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F-8

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F-8

Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Estimates

Cabinet Office

Office of the Premier

Treasury Board Secretariat

Comité permanent des finances et des affaires économiques

Budget des dépenses

Bureau du Conseil des ministres

Cabinet du premier ministre

Secrétariat du Conseil du Trésor

1st Session
44th Parliament

Thursday 13 November 2025

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44^e législature

Jeudi 13 novembre 2025

Chair: Hon. Ernie Hardeman
Clerk: Lesley Flores

Président : L'hon. Ernie Hardeman
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Thursday 13 November 2025

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUES

Jeudi 13 novembre 2025

The committee met at 1000 in room 151.

ESTIMATES

CABINET OFFICE

OFFICE OF THE PREMIER

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Good morning, everyone. The Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs will now come to order.

We're meeting to consider the 2025-26 estimates of the Cabinet Office and the Office of the Premier for a total of two hours.

Pursuant to standing order 63(d)(ii), "the estimates of the Office of the Premier and the estimates of the Cabinet Office shall be allotted time jointly and shall be considered concurrently."

We're joined today by staff from Hansard, broadcast and recording, and legislative research. We're also joined by the Honourable Andrea Khanjin—Minister, welcome—the Minister of Red Tape Reduction, deputy ministers, officials and staff.

Are there any questions, before we start, from the members of the committee? Seeing none, I'm now required to call vote 401 and vote 2401, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement from the minister for up to 20 minutes.

As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. I trust that the deputy minister has arranged to have the hearings closely monitored with respect to questions raised so that the ministry can respond accordingly. If you wish, you may verify the questions and issues being tracked by the research officer at the end of your appearance. As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

Minister, welcome, and the floor is now yours.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you, committee members, for having me today. I'm really pleased to be able to update you on all things red tape reduction, Cabinet Office as well as the Premier's office.

As you know, I do join you here today in my capacity as Minister of Red Tape Reduction to provide this committee with details on how our government is continuing to take bold action, delivering on our promises for the people of this province.

On behalf of the Premier of Ontario, I will present a comprehensive overview of the work being done by both

the Office of the Premier and the Cabinet Office as they support the Office of the Premier of Ontario to deliver our government's mandate. Our government's mandate has been quite clear, which is to protect Ontario.

I will also take the opportunity to speak about the importance of regulatory reform and how cutting red tape plays a critical role in how we grow our economy, serve our communities and stay competitive on the world stage.

To begin, the Office of the Premier provides direction to ministers' offices on key government priorities. The Office of the Premier also calls on the expertise of various ministries, soliciting their advice and recommendations to ensure that government messaging is well integrated and distinct, ensuring that details of programs and services are communicated clearly to the public.

The duties carried out by the Office of the Premier provide leadership to ministries and government to support people, families, businesses and workers across the province—and we've seen those results.

The Premier of Ontario is committed to moving forward with a focused, responsible approach to protect Ontario by strengthening the economy, navigating global uncertainty and supporting the priorities that matter most to the people. Our successes to date on these fronts has been historic, but we still have more work to do, and so the work continues.

The work and our approach are supporting workers and businesses, unleashing Ontario's economic potential, investing in infrastructure and health care, keeping costs down and protecting communities, all while maintaining fiscal responsibility. And we saw that fiscal prudence most recently just last week with the fall economic statement done by my colleague the Minister of Finance, Minister Bethlenfalvy, in partnership with his great parliamentary assistants, one of whom is with us here in committee, MPP Dave Smith. So thank you for your work on that update by introducing the 2025 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review: A Plan to Protect Ontario.

I know many of the financial hawks with the background—we have MPP Bowman here—would have really appreciated the fact that we really detailed the path forward and where we are today economically.

It is the Office of the Premier, working in collaboration with Cabinet Office, that holds both ministries and the broader public sector accountable for honouring the commitments we have made to Ontarians through the most recent budget. The Office of the Premier provides centralized direction to ministers' offices, which then guide the individual ministries in their responsibilities and under-

takings. This ensures a unified and cogent approach to policy development, program delivery and communications. The Office of the Premier stands as a model of fiscal prudence, leading by example across government for responsible budgeting and resource management while maintaining a high standard of delivery with a very efficient roster of 72 staff members.

Next, I would like to discuss the services provided by Cabinet Office. Cabinet Office is considered the Premier's ministry and acts as a central agency across other provincial ministries. We are very fortunate to have all the hard-working people that make up and combine Cabinet Office. These great public service individuals work day in and day out to support the Premier.

Under direction from the Office of the Premier, the neutral and non-partisan civil servants of the Cabinet Office perform tasks that are fundamental to the implementation of our government's priorities. We would not be able to get all the priorities done, as we are, without the great work of the public service, so I want to thank them for their contributions, their hard work and keeping up with the very fast pace of our Premier as he works day in and day out and is the most accessible Premier we have seen in history, always answering the calls and questions from his phone but also delegating those, as necessary, to either cabinet ministers or Cabinet Office. That work is very much appreciated.

For those who aren't familiar, Cabinet Office is home to the Secretary of the Cabinet, head of the Ontario public service and clerk of the executive council. In this role, the secretary ensures that the public service operates in a fiscally responsible manner while delivering provincial programs at the highest standard. I want to emphasize "the highest standard" because it is a very competitive global world out there, and we have set an ambitious target to be the most competitive in the G7, but it starts at home, it starts within the government, it starts with motivating everyone to work on all cylinders but also taking into account the future and the fiscal responsibility that is so important to keep those investments going for many generations to come. The secretary is a source of independent, non-partisan advice to the Premier on government policies, communication with the public and candidates for deputy minister roles.

Cabinet Office's policy and delivery division works with ministries and provides objective and strategic advice on both short- and long-term policy to the Office of the Premier. That advice will then support the process of cabinet decision-making, including the operation of cabinet and cabinet committees.

This division is also responsible for providing operational support such as the swearing in of cabinet, liaising with the Legislative Assembly and facilitating the relationship between the Ontario public service and the Office of the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. Another important aspect of this division is assessing potential risks related to key government activities and informing government on possible problems in advance.

Cabinet Office is very strategic and innovative—it is the most strategic and innovative branch, some may argue,

in our government. The SIB merges public sector innovation, consulting, behavioural science, product management, and data analytics and visualization to assist ministries in improving policies, programs and services for Ontarians. We can all be very proud of its incredible work.

During the previous fiscal year, the strategy and innovation branch aided ministries in tracking and reporting their work on behalf of Ontarians, including a renewed focus on major projects and service delivery.

The Cabinet Office's strategy and innovation branch's internal consulting services help government save more than \$6 million in hiring external vendors. These internal services included work on more than 40 projects, ranging from supporting the development of the new My Career Journey portal for people seeking education or employment options that lead to rewarding, in-demand careers; supporting implementation and updates to the new provincial oversight regime for towing and storage; and helping more apprentices get access to grants for tools to help them complete their training and seek employment in their trade.

