of Ontario.

We need our nuclear fleet to help, as well as using natural gas to heat our homes at this present time, but we have to do it to combine this together, to move forward as we do move off natural gas moving forward.

I still have a natural gas furnace. I have a natural gas water heater. I have a natural gas barbecue and a natural gas fireplace, and I know that moving forward, we are going to be moving off all this—and a natural gas stove, too, in the kitchen; I forgot about that one. I know, moving forward, we are going to be changing that, but right now is not the time to put this extra cost on the consumers and the new homes that we're building in a housing crisis that we are having right now in the province of Ontario. This will only cost people more money at the present time, so Bill 165—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Mr. David Smith: I'd like to thank the member from Mississauga–Lakeshore for his presentation.

With Ontario growing at an extremely fast rate, our government has a plan to build 1.5 million new homes, as Ontario's population is expected to grow by two million people by the end of this decade. Therefore, I'm hoping the member can explain how the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act aligns with that plan.

1700

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank the member for that question.

Yes, we do have to build 1.5 million homes, but we have to keep the cost of these homes down. With interest rates right now at 8%, it's almost impossible for someone to purchase a home, especially on a condo build when you

have to pay—before it's registered, you have to pay the 8%; otherwise you could probably negotiate a mortgage for 5.45%. On a \$500,000 mortgage, that would cost a consumer \$4,500 a month. So, putting an extra \$4,400 for a condo in the city of Mississauga would only harm and make it unaffordable for people to buy these condos and homes as well.

And moving in rural Ontario at \$8,000 or \$10,000 to put a natural gas fitting into their home, that would cost them even more. So by doing this, it will reduce the cost of homes being built in Ontario, and we have to do that for the future of this province, for our children and for our grandchildren moving forward.

So, I want to thank you very much for that question.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: During the hearings, the issue was raised on behalf of Unifor workers that when there are methane leakages, Enbridge often uses private contractors in order to bypass the regulatory process.

So I'm wondering why the government really would have voted against an amendment put forward by one of my colleagues providing for the monitoring and prevention of methane leakages and for the publication of reports on such leakages. I'm wondering why on earth the government would vote against letting the public know and making sure that Enbridge always reports on any leakages that are taking place.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: I want to thank the member for that question.

As you know, natural gas is probably one of the safest ways to heat your home today in the province of Ontario. And, as you know, I look at our cities across Ontario—Mississauga, Toronto, Burlington, Hamilton—most of us are in natural gas. It is a very safe system in place.

As we continue moving forward, I know that we are going to be moving over to electricity, but at this present time, we have to keep our natural gas in the province and keep it safe, as we are doing right now.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): We do not have time for further questions.

It's now time for further debate.

Ms. Bhutila Karpoche: I rise today to speak to Bill 165, the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act.

Ontario is in an affordability crisis. Energy costs are high and consumers are struggling to pay their bills. And yet, the Conservatives are bringing forward this legislation that is going to drive energy bills up by forcing nearly four million natural gas consumers to pay costs that the Ontario Energy Board says they shouldn't have to pay. Not only that; this Conservative government is making the unprecedented move of interfering with a decision of the Ontario Energy Board, an arm's-length independent regulator.

Conservatives claim that they're keeping energy costs down, but this legislation is doing the exact opposite and is doing it at great legal risk.

Speaker, when looking at this bill, Bill 165, a big question came to mind, and thanks to the recent investiga-

tion by the Narwhal, I believe we have an answer. But before I get to that, I'd like to first ask the most obvious question presented in this legislation: Keeping energy costs down for whom? Not for Ontario consumers. They'll be forced to pay costs the OEB has ruled they shouldn't have to pay.

Right now, gas customers' bills include charges worth hundreds of millions of dollars each year to cover Enbridge's costs of expanding gas pipelines into new developments. The OEB decided to put a stop to this subsidy because it raises consumers' energy bills and increases financial risks for the whole gas system.

Bill 165 would allow the government to add \$1 billion in costs to the gas bills of nearly four million consumers, costing each an average of more than \$300. It would also allow the government to approve a gas pipeline project that the Ontario Energy Board has deemed too expensive, not economically viable or otherwise not in the public interest. This would leave consumers on the hook for costly, uneconomical projects they don't even benefit from.

Energy lawyer Kent Elson explained this clearly in the *Globe and Mail*, as he said, "Gas pipelines are paid off over roughly 60 years ... so a pipeline built today will be paid off in the 2080s ... long beyond the point at which fossil fuel use is set to drastically decline. Investments in new gas pipelines today will almost certainly go bad, and Bill 165 forces Ontario's gas customers to make that bad investment."