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Cabinet Office communications is the division tasked with providing strategic advice, support and analysis on communications to both the Office of the Premier and the secretary of cabinet, as well as managing communications between the Premier's office and individual ministries. Services offered by this division include strategic decision-making support, cross-government communications coordination, corporate issues management, media monitoring and analysis, end-to-end paid marketing and digital communications.

Cabinet Office communications ensures the functionality and maintenance of the government's flagship website at ontario.ca and the Ontario Newsroom website for media communications. It manages the government's social media channels and coordinates strategic communications through several channels—while cultivating a positive, inclusive culture across the broader OPS.

Cabinet Office's new, state-of-the-art communications centre is a multi-functional meeting and event space for government and ministry events. I was able to use it not that long ago as we were introducing our very recent and newly passed red tape reduction bill. It really underscored the importance of the studio and having real-time access to be able to update Ontarians on the great work we're doing on the policies and legislation that we debate in this Legislature.

Additionally, Cabinet Office communications oversees the review and response to freedom-of-information requests; responds to correspondence from the public; and also leads logistical and event support functions to deliver polished, executive-level government of Ontario events and announcements.

The true professionalism of the team is unbeknownst to none and is incredible. We've all seen it first-hand on the government side and want to continue working collaboratively on these state-of-the-art announcements. They are

so important to Ontarians, especially now in these unprecedented economic times, to have real, in-time updates on the state of the economy, the state of government policy and how we're protecting Ontario.

Switching to the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs: The Premier acts as the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs. I had the privilege of serving as the parliamentary assistant to intergovernmental affairs and got to see much of the work that he and that incredible team do first-hand. The Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs is such an integral arm of Cabinet Office, which supports the Premier in interactions with other governments. It also does a lot of interprovincial discussions, something that I got to see first-hand in terms of the work that the intergovernmental affairs ministry does with military families as well.

The Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs is tasked with ensuring the Premier receives high-level policy analysis and timely intelligence regarding provinces, territories, the federal government and international jurisdictions; offering advice to partner ministries; delivering protocol briefings; and providing operational support as needed.

I will tell you the protocol briefings and the operational support is incredibly professional and very thorough. One example was Germany. The German chancellor did come to Ontario not that long ago. The amount of support that this team provided in order to greet him at the airport here in Toronto was very thorough, incredible and professional. It helped strengthen Ontario's ties and expand our economic trade relations and, again, the investments that different countries and jurisdictions are making in Ontario.

I represent the riding of Barrie–Innisfil, and we have a lot of companies from Germany who are employing lots of Ontarians in my own backyard. That work all starts with intergovernmental affairs.

The Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs also supports the Premier in frequent interactions with provincial, territorial and federal governments and we've seen this just over the course of the summer, as the First Ministers' meetings happened through the Council of the Federation.

In addition, the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs has played a key role in signing agreements with other jurisdictions to boost internal trade, improve labour mobility and tear down long-standing barriers to doing business between provinces and territories. This past year, the Premier also had the honour of acting as the chair of the Council of the Federation, playing a leadership role in the federation during unprecedented global challenges and change.

As Ontario has navigated these unprecedented challenges across global trade relations, the ministry supports the Premier's US engagement response, including signing agreements with various United States governors to strengthen trade between jurisdictions. There is so much that the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs does in addition to coordinating the meetings of different diplomats, consuls general or officials from the US who do come here to Ontario. We need to always keep that open line of communication. You saw that through the Fortress

Am-Can that the Premier had launched to strengthen relations with the US. That wouldn't have been possible without the great support of the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs, also supported by the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction in some of those ideas and policy support.

This takes me to the ministry that I first-hand represent on behalf of the Premier, and that is the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction. It's a very nimble, fast and exciting ministry, especially in this time. It has existed since our government came to office in 2018. It was the Premier's directive that we need to do everything we possibly can to reduce red tape.

My role as Minister of Red Tape Reduction is to ensure that we don't just cut red tape for the sake of it, but that we carefully examine each regulation, keeping only those that truly protect Ontarians and support our economy, all while balancing good environmental standards and good public safety.

My ministry works with industry leaders and ministry partners across the OPS to identify and drive meaningful regulatory improvements that help people and businesses thrive. These ideas come first-hand from Ontarians, they come from my colleagues in government and they come from multiple ministries and the greater public service. It is truly a team approach and a true Team Ontario-type of ministry.

Our success at the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction wouldn't be possible without the team's success. Our regulatory reform efforts are strategic in that sense, to make Ontario the top choice in the G7 for investment, job creation and business growth, while maintaining and strengthening those important rules and regulations to protect people's health, safety and the environment.

Ontario's economy has proved to be resilient in 2024. We continued to grow well into early 2025. However, trade policy changes, including disruptions from US-imposed tariffs, introduced significant downside risks to the economic growth outlook. There are a number of additional risks beyond the province's control that may impact Ontario's economic and fiscal outlook. Ontario remains committed to creating an environment for growth. This will ensure that people and employers of the province benefit from jobs, prosperity and opportunity. You saw the plan for jobs, prosperity and opportunity in the recent fall economic statement to bolster that support and those investments across this province.

We continue to invest responsibly to build a strong province while maintaining a path to balance the budget. As you have might have read over the course of your constituency week—in between many events you've attended and, of course, ensuring that you observe Remembrance Day—we are still on track to balance. It is all laid out in our fall economic statement. We'll continue these regular updates on the province's fiscal economic outlook based on the latest information available.

But our vision, from day one, was the fact that our government refuses to accept the status quo that stifled growth and slowed progress down. Instead, our government is taking a radically different approach as we move

forward with our ambitious plan to protect Ontario. As we deliver on that plan, the people of this province can be proud that we are served by the most effective and efficient public service in Canada.

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Our government has driven excellence through the introduction of lean methodologies—something that the Premier really prizes—working closely with Ontario public service leadership to streamline processes and eliminate red tape and unnecessary bureaucracy. After all, we serve all the people of Ontario, and we wouldn't be able to do the jobs that we do today in this incredible democracy without those individuals who give us the mandate to work day in and day out for them.

Since 2018, Ontario has been a national leader in reducing red tape, demonstrating how efficient government can drive meaningful results—and they have been meaningful. They've touched the lives of so many people, big and small changes all alike—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —and that's all by eliminating 14,000 regulatory compliance requirements. Ontario has reduced its red tape burden by nearly 6%, contributing to the lowest regulatory burden per capita.

Chair, as I'm running out of time, there's so much that the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction continues to do, and I would be pleased to continue my remarks if you give me the allocated time, whether it's the government side or the opposition side.

I appreciate your time today. I'm looking forward to answering questions, but I will tell you, we are in a relentless pursuit of excellence at the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction, being supported also by the work the Cabinet Office does and, of course, intergovernmental affairs.

We will remain at the heart of the work of Ontario's public service. We are achieving our mandate by taking a number of actions, which I would be delighted to lay out if my colleagues permit me the time in their question-and-answer period. Speaker, just to highlight one in terms of the action to help protect Ontario—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That does conclude the time.

We will now—

Mr. John Fraser: Quick question, Chair: Will the people at the table introduce themselves so we all know? Because there are no names—just quickly—and the Cabinet Office people, the people who are joining us as well too: Can they just introduce themselves?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): That's not a point of order.

Mr. John Fraser: It's a question.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): What is it you want?

Mr. John Fraser: If they could introduce themselves and what they do so we know who—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The only people who are being asked to introduce themselves are people who are asked to answer questions. This is not a social. It's

a program. We're here to do our job to hear about the estimates.

We will now begin the rounds of questions: 15 minutes to the official opposition, 15 minutes to the third party, five minutes for the independent members, 15 minutes for the government members for the remainder for circulation—we can circulate until the end of the time.

For the deputy minister, assistant deputy ministers and ministry staff, please state your name and title when you are called on to speak so the proceedings can be accurately recorded in Hansard.

We will start the questions in the first round with the official opposition. In relation to the last comments from the third party, I would say that anyone is allowed to use their time for whatever purpose they wish. With that, we now will go to the official opposition. MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you very much, Minister, for coming here today. Thank you also to the staff who are here today for the work that you do and also for providing support.

My first questions are about the freedom-of-information request process. Maybe if there are some staff or leads on that, get ready. As you can imagine, the freedom-of-information process is incredibly important to provide a vital check on power. I think we can agree on that. I noticed that in the estimates documents, the government has said that 95% of freedom-of-information requests are met within the legislative time frame. That's correct?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Correct.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm just curious about that. If a freedom-of-information request is met, explain that to me. What exactly does the applicant get and what is the timeline?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Certainly. I think across the entire government enterprise, we have always tried to do whatever we can to streamline the FOI process. Coming from a former hat I used to wear, it was—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm just going to reclaim my time. As you can imagine, I don't have a lot of time, and my question was very specific and it's a genuine one. What does an applicant get and what is the timeline?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Right. With respect to your question, we've been working hard. I alluded to the lean system in my opening remarks and applying that to turning around more access-to-information requests using those types of systems. There were certain requests that didn't need to go through an FOI trail that you could just get, say, online. So that was a lean methodology that was applied to certain ministries where people could get their FOI requests much, much faster. This is a response to how this government has always been nimble and very accountable in that sense. There are certainly processes within the freedom-of-information act that can always be improved, and we're making those improvements.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. So that doesn't answer my question.

What I'm seeing in the legislation is that a freedom-of-information request is met if it's met within 30 days. Is that correct? Yes or no?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: It depends on the complexity of the request. So if it's a straightforward request, 30 days. Sometimes the applicant comes back, oftentimes with subsequent questions or subsequent requests. So sometimes an information request will have one little paragraph to it, and then they'll ask, "Okay. Well, I want to expand my request." So instead of treating that as a whole new request, it gets added to it. That helps triage all the requests but also to try to abide by as much of the timeline as we can.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. Just to clarify, then, what it says in the document is that 95% of requests are met, but what we're finding is that there are different interpretations of how many requests are met. I'll just give you some examples. The Globe and Mail did an analysis of FOI reports in Ontario, and they found that the average timeline was not 30 days, which is what it says in the law, but 122 days and that the percentage of requests that were completed in more than 30 days was 64%. So most people who applied, they didn't get their answer within the 30-day timeline that's in the legislation.

How do you reconcile this difference, with 95% in the estimates document you've presented and the Globe and Mail looking at the data—Ontario's data—and finding that it's only about 36% of requests that are being responded to in 30 days? How do you reconcile that?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Those individuals making the FOI requests, including the ones that you have mentioned in your question, certainly know that there's been open lines of communication as the work is done on the back end to get that information and get those files. It's not as if they make a request and there's been no back-and-forth communication. Oftentimes, as the work is being done, there's an open line of communication to say, "What is it that's being sought under FOI?" and what is in terms of the complexity of the question.

But certainly, we've been resourcing. I know that the deputy can talk about the resourcing that has been made to improve the FOI process.

Ms. Jessica Bell: It definitely seems like what's actually in the estimates document is a little different than what has been reported on.

Just related to that, what the government has reported on is the number of requests that are met, but what the government has not reported on in this document is whether the respondents actually got the information that they were asking for. When I look at what the Globe and Mail reported—and they did a very deep dive—they found that 34% of respondents got full access to the documents they wanted, 33% of respondents got partial access, 24% of respondents got no documents at all and 3% of respondents got denied. So you can imagine, when you're looking at the estimates, people don't just want to know, "Did the government respond?" but they also want to know, "Did the government actually give the information that they're required to give within the timelines that they expected?"

So my question is this: Can this government provide a summary of not just timelines for the FOI process but what the outcome of the FOI requests are in terms of access?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: If you've ever had experience submitting an FOI, in part, there is a level of work that is done per the request, and there is a flat fee for that request. Oftentimes if the request is more complicated, there will be an email or correspondence going back, explaining or maybe clarifying what is being looked for. The amount of hours that go into servicing that request: We have a very dedicated public service that tries to turn around these requests and looks for the information. As I mentioned—and I know the deputy can certainly elaborate—the amount of individuals who work on these requests, not only do they receive the training to be able to produce the right amount of documents and what is being sought, but also anything we can do to point people to where this information is already publicly available. I'll give you an example. There was land survey information—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I'm going to reclaim my time.

1030

I've asked you a very specific question. Can you report on not just a summary of the timelines, but the outcome of the FOI requests in terms of access? Yes or no?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Right. I'm happy to answer. I was trying to give you the context of the answer, which I think is very important to seek the information you're finding—

Ms. Jessica Bell: It's a pretty simple yes-or-no question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: But there has been additional staffing that has been allocated, and I'll let the deputy elaborate on the additional staffing.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Good morning. My name is Alexandra Sutton. I'm the Deputy Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, and Cabinet Office communications. Thank you for the question.

I'd just like to bring attention to the response rate. Cabinet Office completes FOI requests on behalf of Cabinet Office, the Premier's office and the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction. You referred to the 30-day time frame. There is also the ability for a legal extension in terms of complexity of requests. What we've seen recently is we're getting increasingly complex requests that require us to consult with numerous ministries across the enterprise, in addition to third parties. That information does often take a little bit more time, which is where we need to access that legal extension for those more complex requests.

In terms of the information that's provided, you asked specifically whether or not the information that was requested was actually provided. We do also work within a framework. One example for that would be information that is commercially sensitive. That has to be consulted on with a third party, and that information would not generally be available and would qualify for an exemption. That would be one example in terms of some of the information.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm going to reclaim my time. My questions are very specific. I don't need examples. What I wanted was: Overall, what are the timelines and can you

track the actual access to information? It doesn't seem like I'm going to be getting an answer today, but I am going to be following up with specific requests on that.

Just to summarize: I do believe the freedom-of-information request process is essential to democracy. It is frustrating to ask pretty specific, relevant questions about how well the FOI process is going, and the reason why I'm feeling some frustration here is because in the estimates document, it says that everything is rosy and that you're meeting a 95% timeline, when evidence is clearly suggesting that something very different is happening. And I'm not hearing specific responses from either of you around what you're going to do to properly track it and report on it so that we know how the FOI process is going. That is my frustration on that piece.