The OEB has a mandate of protecting consumers and making sure they aren't gouged or silently stolen from. By listening to the experts, this Conservative government had the opportunity to put money back in people's pockets and finally start addressing the realities of climate change. Instead, at a time when the world needs to move toward renewable energy, they are using their majority to drive up carbon emissions and gas bills and to undermine an independent regulator. This legislation does not keep costs down for Ontario's consumers.

So then who does it keep them down for? Not for Ontario homebuyers. If we want to make housing more affordable, we need to give people access to sustainable, low-cost energy sources like electric heat pumps that are much cheaper to operate in the long term than gas furnaces. The NDP put forward Bill 172, the Affordable Energy Act, which creates the framework to set up large-scale programs to finance and organize deep home energy retrofits, including installation of heat pumps.

We are in a cost-of-living and climate crisis. A focus on conservation and community-based distribution for renewable energy can substantially cut energy costs down. We have the technology to build a reliable and sustainable energy future in Ontario that does not leave Ontarians with a pricey bill.

The OEB's decision tried to protect homebuyers by making the costs of natural gas connections visible to them and to developers. They wanted to ensure that the costs of installing a new gas connection would be paid by those who benefit from that choice, and not by consumers who don't benefit. With Bill 165, Conservatives are ensuring

that when a developer chooses to install a gas connection, they are not required to consider the cost consequences to homebuyers and tenants. They aren't keeping costs down for Ontario's homebuyers.

Who are they keeping them down for? Not for Ontarian taxpayers. They're the ones who are going to foot the bill for the high costs of climate change and the damage to highways, bridges, hospital buildings and other infrastructure if we don't get serious about the clean energy transition. Climate change is already costing us a lot, and it's going to get so much worse. The Financial Accountability Office estimates that it could add more than \$4 billion per year to the cost of maintaining Ontario's public infrastructure over the rest of the century if we don't adapt. And the FAO warns that this cost impact estimate should be considered in the lower range since it doesn't factor in costs incurred by hazards like river flooding and wildfires.

There are already warnings that Canada is at risk of another devastating wildfire season this year. Taxpayers are already paying the price through devastating property damage, health emergencies, and more.

Methane gas, the fossil fuel used in natural gas connections, accounts for one third of Ontario's carbon emissions. According to Environmental Defence, 19% of Ontario's greenhouse gas emissions comes from heating our homes and buildings with methane gas. The NDP's Affordable Energy Act will help us to stop burning it and will give residents and tenants the tools to cut their energy usage and costs. As has been said many times in this House by the NDP, "The cost of doing nothing is billions of dollars higher than the cost of proactively investing in our public infrastructure for climate adaptation."

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Bill 165 does not keep costs down for Ontario's taxpayers. So keeping energy costs down for whom? Not for young Ontarians.

As this Conservative government's own energy transition panel observed, the global energy landscape is evolving at an unprecedented pace. To take advantage of the economic opportunities that this change presents, the panel concluded that Ontario should commit to electrification and a clean energy economy by 2050. This includes following the transition panel's recommendation that the Ontario Energy Board "employ all tools within its existing mandate to implement activities consistent with Ontario's goals for a clean energy economy and the requirements of the energy transition for Ontario."

Bill 165 carries economic costs for young Ontarians. It slows our move to a green energy economy and foolishly invests in gas pipelines that are going to become obsolete and present a massive cost to customers as we move away from gas heating.

This is not to mention the broader costs of climate change that young Ontarians will bear the brunt of, from the infrastructure maintenance that I mentioned earlier to mental health distress and health emergencies linked to extreme weather events, negative impacts on air quality and the increase in vector-borne diseases. We know that young people and people in marginalized communities

will suffer the most from these effects as the climate crisis creates more instability in housing, food, employment and quality of life.

I tabled the Climate Crisis Health Action Plan Act, which would require the government to ensure that Ontario is prepared to address the current and future health impacts caused by climate change. The cost for young Ontarians and for all of us is simply too high, and Bill 165 is going to drive it higher.

So if not for homebuyers, if not for consumers, if not for taxpayers, if not for young Ontarians, who exactly does this Bill 165 keep energy costs down for?

Speaker, we have a pretty clear answer to that question. The Narwhal reports that hours before the government announced its unprecedented decision to overrule an independent regulator, senior officials from the Premier's office worried that the OEB's decision would create a "magnitude" of costs for developers and for Enbridge Gas.

Yes, you heard that right. An independent board of people with expertise and experience and a mandate to protect consumers made a decision to put money back in your pockets, and this Conservative government jumped into action and went to extraordinary lengths to keep energy costs down for a giant gas monopoly.