I want to talk about the Premier's office and staffing. My first question is pretty simple: How many staff are in the Premier's office and what is their total compensation?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Great question. If I could just loop back to the FOI processes: What you have to understand in the estimates on that is that we are putting in lean systems to turn around things much—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I'm reclaiming my time. I want to ask you very clearly. My question is: How many staff are in the Premier's office and what is their total compensation?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: With all due respect, I'm trying to answer your questions. You're not allotting me the time.

To answer this question: As of March 31, 2025, there were 42 full-time equivalent positions in the Office of the Premier, a decrease of three positions from the actual previous year. That's the complement there.

But I'm happy to go back to—in terms of the lean systems we're putting in place when it comes to running an effective government on the FOI front, you had a lot of—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for answering that there are 42 staff in the Premier's office—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Seventy-two.

Ms. Jessica Bell: And what is the total compensation?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: This is public information. You can see it on the sunshine list, which was released for 2024. The Premier's office did report 47 staff earning more than \$100,000 per year. That's a decrease of one employee compared with 2023.

Ms. Jessica Bell: And then what is the total compensation?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: You will see that there is the \$100,000 threshold set out in the Public Sector Salary Disclosure Act. That has remained the same for about 28 years, and that was adjusted for inflation, as you may know, so about 85% of the employees on the current list wouldn't be included. But leaving the most senior executives, in terms of the compensation—and I would say, given the amount of work that is being done in light of the unprecedented economic times, you are going to want really good, high-quality staff, and them to be compensated accordingly. These are individuals who do not

work 9 to 5; they are not unionized. We really rely on them to do the heavy lifting and be able to work at a moment's notice, whether there is an imminent economic meeting that is happening between the Premier and a governor, or the Premier and the Prime Minister. The work that is laid out by these individuals is 24/7 type of work.

I'll give you an example: Everyone was glued to the television for the World Series, but of course what was happening in the background was the continuous trade war. So as everyone was rejoicing, cheering on a Canadian team over the Americans—a Canadian team that was kind of the underdog going into all of this—you had people that were working around the clock no matter what was happening elsewhere in this province because that's what Ontarians are relying on. They want a Premier and a Premier's team who are willing to work whatever hours are necessary to protect Ontario and respond in real time to the economic—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I'm asking—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If I could just stop us there, I would ask the table to speak directly into the mike from broadcasting. We're getting feedback because you're not close enough to the microphone.

Back to MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Is there someone else, maybe the deputy ministers, who could answer this question of, what is the total compensation of funding that goes to staff in the Premier's office? It's a simple question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: As I mentioned, as of March 31, 2025, there are 72 full-time equivalent positions in the Office of the Premier. That's a decrease from the last three years.

Ms. Jessica Bell: What is their total compensation?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: What does that have to do with the estimates line? You can literally see the estimates of how much is being spent on staff.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm asking you a very simple question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: It's right in front of you in the estimates.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Could you please tell me what it is?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: We can read out what is before you in the estimates if that is—let me just grab that line for you and then I can—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: As you will see, there hasn't been an increase for a number of years, and the total compensation has remained the same. What I will say is if you note the Premier's—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm asking you a very simple question. What is the total—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Ms. Jessica Bell: —compensation of funding that goes to staff in the Premier's office?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: So again, there are—

Ms. Jessica Bell: This is estimates. This is really as fundamental as it gets.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: And I'm trying to give you the breakdown if you'll allot me the time. Again, we're talking

about, as I mentioned already, the \$100,000 threshold that was set out in the Public Sector Salary Disclosure Act. That does remain the same. The complement is lower than it was in previous years, and so the compensation is a result of those 72 full-time equivalent positions in the Office of the Premier.

Ms. Jessica Bell: And what is the compensation, then, to those 72 staffers?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, publicly available information—you can also see it on the sunshine list, where you can look it up, where there are folks that are earning more than \$100,000 per year. What you'll notice from the sunshine list is there is actually a decrease of one employee from 2023, compared to the previous—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much.

We'll now go on to the third party. MPP Fraser.

Mr. John Fraser: Thank you for being here, Minister. I want to thank Deputy Minister Sutton for being here. I would just ask if Assistant Deputy Minister Evans and Brown are available. Are they here? You may want to come up front, please.

Minister, I will have a question for you, but you'll have to wait until the end. I know you'll want to answer, but I would ask that you direct these questions because they're very specific. I'll start with some general questions for an understanding, and they're very specific questions that actually don't require a figure. A yes or no is the simple answer that I need.

My questions are going to be all around government advertising and to get an understanding of what's happening and how this works. We know the government does a lot of advertising—a lot of governments do. This one does a lot. We know that the Cabinet Office's responsibility is to oversee that. Have I got that right? Minister?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I mentioned that in my opening remarks, the support that we do receive, so you are right. You really were paying attention to my opening remarks. Thank you.

Mr. John Fraser: All right. I'm just confirming this because I have a line of questioning which you'd be familiar with. It's important that I put it through in the line of questioning so that I can get to the conclusion, but I appreciate you letting me know that.

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There's a lot of people who are involved in the delivery. First you start with consulting, then you go with creative, then you go with production and then there are people who place the ads. The people who place the ads earn a commission. It's an interesting environment in which advertising is procured.

I would ask because I think this is an important question. We know there are things that are vendors of record that provide services to the government. Specifically in this fiscal year, was there a tendering process for the ad campaigns, the Protect Ontario and the Reagan ad? Yes or no? Was there a tendering process, or was it simply a vendor of record being selected? I just need to know the answer to that.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Yes. You're very familiar with this process, as you are a former member of a government as well. Everything in terms of advertising is done—

Mr. John Fraser: I'm just going to reclaim my time because I've got 15 minutes. It's a yes or a no. I don't mean to be rude. I know the game that we're playing here. I'll give you some time, but it's a yes or no. Was there a tendering process? Is there someone at the table who can answer that question? Yes or no?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Everything the government does on advertising follows the advertising act, as you are well aware of—

Mr. John Fraser: I would ask that the minister direct this to Deputy Sutton.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm happy to direct it to Deputy Sutton, your request, but it's no different than what I just said.

Mr. John Fraser: Thank you.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Do you mind repeating your question?

Mr. John Fraser: My question is: For the two ad campaigns this year that I know of, which are the Protect Ontario ad and the Reagan ad, was there a tendering process for those ads or was it simply a selection made from the vendors of record?

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Thank you. That's very helpful. Those were two separate processes. I'm happy to speak to that. For the Protect Ontario ad, it was a competitive procurement. It was done by Publicis, which is on the vendors of record that is maintained by Supply Ontario, and it was through a second-stage process.

What was the other ad you wanted to know?

Mr. John Fraser: Protect Ontario.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: That was Protect Ontario.

Mr. John Fraser: And the Reagan ad, the two-spot ad.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Oh, the Reagan ad, yes. In terms of the creative associated to that ad, it was actually a very small amount of creative. We utilized Creative Currency, who is also listed on Supply Ontario's vendors of record. You'll note from that ad that it utilizes the actual voice of Ronald Reagan from his 1987 address, which is publicly available.

The creative that was associated to that ad was the still images, so most of the fees on that were associated to the use of those still images and were part of a separate procurement, which was a competitive procurement for some of our work on the US campaigns through LG2.

Mr. John Fraser: LG2?

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Yes.

Mr. John Fraser: Okay. I'm going to skip ahead past production right now, and I want to talk about brokerage and these two ads specifically—not all the government ads; I'd like to be able to ask that question, but I don't want my colleagues across the way to interject.

In this field of placing ads, it's an interesting environment. You've got a lot of companies, but they all seem to be connected to the same parent company—not all of them, but a lot of them. It's a very profitable line of business. Can you tell me specifically which agency

placed both the Ontario ads and the Reagan ad? If you can't answer that question specifically, we'll just table it. I'll have another round of questioning, and maybe somebody can find the answer between now and then.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'll begin the answer on that. I think it's not about names or what you're alluding to; it's about the actual merit and the quality of the work.

If I were to consult good old Google here and type in "Creative Currency," they've done projects for the OPSBA, which is a voice for public education in Ontario. I'd imagine they're a very reputable firm. Homegrown, Ontario Federation of Agriculture—

Mr. John Fraser: Respectfully, Minister, I'm not talking about creative anymore; I'm talking about ad placing. I understand that Creative Currency doesn't place the ad, so I don't need to hear about Creative Currency and my questions aren't germane to them. My questions are germane to who the specific companies are and what the process was for placing those ads: for the Protect Ontario ad, which was in Ontario, and the Reagan ad, which was in the United States. If you could direct those questions to Deputy Sutton, I'd really appreciate it. Thank you.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Right. Just to lay the groundwork for the response: As you know, everything is laid out in terms of the Government Advertising Act, and so everything is followed through the Government Advertising Act.

Mr. John Fraser: That's why I'm asking these questions.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: There's also to the vendor of record list that Deputy Sutton has addressed, so—

Mr. John Fraser: Respectfully, Minister, I'm looking for a specific answer. I don't mean to interrupt. I only have 15 minutes. You can run the whole clock on me if you like, but it's a specific answer and it's not a "gotcha." Who were the agencies? What was the process?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, because you're asking about process, before I pass it along: You will be familiar that in addition to that process, everything is reviewed by the Auditor General. You would be familiar with that because it was actually brought in by a former Liberal government.

Mr. John Fraser: Respectfully, Minister, I'm asking a specific question. I do know what the Auditor General has to say about some of the government advertising, and I don't think we want to go down that road.

I would really appreciate it if you just referred this to Deputy Sutton, please.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: You asked about process, so I'm answering a question about process. But I'm happy to pass it to Deputy Sutton for further elaboration.

Mr. John Fraser: Thank you. That's great.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Make sure that everybody speaks into the microphone.

I would also remind us that we want to make sure that we're speaking to the estimates, not to the public accounts.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Thank you for the question. I would just start by saying that all of the reviewable advertisement placed by Cabinet Office has received approval

from the Auditor General. I would specifically note that these are not in Cabinet Office's estimates, as they pertain to the individual ministries.

However, I am, if it pleases the Chair, happy to answer the question. Yes, the advertisements were placed by EssenceMediacom. We have a multi-year contract with them, and it was competitively procured.

Mr. John Fraser: Thank you very much.

I'm going to go back to consulting now. We know when we have these ad campaigns, there's a strategic component to that. We're spending a lot of money, and we want to know what goes into that money that we're spending. We kind of probably know what comes out at the end of it, but what's going in at the beginning?

I guess my question—and I'll give you a little bit of time, Minister—is: What consulting is done to create the strategic plan for these advertisements—again, specifically in this year?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Just for clarity, are you referring to the public accounts and the agencies listed in public accounts, or are you—

Mr. John Fraser: No. You've got two ads. There are two ads that that you have going here that this Cabinet Office has responsibility for and some fiscal duty for, as well, too. Treasury Board can spread it all over the place, but I would imagine that Cabinet Office has a pretty good record of what they're spending and what they're doing, and they also are very involved in this—I would hope so; I mean, if they're not, then we've got bigger problems.

So my question is specific to the strategic way forward on these ads, the strategic plan for these ads, the consulting that's done. Where do we get that? Is that strictly from the Premier's office? Is it political consulting? Is there a consultant that comes in that does that? Does the Cabinet Office engage anybody in providing this strategic advice? That's my question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: As you heard, because I know you were intently listening to my opening remarks, Cabinet Office does act as a central agency. So it's a big work of collaboration, to answer your question in that sense.

When it comes to advertising, it's no different. It is a team approach, but of course there is an approach that is followed. There's a vendors of record list that is followed, and everything is laid out in the advertising act.

Mr. John Fraser: The question is yes or no. I'll make it even easier. Is there outside consulting that has been brought in to provide strategic advice for those two ads? Yes or no?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Which part of estimates are you referring to? Is it the line in the public accounts, or is it—

Mr. John Fraser: I am specifically asking a question about a process for which Cabinet Office is responsible in this fiscal year, that they've planned out, that they have carriage over. I just want to know, are we paying somebody to give strategic advice? That's it; it's simple. If you could direct this to the deputy, I'd really appreciate it.

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Hon. Andrea Khanjin: So before I turn it over to the deputy, I'd say that we're in an unprecedented economic

time with the tariffs, and so you're going to want strategic advice for people who have very close relations with our US counterparts. But I'll turn it over to Deputy Sutton to elaborate.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Thank you. May I just ask that you repeat the question, please?

Mr. John Fraser: I'm just simply asking whether outside strategic advice for either of these two ads was procured by Cabinet Office or the Premier's office.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Thank you for the question. Cabinet Office does play an oversight and coordination role in terms of the marketing campaigns, including the two campaigns that you've referenced. We start with an annual marketing plan that involves conversations with the Premier's office, with ministries across the system. We work with a number of different vendors of record in terms of the work that we do.

Mr. John Fraser: Specifically for those two campaigns, do you recall if there was a vendor of record that you used?

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Specifically, we've covered those two in terms of—we utilized Creative Currency on the Reagan ad and we used Publicis on the Protect Ontario ad.

Mr. John Fraser: Thanks. I turn my time over to—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you to the minister and her team for being here today. I would like to talk about the salaries in the Premier's office. You know, this government continues to run deficits every year. We're barreling towards half a trillion dollars in debt, hardly what I would call fiscally responsible.

And yet, we know from the sunshine list that the salaries of the staff in the Premier's office last year were \$7,346,105. That's according to the sunshine list. And yet this government continues to show in the estimates here only about \$2 million.

I understand that there's an allocation process. We've heard that before. But I would really like to hear from the minister a dollar amount for the total of the Premier's office salaries before that allocation happens. Just a dollar amount is all I'm looking for here.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I would say, as you know, we're prudent fiscal managers—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: No, just the dollar amount, Minister.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm trying to answer your question—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: A dollar amount, please.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: At a total of \$2.4 million, the budget provides for core staff—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Sorry, Chair, I'd like to reclaim my time.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —and their operating expenses.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Minister, I'm just looking for the salaries for the Premier's office before the allocation is done. I expect it will be actually in excess of \$7 million.