Hours before the OEB decision was even announced, the Minister of Energy's chief of staff set up an urgent touchpoint meeting to strategize the government's response. An official response was drafted, talking points were agreed upon and legislation was brought into the works, all before the OEB's decision was made public. Staff from the minister's office even consulted with Enbridge executives for input on the minister's statement.

The government's lawyers warned the Premier's staff that intervening in the OEB's decision carried legal risks. Their warnings were ignored. This Conservative government was just that determined to overrule an independent regulator and drive up gas bills for Ontario consumers.

At the committee meeting last week, a number of amendments were brought forward by the NDP to protect people from higher bills. Every amendment meant to protect consumers from higher energy prices was defeated by the Conservatives. So even when there were opportunities to include actual measures to keep costs down, this Conservative government voted against them.

Speaker, the Ontario Energy Board did its job. Its decision would protect consumers and the public interest by lowering energy costs and carbon emissions for current and future Ontarians. It is a win for almost everyone. But with Bill 165, the government is interfering with an independent regulator to raise gas bills for Ontarians so that a multi-billion-dollar gas company can make more profit.

This bill is giving the government the power to push energy costs up, and it's forcing four million natural gas consumers to pay the costs that the Ontario Energy Board would otherwise disallow. This bill enables unprecedented political interference with an independent regulator in order to help a powerful gas monopoly at the expense of consumers. It does exactly the opposite of keeping energy costs down.

When the Liberals were in power, the Conservatives used to criticize their politicization of electricity planning. The Liberals disregarded evidence, disregarded professional independent analysis. The Liberals directed the IESO to write blank cheques for new gas plants and sign hundreds of overpriced private contracts with no OEB hearing to find out if these were a good deal for consumers. As a result, hydro bills skyrocketed.

We're seeing now this Conservative government do exactly the same thing with the natural gas system. Speaker, this bill should not be titled Keeping Energy Costs Down Act. It actually should be titled "pushing energy costs up act," because that's what this bill is doing. It's a shame that they are pushing energy costs up on behalf of a gas monopoly.

The government still can do the right thing for Ontario's consumers, for Ontario's homebuyers, for Ontario's future generations and not proceed with this bill. This is the wrong direction. I urge this government to keep the interests of the people of this province and not their well-connected insiders before they make this grave mistake.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Steve Clark): Questions and comments?

M^{me} France Gélinas: Thank you to my colleague for a very well-put analysis of what this bill does. I fully agree with her; I don't know why this bill is called Keeping Energy Costs Down Act. It does anything but.

We face an affordability crisis right now. We also face an environmental crisis. Do you see anything in this bill that will help with the affordability crisis? Do you see anything in this bill that would help with the environmental crisis that we are facing?

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I want to thank my colleague from Nickel Belt for her question. She's absolutely right: There is nothing in this bill that actually addresses the affordability crisis.

As I stated at the start, Ontario is in an affordability crisis. Energy costs are high, and consumers, the people in this province, are struggling to pay their bills. So why would the Conservative government, during an affordability crisis, bring forward a piece of legislation that actually drives up energy costs, that actually increases the bills that Ontarians are faced with, and on top of that, making matters worse, is also interfering with an independent regulator's decision at great legal risk? Thank you.

1720

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Steve Clark): Thank you. Questions and comments?

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: I'm wondering if the member did get some emails from pretty much all the constituents and all the municipalities asking them to vote for that bill because that's what people want. I've been meeting with a lot of municipal leaders and what they want is to have natural gas, and they sure are working for even the leave to construct being raised. So I'm wondering if she had reached out to municipalities and if she heard—of course, maybe she's representing more of a city, but for us in a rural area it's really important, natural gas. I'm wondering if she did get that kind of response from municipalities.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I thank my colleague from the Conservatives for that question. First, let me start by saying I did receive many emails on this issue and, by far, the main concern expressed by Ontarians is that this is an unprecedented move by this government interfering with an independent regulator.

Think about what that message sends to anybody who is interested in making investments in this province. They're going to now move forward knowing that, depending on who has the direct line to the minister's office, this is the government that is completely controlled by influence rather than the interests of what is good for the people of this province.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Steve Clark): Further questions and comments?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you to my colleague from Parkdale–High Park for your presentation, focusing on affordability and the Orwellian title of Bill 165.

When the standing committee met to discuss Bill 165, representatives from Unifor, including Samia Hashi and Doug Carter, testified at the committee and they stated that the Ontario Energy Board needs to do a much better job of monitoring gas companies' investments in infrastructure. They actually stated to the committee, "When gas leaks are not fixed, Ontario families pay three times: They pay through delayed investment in upgrading and maintaining our gas infrastructure; they pay for it through climate change; they pay through the increased risks of major safety incidents."