What I would like to hear from you is a dollar amount that begins with at least a seven. That's what I'd like to hear.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: With all due respect, we're here for estimates. And if you look at the estimates, you will see there are a total of \$2.4 million that the budget provides for the core staff and operating expenses.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Right. Thank you. Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time.

But we know from the sunshine list that the number is greater because that's public information, as you've said. It's over \$7 million in total. What I'm asking for—I'm an accountant by background; I get allocations. Pre-allocation, what is the total dollar value?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time.

We'll go to the government. MPP Kanapathi.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Minister, for your presentation, and thank you for your leadership and passion for the ministry. I see it first-hand working as the parliamentary assistant. Your work in the Premier's office and your leadership is commendable. I'd also like to thank the deputy ministers and all your staff for your hard work. I know this ministry has done a lot. You covered many, many areas within seven years, and your ministry's success rate to date, in many areas and many fronts, has been historic.

I am not going to speak the whole time. I'll let you speak. Under your leadership and the Premier's leadership, cutting \$1.2 billion worth of red tape every year—this number is staggering.

My question to you: How does the Premier's office ensure that common priorities are delivered effectively across the ministry you're involved in, multi-ministries and several ministries in our government? Please elaborate on that.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you, MPP Kanapathi. Thank you for serving as the parliamentary assistant for red tape reduction. I know you're a very passionate advocate for reducing red tape in all aspects, of course, with your passion in health care.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we're very much about reducing and getting rid of the status quo that hasn't been working in many areas, including one that you're passionate about, which is health care and putting people above paperwork.

What you'll see in the estimates in terms of support that the Premier's office plays and the critical coordination role that it does play is under the campaign of Protect Ontario, which we went to Ontarians to seek a mandate for and received a clear mandate for. A lot of it is now being examined and executed through the Premier's office and, of course, supported by many ministries, including the one you and I get to serve at for red tape reduction.

Part of that is really supporting our major projects. I look at some of the committee members we have here in this room, and you think about the coordinating efforts and things that the Premier's office does to protect Ontario. Just yesterday, he was at a groundbreaking with MPP Clark and Minister Lecce for the largest battery operating

plant we're going to have in our history—that is real jobs. It's really investing in the "Protect Ontario" slogan.

But it's more than that. What "Protect Ontario" means is people. It's the people who are behind that, the people who want the assurance that their government is there standing up for their jobs and the future. I know one of your colleagues MPP Triantafilopoulos here served at the Ministry of Economic Development, and the work that she had done to lay the groundwork for the auto and the manufacturing sectors really puts us in a better position now, considering how the tariffs have affected that sector.

I know one of the members you have on the committee, MPP Saunderson, has got Honda in his riding, so when we talk about the role of the Premier's office supporting that work, that we need to send a strong message to the auto sector saying, "We've got your back."

We have that coordinating approach because it's not just the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction that can work, say, when it comes to the auto sector to reduce some of the red tape, but the Premier's office will coordinate with other ministries. As I mentioned with the Ministry of Economic Development, it's those relations of trade ties, bringing in those auto investments to Ontario, but also having those inter-linkages, jurisdictional things between different provinces to bring those investments.

We talk about other investments we've made in terms of energy, and we are an energy powerhouse here in Ontario. I know one of your members here, MPP Smith, is really passionate about the Ring of Fire and all the work that he's done to really promote our critical minerals. This is all being coordinated through a one-team approach at the Premier's office here, which also links into, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, intergovernmental affairs.

MPP Smith knows this well, but when he was on an economic mission to Taiwan, they were very interested in our critical minerals. They're making lots of semiconductor chips there, which actually really intertwines with our economy because we're very auto dependant in Ontario. But we've done really good work since 2018 to diversify our economies of scale, and a lot of that coordination is done through the Office of the Premier and the supporting ministries like intergovernmental affairs, which prepares our members for these particular missions so that we can shore that investment into Ontario and really diversify our economy.

You're very familiar with the work you do in health care—and your family—in the life sciences sector, which we've been able to onshore onto Ontario's territory here, not only expanding job creation in Mississauga and the ripple effects that it has, but diversifying. Not only will we always back our auto employees and employers alike, but we're diversifying so that we put Ontario on the map as a life sciences powerhouse, which is literally powered by all the investments we're also doing in nuclear, which is then also complemented by the work that we're doing in mining and mining the critical minerals to create jobs.

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This is all the vision of the Premier and the Premier's office, supported by Cabinet Office and intergovernmental

affairs, and it is very much a team-coordinated effort to really bolster that economy.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Minister. I know that in the previous red tape bill that just received royal assent, Bill 56, Building a More Competitive Economy Act, it includes a commitment from the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction to explore and review and transform Ontario's economic development-related permit.

My question to you: Is all of this work accounted for in these estimates?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: It's a good question. I want to thank you for your support and your work on Bill 56, Building a More Competitive Economy Act, as well, which includes, of course, our commitments not only to protect Ontario, but also to reduce red tape.

That brings it back to the actual estimates of the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction. Because for us to do the work that we can do, when the Premier goes out there bringing investment to Ontario—and yourself included, being at the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction as well—and we say we've been able to reduce red tape for businesses, not-for-profits and people by \$1.2 billion and save them 1.8 million hours, those are real results that were driven by the fact that we have an operating budget within the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction to be able to do that great work, and, really, that coordinating effort. I think that's where I'm very fortunate to be here today to answer questions of all those three different offices. But actually, they complement each other so well.

When you see government humming—and you really need that right now with these unprecedented economic times—of being able to integrate that work to reduce, whether we're talking about keeping Ontario more competitive, the goal there is set out. The Premier talks about this a lot, being the most competitive in the G7. What does that mean, though, and how do we get there? That's where you look at the work that red tape reduction is doing to create that regulatory framework that's competitive across the G7 but also within our own country, to bring in those investments and make us more competitive.

An example I'll give you is—you're very familiar with this. Your passion in health care is being able to move across provinces and health care professions. Well, there was red tape there, and the red tape was, if you're a doctor or a nurse practitioner in Saskatchewan, you couldn't necessarily practise here in Ontario. Now within two business days, we're turning around those applications. There was big advocacy not only from our Minister of Health, Minister Jones, but also through the Ontario Medical Association, who brought these concerns to us, including the amount of time that doctors spend on paperwork versus patients. So we set out a clear directive saying, "We are always going to put patients above paperwork." Of course, all within due diligence and safety, but it's just the stuff that gets them mired down and not allowing them to spend that time with patients. This has now created us as the place where other people are looking at us as an example.

Leaning on the estimates here we have for intergovernmental affairs too, it's working across jurisdictions. I had

met with my counterparts in Nova Scotia who are doing great work on digitizing medical records. They're actually ahead of Ontario in that sense. We can learn a lot from them. Of course, population-wise, it's a smaller scale, but it gives us a good sample size to take that work.

As you know, with the work that you're doing with the medical association on getting their ideas on reducing red tape, it's so important, because whether you're going to your pharmacist or your doctor, your primary care, as we're expanding primary care throughout this province, part of that is learning from other jurisdictions and taking that intergovernmental approach to learn from others—Nova Scotia being an example.

I just met with my counterpart in Saskatchewan as well—and just again, borrowing the things that they've already done and things that we have in common and borrowing from each other. So we're really looking to strengthen those ties across Ontario, but it's nice to see that there's actually a few provinces now that have a Minister of Red Tape Reduction. I'd like to see everyone have a Minister of Red Tape Reduction because we see the great work that's done, but in some capacity, there is someone there that is doing that great work. I think we can be proud here in Ontario that we're leading the charge.

In terms of the regulatory burden, we're sitting in about 90 regulations per 10,000 people. Next to that is Alberta with about 140-plus and then after that, BC too with about 140-plus, so we're really leading the charge in that sense, all within keeping the integrity of the environment and public safety in step.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for that great answer.

Now I'll let my colleague MPP Firin—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Firin.

MPP Mohamed Firin: Thank you, Minister and your team, for the presentation. The Premier's office's budget hasn't changed from last year. Does that mean government is cutting back on priorities?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: That's a good question. I know you're a big fiscal hawk as well in your former walk of life. I would say, not at all. It really shows how efficiently the Premier's office is working and is operating. We're doing more with less, and that actually reflects what every Ontarian has to do right now too. Everyone in our economy has to innovate, and we also have to do more with less. So I'm very fortunate we have a great team at the Premier's office, as I mentioned, working around the clock, who are supporting record job creation in this province, major infrastructure projects that they're supporting and, of course, most importantly, cost-of-living relief measures that they're supporting as well through the work they're doing.

This is all while keeping all these investments I've talked about, whether it's investing in hospitals—we just talked about home care investments. It's all within keeping spending flat, which talks about the fiscal prudence we have as a government, but we take that fiscal prudence in-house as well when it comes to our own operations, which is really important. I think that's what Ontarians expect,

and that really shows how the government is not only taking responsibility but being responsive to the economic times and shows that we can deliver protections for the people of Ontario, all while not asking taxpayers to pay more.

There is no better example than—the Premier was recently talking about, in our fall economic statement, the lowering of the HST. I'm paraphrasing a bit; I don't have the quote in front of me, but he was saying that if you're keeping the HST, what you're really doing is taking money out of people's pockets. And he prides himself, since he became Premier in 2018, on not nickelling and diming people and really putting money back into the people's pockets, whether it's reducing gas at the pumps, whether it was getting rid of cap-and-trade, whether it's the economic investments he's making to create jobs here in this province. It's all a coordinated effort, but it wouldn't be possible without, also, the great work that the Premier's office is doing.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you, Minister and your team, for the presentation here today and all the hard work that you do every day.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: My question to the minister is, can you please provide an overview of how your ministry plans to use the funds outlined in the estimates?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you for that question. I'm afraid I only have one minute, so I encourage you to ask me that question again.

We're developing some really cool cutting-edge technology, which I'm happy to answer in the next round and elaborate on. But I know the Chair is giving me the eye, knowing that I only have one minute to answer. I'm happy to come back to you on that exciting use of innovation and digital tools we're using.

We're in an AI competition right now in the world, and there's a really interesting tool we're working on at the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction that will really set us apart from so many other jurisdictions.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We'll now go to MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I just want to put this process in context. The whole process of estimates is for opposition members, the third party, to question the government on how they're spending, in this year, \$232.5 billion. That's a lot of money. We've asked pretty simple questions today, which are directly related to the estimates we're talking about—freedom-of-information requests, the staffing component in the Premier's office, the process used to issue out what have become some very controversial ads.

What we're seeing is this process—I would describe it as being treated by the minister as a game of obstruction, where the goal is to not answer even the most basic questions. When that happens, good governance, accountability and transparency suffer as a result.

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I want to go back to the questions around the Premier's office. The minister refused to answer the question on how much money is spent on staffing in the Premier's office,

but this is what we know. We know that in the estimates that you have in front of you, it said that there's \$2.5 million that's going to be spent on staffing. What we also know, when we go to the sunshine list and we calculate how many people are actually working in the Premier's office and how much they get paid—and this is only people who earn over \$100,000 a year, so it doesn't include everyone—we know that the Premier's office is spending at least \$7.3 million, so three times more than what we're seeing in the estimates in front of us today.

So my question is, do you think it's appropriate to present a staffing number in estimates which is clearly significantly smaller than what the Premier's office is actually spending on staffing? Do you, as the minister, think that's appropriate?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I just want to get the Chair's attention for a moment—Chair, my apologies; I know you're trying to have a chat there, but—I'll just wait for the Chair's attention. My apologies, Chair.

Before I answer the member's question, she alluded to me at this committee being obstructionist, and I just want to remind us of the standing orders and how she's implying motive of be me being obstructionist. I would remind the members, I've given you answers, and if you don't like the answers, it doesn't mean I'm not giving you the answers. There's a difference between the two—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I don't think you've really given me an answer.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Chair, I'd like the member to withdraw the comment "obstructionist."

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I would ask all parties to make all their comments through the Chair, and we'll go from there.

Ms. Jessica Bell: So I'm going to reclaim my time—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: If I could turn to you, Chair, about using the term "obstructionist," if the member could withdraw that statement.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you. My question is very clear: Do you think it's appropriate that the number that the Premier's office is saying they're spending on staffing is at least three times smaller than what we know the Premier's office is spending on staffing? This is your opportunity to demonstrate that you are not being obstructionist at all, and you can just answer the question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, Chair, I turn to you in terms of the member's use of certain language that implies motive. So I would turn to you to ask the member to withdraw, if you see appropriate.

But again, you're conflating public accounts with estimates. But if we want to get into public accounts, I can certainly read from them. What you will see, which was provided to this committee—there was a chart provided to this committee about the historic expenditures of the Premier's office. So if I look at 2019-20, it's \$2.4 million. Then, if I look at 2020-21—it had a minor dip, actually—\$2.3 million. Then, if you look at 2021-22, it's \$2.4 million. If you look at 2022-23, it's \$2.4 million. If you

look at 2023-24, it was \$2.4 million, and if you look at 2024-25, it's \$2.4 million.

I know my colleague MPP Firin had asked about the role of the Premier's office, and I—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, thank you very much. I'm going to reclaim my time. Thank you for summarizing that.

So my next question is this. You've just presented the estimates over time indicating that the Premier's office is spending approximately the same amount each year on staffing. But what we find when we use the sunshine list is that the amount of funding that's going to staffing within the Premier's office is going up year in, year out. Do you think it is appropriate for staffing within the Premier's office to go up year in, year out given that the government has instituted a hiring freeze on many public service departments and agencies as of September 2025?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: In your line of questioning, what I presume you're asking about is public accounts reporting. Public accounts are the province of Ontario's annual reports and are consolidated fiscal statements, as you would have received in your briefing notes. They provide financial highlights of past fiscal years. So I presume what you're asking about—even though we're here on estimates, you're referring to public accounts. But public accounts, as you know from your briefing documents provided to you, are supporting volumes, present financial information at a more detailed level. So you'll see things like ministry statements and schedules that contain ministry statements, detailed schedules of payments. As part of public accounts schedules, you'll also see—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, Minister, for summarizing. I am now going to reclaim my time. What I'm asking very clearly about is estimates and the difference between the amount of money that the Premier's office is saying they're spending each year on staffing, which is in the estimates document, and what other sources of evidence which are also government-collected are saying about how the Premier's office is staffing.