Would the member like to comment about how this government is not looking after affordability in this bill and actually could do so by listening to the representatives from Unifor?

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I thank my colleague from London North Centre for his question. What we heard at committee from stakeholders on this issue was actually something that I had hoped this government would pay close attention to and take seriously so that amendments could be made to this legislation.

Unifor workers have raised the issue that when there is a gas leak, Enbridge has been contracting out that problem so that they can evade the Ontario Energy Board regulations. Think about that. And what happens? It's the taxpayers, it's the public who foots the bill. So we have added costs and all Enbridge has is more profit.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Steve Clark): Further questions and comments?

Mr. Trevor Jones: I listened intently to the member from Parkdale–High Park. She had an eloquent address and a strong argument, and she talked about housing, food and quality of life—important issues to all our communities and all our families.

Food producers in southwestern Ontario need cheap, safe, inexpensive, reliable natural gas to dry grains, to grow fresh fruit and vegetables, to put food with less food miles, grown closer to home and safe and trusted and grown in Ontario year-round. That food is in grocery stores in Parkdale–High Park, in Chatham-Kent–Leamington and throughout our communities. This bill supports

just that: housing, food and quality of life. Does she not agree that keeping energy costs down provides safe food, grown closer to home, in her community and mine?

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I thank my colleague from Chatham-Kent–Leamington for his question. First of all, don't take it from me; take it from the Ontario Energy Board. They are mandated to keep consumer interests in mind. They have looked at a body of evidence and have concluded that Enbridge should not be subsidized because it will result in higher energy bills for everyone. It is actually in the interest of farmers, of everybody who is hooked on to natural gas, that they not be on the hook for Enbridge's profits for decades to come.

Speaker, the government can also listen to their own energy panel, which has said that Ontario must transition to clean, green energy.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Steve Clark): Further questions and comments?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I really appreciated the comments from my colleague the member for Parkdale–High Park. As she pointed out, the ruling by the Ontario Energy Board was made after a year-long process that involved many, many experts, that involved the review of thousands of pages of documents and was all focused on what is in the public interest. And it only took a couple of hours after the ruling came out for the minister to announce that he was going to ignore the OEB decision and go back to the way that things were done previously in this province.

I wondered: What does the member for Parkdale–High Park think about a government that would be so quick to dismiss this incredible body of evidence that resulted in this decision of the OEB?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Steve Clark): Back to the member for Parkdale–High Park.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: I thank my colleague from London West. The question she raised is very, very important, because not only did the Ontario Energy Board rule that Enbridge could no longer pass on the bill to Ontario consumers and this government's unprecedented action to overturn the OEB ruling—my goodness, the speed with which the government acted. The Minister of Energy responded in less than 24 hours, announcing that he would bring legislation to overturn the OEB's decision. Did he pause to digest what had just happened? Did he pause to think about what the Ontario Energy Board's decision meant for Ontarians? No. And as we have found out through the excellent investigation—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Steve Clark): Thank you. That concludes our time.

Further debate?

Mr. Ted Hsu: Before I begin, I want to say that I'm going to share my time with the marvellous member for Beaches–East York.

Speaker, we make laws here in this Legislature, but there are certain laws which cannot be repealed—certain laws in this world, which cannot be repealed, and they must always be obeyed. I'm speaking here of physical law.

One of them is energy conservation. We get a lot of light and energy from the sun, and this brings with it

energy that can be turned into heat. Some of that heat gets captured and kept on earth by sort of “floppy” molecules, like carbon dioxide or methane or bigger molecules. That heat doesn’t just go away. Something happens to that heat. That heat affects us.

There’s another kind of unbreakable principle in the world, and some people may not be familiar with it. It’s called the ergodic principle—a very, very powerful idea—but the result is that this energy that we get from the sun, it gets into everything. It heats the air, heats the water. It affects weather extremes, warms the oceans. It’s going to cause the sea level to rise. It causes drought and flooding and it has consequences for ecosystems, and that in turn is going to affect things like insects and disease and famine. It’s going to create mass migration, social conflicts, and war.

1730

This is something that people are expecting. The heat will affect everything. And it has really begun to make everything a lot more expensive. It makes everything a lot more expensive. We have to change how we behave and it’s not something that we’re going to do in 40 years. It’s not something we’re going to do in 30 years or 20 years. Really, it’s the next 10 years that are the most critical.

Les gens vont-ils changer leur façon de vivre, leur façon d’utiliser l’énergie? Ce gouvernement, qui dit se soucier de bâtir des maisons, veut-il sauvegarder notre maison commune?

I think the Ontario Energy Board has faith in people. They have faith that people will care for our common home. The Ontario Energy Board believes that people will move away from burning fossil fuels for heat and switch very soon, because we have to switch soon, to alternatives like heat pumps.

Now, heat pumps have been praised by this government. I think I just heard a minister today praise heat pumps, and I know the energy minister’s house has a heat pump with an electric backup, and so does his parliamentary assistant’s home. There are Ontario government incentives for heat pumps. So it’s no surprise that the Ontario Energy Board believes that Ontarians will respond and understand that this is the direction that we must go to save our common home. And there’s no reason why the government of the day, the ministers, should not believe that as well.

Now, the Ontario Energy Board concluded, after much deliberation, that this change in energy use pretty clearly risks stranded infrastructure, like pipes. Stranded infrastructure means unused infrastructure. And our system of regulated utilities means that all the remaining customers on the system must still pay back the utility for these unused assets, the cost of building these unused assets.

The Ontario Energy Board, which has a duty to protect consumers, said that we should pay for the infrastructure upfront in order to be fair to ratepayers, to protect ratepayers, especially in this time where affordability is so much of a concern for consumers. Now what that means is that there’s no more free natural gas pipeline insulations for housing developers, no more incentives to install

natural gas pipelines to service every new residential subdivision.

The Ontario Energy Board decision to pay at least part of that cost upfront will help preserve our common home in the form of a minimum requirement for any reasonable climate strategy. At the very minimum, fossil fuels have to compete on a level playing field with other sources of energy, with all the costs accounted for, so no more perverse incentives where somebody—in particular, a house builder—doesn’t see the cost of putting in natural gas infrastructure and therefore just goes ahead and does it without bothering to think about what the consequences are.

And this, Speaker, is why Bill 165, overturning an independent regulator’s carefully considered decision, fundamentally is wrong. It hurts consumers and it does not help us care for our common home. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Beaches–East York.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I thank the member from Kingston and the Islands for that amazing lesson in physics. You are an incredible resource here in the chamber.

So here we go again, debating more policy that is going to help accelerate the climate crisis and cost Ontarians even more.

Bill 165, Keeping Energy Costs Down Act, 2024: Honestly, I just love the branding of these bills by the government. The titles are actually the complete opposite of what they do. It’s like developers, when they build sprawl, and they name the new areas after the things they destroy, like Heron Gate or Eagle Ridge.

The truth is, this bill seeks to undermine the authority of an independent energy watchdog. Let’s just think about it: It seeks to undermine the authority of an independent energy watchdog, and as is routine for this government, they prioritize corporate interests over the well-being of Ontarians.

The Ontario Energy Board, an independent arm’s-length regulator mandated to protect the interests of energy customers, released a landmark decision telling Enbridge to stop subsidizing its plans to expand infrastructure for methane-heavy natural gas by charging buyers of new homes for connections. I agree with this decision. It should have been done and dusted after the board so bravely made this choice.

Let me tell you what I think happened here. Their buddies, the government’s buddies in the greenhouse gas industry, got so mad that the government had to do something to stop the legitimate decision by the OEB, so they had to legislate it because, well, they knew they could not win a legal appeal on this.

The Ontario Energy Board came to this decision to help builders make informed choices when building new homes. The problem for this government is that if people have the option and information to make an informed choice, well, maybe many people won’t choose gas, and they can’t have that, because they have too many people in the greenhouse gas industry counting on them to keep them rich.

The government has justified Bill 165 based on the cost of the OEB decision—

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I apologize to the member for Beaches–East York.

I recognize the member for Peterborough–Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: In speeches, members cannot impute motive, and that is what the member just did.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I will caution the member to be careful when she is referencing motives of the government.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you.

Interjections.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: It's a little loud over here, but I'm going to try and speak over the rhetoric.

So, the government has justified Bill 165 based on the cost of the OEB decision, but the ruling would actually not have had a substantial impact on housing prices. In the long run, its influence on energy prices would be determined by the energy source a home used, a choice that will increasingly shift as renewables gain recognition as an affordable energy option. As gas becomes less competitive, homeowners with gas hookups may switch to other energy sources, leaving the gas infrastructure as a costly stranded asset that would be a burden on homeowners who are still hooked up, a point that was emphasized by the OEB.

The legislation also sets a dangerous precedent. This is the first time any government of Ontario has overruled a decision by the independent OEB. These independent watchdogs that we are lucky to have should be non-partisan entities that look out for the needs of Ontarians.

The board's mandate is to keep energy costs down, and that's what drove this decision. This government is not looking out for the needs of regular Ontarians who are trying to save money on their energy bills. You can listen to them rant and rave and waste all their time talking about federal issues, but when there is an actual opportunity to make life more affordable for the people of Ontario, they intervene and make sure that, as always, their friends and wealthy insiders are taken care of.

Mr. Dave Smith: Again, point of order.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Peterborough–Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: That last comment was absolutely imputing motive.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I disagree. I will allow the member to continue if she chooses to—but you are no longer speaking?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I was done. Thanks.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Okay. Time for questions.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: My question is to the member from Beaches–East York. When the Liberals were in power, they politicized electricity planning. Liberals disregarded evidence. Liberals disregarded professional independent analysis. The Liberals directed the IESO to write blank cheques for new gas plants and signed hundreds of overpriced private contracts with no OEB hearings to find

out if these were a good deal for consumers. As a result, hydro bills skyrocketed. We all remember also the gas plant scandal where hard drives were damaged and deleted and a staffer went to jail, Speaker.

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My question to the member is, what lessons did your party learn that you can share with the Conservatives so they can avoid making the same mistakes?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you to the member from Parkdale–High Park. As you know, I just came two years ago, so I will start from June 2, 2022.

As you know, with the climate emergency, we all need to work together and we need to stop being partisan. That's what Ontarians are looking for. I hear it time and time again, whether everyone can just get behind good, strong, bold and brave climate action and work together.

I expect—because I know that that is part of the NDP, who believe in climate change and want to do that and believe in the climate emergency—that you would work alongside with us, with the Greens and, hopefully, with the Conservatives if they clue in that there's actually a climate emergency. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Solicitor General.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I'd like to ask my colleague from Beaches–East York how important, in her opinion, is certainty. Is certainty of knowing that by having the infrastructure in place—and we heard from the member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke about when you look at rural areas, people have a right to have a home. People have a right to be able to purchase a home, and we need certainty to do that.

I think what I really appreciate in Bill 165 is that by keeping energy costs down, with certainty, it allows us to take that step. How important is that in her opinion?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I'm actually thrilled that you asked that question, and what I'm hearing from Ontarians is they want certainty, absolutely. But what they're getting from this government is the furthest thing from that.

Farmers don't know whether they're coming or going with you. You're selling their land. You're expropriating it. You're keeping it. You're all for the farmers. They don't know. There's no certainty.

Developers—well, let's see. We're going to not have you pay development charges, then we're going to have you pay them. Then we're going to allow this and then we're not going to allow this. And planners, you're out of jobs in Ontario because we know best as this government. We're just going to take over and scrap all the planning policies that are out there.

So there's no certainty for Ontarians with this government. I would ask you to maybe walk the talk on your comments today.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you to the member from Beaches–East York for her presentation this afternoon.

Speaker, given the PCs' past critiques of your government's approach to electricity, which they compared to a soap opera for its dramatic politicization, how do the Liberals now view the current government's similar strategy with Bill 165, which might lead to some lessons from previous missteps on electricity?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much for that question. What worries me about this government and their plan for electrification, it's mostly—well, by and large, they're putting all their eggs in the EV basket, and we know that electric vehicles are one of the tools but not the only tool.

And here's the thing: Where is the supply chain? Have you secured the supply chain to extract these minerals in the Ring of Fire? Have you done that? No. Have you consulted or engaged with Indigenous communities? No. How are you doing this and—

Interjections.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Well, we've had people in this chamber who are from the Ring of Fire who have been removed from the chamber for vowing that no way are you going to be able to get up there to extract the minerals. So you don't have the supply chain and you're putting all your eggs in that basket and misleading Ontarians.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Newmarket–Aurora.

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: While the Ontario Energy Board makes hundreds of decisions a year and— and to their credit, almost all of them without issue—this one, this particular decision, did raise some concerns about the public engagement in the decision-making process. In fact, in the decision itself, one of the commissioners noted that this decision, which could have significant impacts on electricity demand, was reached without input from the province's Independent Electricity System Operator.

So to the member of Beaches–East York: Do you agree that it's concerning that members of the commission didn't know the impacts of the decision before signing off on it, and do you agree that the changes we propose to increase public engagement is the right thing to do to ensure that the people of Ontario are heard on decisions that impact them?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Well, this is another very rich question because now you're about certainty—that's the question I got earlier—but your actions don't match those words, and now you're about engagement. Oh, my gosh, community engagement: Let's talk about when you engage—did you engage the planners with Bill 23 and Bill 39? No. Did you engage the farmers with the greenbelt debacle? No. And we know there's an RCMP \$8.3-billion criminal investigation into that because you didn't do your homework and you're reversing these decisions. You haven't engaged teachers, nurses, education, front-line workers—no one. That is like you're allergic to—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): A reminder to address through the Chair.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Your allergy to engagement is almost as strong and horrific as your allergy to the climate emergency.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Further questions?

M^{me} France Gélinas: My question is quite simple. The bill is called the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act, yet we saw that this bill would allow the government to basically approve gas pipeline projects that the Ontario Energy Board has reviewed and believe that it is not economically viable, it is too expensive and not in the public's best interest to do so. So how can she reconcile the two?

We have the energy board telling us, "Don't go ahead with those projects that are too expensive," and yet we have a bill that's called Keeping Energy Costs Down. Do you think there is a problem here?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I think there are many problems here, and I talked about how these titles are so misleading and they actually do the opposite of what they say they're going to do.

If you are aware of the climate emergency, you know that technology needs to change, and it will change. We're going to have extreme heat this summer, absolutely, in Ontario. We've had it in the past, but it will be worse this year. It will continue to be worse, and we've done nothing for it. The FAO has warned us about the high cost of inaction, and we're doing nothing. It's going to be more cost-prohibitive.

So Ontarians are doing their own thing. They're getting heat pumps. They're conserving energy. They're doing it themselves in spite of the lack of leadership.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): We have time for one further question.

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: I just want to back the tractor up. A lot of gall coming from an urban member from Toronto who is part of the Ontario Liberal Party. When I showed up here in 2006 and we were debating the budget of the day, shortly after I was sworn in, the first thing we talked about were cuts to the agricultural community. How can you stand there and speak to this caucus about your record?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Well, my record started June 2, 2022.

You know what? How can you stand here and say Ontario's open for business when you cut 748 renewable energy contracts in 2018 when you arrived? Like, read the tea leaves and the rest of the world. You're open for business, but you—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): It's now time for further debate.

I recognize the member for Peterborough–Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I've had the great pleasure of listening to some of the conversation. I'm actually going to follow up a little bit on what my colleague from Ottawa–Carleton—

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: Nepean.

Mr. Dave Smith: Sorry, no, Nepean—actually said.

Interjection.

Mr. Dave Smith: I know, yes.

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I represent a riding that is larger than Prince Edward Island. We are slightly more than 3,400 square kilometres. We have approximately 170,000 people when you count some of the seasonal residents as well. Prince Edward Island is about 171,000 in about 3,200 square kilometres. So what I found really interesting about it was that during committee, the NDP kept bringing up Prince Edward Island as a prime example of it, not recognizing that sitting in committee there were three members on the Progressive Conservative side whose ridings were larger than Prince Edward Island.

I want to show some statistics because I do find it very rich that urban centres stand up and say, “This is what should happen in rural Ontario.” The member from Toronto–Danforth, who spent an hour talking about this—his riding is 29 square kilometres, 3,685 people per square kilometre. That is more people in one kilometre of Danforth than in the entire township of Trent Lakes, which I represent.

The member from Parkdale–High Park has a whopping 16 square kilometres, with 6,671 people per kilometre. The only municipality in my riding that is larger than that is the city of Peterborough. I have six municipalities and a First Nation, so the largest portion of my riding isn't even as big as a square kilometre for people.

Beaches–East York: a whopping 19 square kilometres, with 5,061 people per square kilometre.

Kingston and the Islands: a little bit smaller, 665 square kilometres. Trent Lakes is 890 square kilometres. They have 3,000 people.

Peterborough itself: As I said, my riding is about 3,470 square kilometres. The centre of our riding is the city of Peterborough, with 85,000 people in it, and yet my riding only has 33 people per square kilometre. When I look at Trent Lakes, they have a whopping 3.2 people per square kilometre.

Now, why do I bring this up? I bring this up because everybody from the opposition who has been talking about this has natural gas available to them. They have inexpensive heating. What do we have in Trent Lakes? Oil furnaces, propane furnaces, wood pellet and a little bit of electric. Now, why is it only a little bit of electric? Because in 2003, Ontario had the lowest electric rates in North America; in 2018, after 15 years of Liberals, we had the highest electrical rates in North America, and people could not afford to heat their homes with electricity.

We've heard from the opposition many times saying we should go to heat pumps. Well, if the temperature consistently drops below minus 15 degrees Celsius, which would be my entire riding in most of the winter, an air-source heat pump doesn't work for you. You just cannot get your home warm enough. A ground-source heat pump could, but here's the problem that we experience in my part of the province, as well as 72% of the entire province, and that is that the Canadian Shield begins in my riding. It is extremely difficult to put a ground-source heat pump in granite. That is a challenge.

Mr. Kevin Holland: You should try harder.

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm sure if you tried really hard and blasted a whole lot, you might be able to do it. But the reality is, heat pumps are not a viable option outside of the urban centres, who already have inexpensive ways of heating their home.

There has been a false narrative put forward that this is going to actually add costs to it. But since the late 1980s, we've had this system where the gas companies could amortize the price with a cost of that installation over 40 years, and what the OEB did was step outside of their bounds and enter into policy to make that decision. They said, “We don't think that what's been working for 40 years is what we should continue doing, and instead we're going to change it so that you had to pay everything up front.”

The argument that they gave—and this is one of the interesting arguments that they gave—is they said that it would add about \$4,400 to the cost of a new-build construction. But what they took was the example in the urban centres like Parkdale–High Park, Toronto–Danforth and Beaches–East York, where you have thousands of people per square kilometre.

We did the calculation on my house. I live in the rural part of the riding, just outside of the city of Peterborough. We do not have natural gas running down my street. If we had natural gas running down my street and I wanted to hook up to it, my driveway is almost a kilometre long. It would be \$65,000 to run the pipe to my house. That does not become a viable option.

But I'm not alone in my riding in having that much of a distance to the road. There are a lot of places where you have a significant distance to the road—pretty much every single farm.

But it's not just us who are saying that this was a bad decision by the OEB. Now, everybody who lives in Toronto has something in common with everybody who lives in rural Ontario: We all eat food. And where is that food produced?

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: On farms.

Mr. Dave Smith: On farms in ridings like mine.

So, let's take the position, then, from the Ontario farmers' association, the OFA. What was their position on this? “Rural Ontario needs access to natural gas infrastructure to provide reliable and affordable energy options for farms and rural businesses. The expansion of natural gas throughout rural Ontario is the single most important investment the Ontario government can make to support thriving” farms.

I would like to think that everyone who lives in Toronto would like to continue eating. And if they would like to continue eating, they need to recognize that farms in Ontario need to have access to inexpensive energy, so that we can actually dry the grains that they need to eat and all of the other products that come from it, because if you don't—we are already seeing the cost of living increasing significantly. We're already seeing the cost of groceries skyrocketing because of carbon tax. Now you want to add an additional expense to it.

What makes any of these individuals believe that by doing that, they're actually supporting their constituents? Because they're not. They're making it more difficult for them to live. They're making it more difficult and more expensive for them to go out and buy food. And I think every one of them would agree, all of their constituents need the food that's produced in ridings like mine.

We do not have natural gas running throughout the entire riding. There is no possible way for us to have it, but we are doing that expansion. We're expanding into Selwyn. We're expanding into Douro-Dummer. We're expanding into Havelock. These are all small communities. And we need to, because despite what the opposition is saying, that is reducing greenhouse gas emissions, because they're getting off oil.

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): Point of order.

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: I really don't want to interrupt my colleague, but I see that the clock is ticking, and I needed to introduce my former deputy chief of staff Derek Rowland. I know we all know Derek. We love you, Derek, and I miss you, Derek, and we're excited you're here.

I apologize to my colleague for interrupting for that reason.

Mr. Dave Smith: In the 14 seconds left—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): In the 10 seconds you have left.

Mr. Dave Smith: Before we finish this up, Speaker, really what I'm coming down to is that this is such an inequality between urban and rural Ontario.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Donna Skelly): I apologize to the member, but it is now 6 o'clock and time for private members' public business.

Third reading debate deemed adjourned.

Report continues in volume B.

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Sattler, Peggy (NDP)	London West / London-Ouest	
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Schreiner, Mike (GRN)	Guelph	
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Smith, Hon. / L'hon. Todd (PC)	Bay of Quinte / Baie de Quinte	Minister of Energy / Ministre de l'Énergie
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Vanthof, John (NDP)	Timiskaming—Cochrane	Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire de l'opposition officielle

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
Vaugcois, Lise (NDP)	Thunder Bay—Superior North / Thunder Bay—Supérieur-Nord	
Wai, Daisy (PC)	Richmond Hill	
West, Jamie (NDP)	Sudbury	
Williams, Hon. / L'hon. Charmaine A. (PC)	Brampton Centre / Brampton-Centre	Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity / Ministre associée des Perspectives sociales et économiques pour les femmes
Wong-Tam, Kristyn (NDP)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	
Yakabuski, John (PC)	Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke	
Vacant	Lambton—Kent—Middlesex	
Vacant	Milton	