I think it's pretty clear. I think what Ontarians want to know is that the estimates numbers are accurate. If the Premier's office is saying they're spending \$7 million on staffing or \$8 million on staffing, then that is the number that is presented in estimates. It's pretty clear that that's not what's happening today.

I want to go to another question, and this question is about the Cabinet Office budget. When I look at the Cabinet Office budget, it looks like the budget is being increased by 20% from 2023-24 to 2025-26, yet the government has also instituted a freeze on public sector hiring as of September 2025.

So my question to you is, how do you justify increasing the staff component when the Ontario government is asking everyone else in the public sector to freeze hiring?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: As I mentioned, Cabinet Office is the Premier's ministry providing essential strategic advice. You'll see overall spending in Cabinet Office in 2024-25, as you had said, was \$4.3 million higher. Of

course, the increased spending in Cabinet Office is mainly due to the compensation increases that resulted from the repeal of the Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act, 2019.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Just to clarify, that 20% increase is a direct result of existing staff receiving increases in pay? I just want to make that clear. That's what you're saying?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: It's strategic alignment, and it was to respond to the timely decisions that are needed by the government in lieu of what's happening with the economic uncertainty we're in with the tariffs. But I'm happy to also allow the CAO to elaborate on those numbers.

Ms. Jessica Bell: The Cabinet Office budget has increased by 20% from 2023-24 to 2025-26 at a time when the government has announced there's a public sector hiring freeze, and the minister just mentioned that that increase was because existing staff got pay increases. Could you elaborate on that?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If you can introduce yourselves before you answer the question. The floor is yours.

Ms. Anna Boyden: Absolutely. Good morning, Chair—Anna Boyden, chief administrative officer, Cabinet Office and Ministry of Red Tape Reduction.

The Cabinet Office growth in budget allocation is directly tied to the delivery of the government's mandate and to support the OPS in delivering on those priorities. There were several areas where we saw increases over the last year.

The first, as the minister mentioned, is the opportunity to strengthen domestic and international relationships and the work done in the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs to support the team delivering on and implementing Ontario's overall intergovernmental and international relations strategy. There has also been work to support the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs's office in Ottawa and the team there. There was work to support the transfer of ontario.ca, which was previously held in the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Given all that new work, did you hire any new staff?

Ms. Anna Boyden: Very limited—we had several new staff that were hired in the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs.

Ms. Jessica Bell: So there was some new staff that had been hired. How many new staff have been hired?

Ms. Anna Boyden: Just one moment and I'll pull the number.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Sure.

Ms. Anna Boyden: Deputy Sutton, if you'd like to speak to it as well.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Certainly. I'm happy to speak to that to give you an example.

In terms of some of the staffing increases you referenced, there were two specific areas within the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs. One is specific to the US relations and engagement component of our work. I would highlight that those are temporary FTEs that are of short-

term nature to respond to the current challenges that we are facing with our partner to the south.

There were an additional three temporary FTEs that were allocated to the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs in order to support the Premier in his role as chair of the Council of the Federation. That was a role that was one year, commencing on August 1, 2024, and ending this summer with the summer meeting. Those were temporary resources—there were three of them—and those resources have now been closed out.

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Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that summary. Just to be clear, you can imagine if people are listening to this and they've heard that there is a public sector hiring freeze, yet at the same time, we're hearing information today about the Premier's office and Cabinet Office paying people more and hiring people at a time when we have over 700,000 people who are looking for work—you can imagine they might have some questions about that.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Can I just clarify your line of questioning? Do you believe those people should not have jobs to protect Ontario in the unprecedented economic tariff environment?

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm just summarizing what I've noticed.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: If you were in government, MPP Bell, would you fire those individuals from protecting Ontario from tariffs?

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm summarizing what I've noticed, which is very different from what you originally said.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: It's concerning that you would get rid of those jobs of people protecting the province. I'm just very concerned.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Order. Through the Chair.

Ms. Jessica Bell: What I'm going to do next is, I'm going to take my time back and I'm going to ask another question. This is about red tape reduction. Last year, the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction planned to spend \$61.73 million this year. That number has now risen to \$74.13 million, so there has been an increase in the amount of money that the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction is spending.

In previous estimates, the ministry would typically provide an outcome statement on reduction in regulator compliance requirements, and it would include total net annualized compliance cost savings, among other measures. This chart has been omitted from this year's estimates. This is an example of what the chart looked like in previous years, and now there's no tracking in the same way on the outcome of the red tape reduction measures.

Can the ministry provide an explanation for why you've omitted this table from this year's estimates?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I assure you we are the ministry of key performance indicators—lots of tracking to be had.

You asked about the allocation budget increase. The increase was a result of a strategic investment of \$2.39 million, as you will see, and that is actually being made

towards a made-in-Ontario, AI-generated application called Regulatory Intelligence Solution. It's called RegAI. It's actually something that other provinces have expressed interest in.

Basically, we went to Treasury Board for additional—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I didn't actually ask that question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: You asked about a budget increase; I'm explaining the budget increase here.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I provided that in my opening remarks, and then I asked about the estimates chart that you've put in previous estimates, which essentially tracks the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction's work.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Ms. Jessica Bell: My question is, can you provide this chart to the committee so that we can assess the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction's work, just like we've been able to do in previous years?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: We have ample time before this committee to answer that question, and so we can answer that question here today. We're in the capable hands of Deputy Murray here and our CAO.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I think it's a yes or no question.

Ms. Maud Murray: Good morning. Maud Murray, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction.

Through you, Chair, the response is that we do still track all of the work that's being done. Most recently, in our burden reduction report, we did set out all of the changes that have been made. That information we published September 29, I believe. So it is public, and it is something that we are very proud to speak to as well.

Ms. Jessica Bell: My request to staff and the minister is that you could provide that document to the committee so—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time.

Before we go to the third party, I'd like to take a moment to caution all honourable members on the committee on their language here at the committee today. While I recognize that at times discussions in committee can become heated, I ask that the members keep their remarks temperate and worthy of this assembly and the office that we all hold.

With that, we will now go to the third party. MPP Fraser.

Mr. John Fraser: First of all, I want to thank Deputy Sutton for being here and everyone from Cabinet Office. Thank you for your work.

Sorry for calling Deputy Brown unnecessarily up to the front. It's been a while since I've been in estimates.

You know what, Minister? It's just going to be you and me for the next five minutes. I won't make you work hard.

The point I was trying to make is, Cabinet Office and the Premier's office are responsible for spending a lot of money on government advertising, hundreds of millions of dollars in the last four years, five years. It's a lot of money.

The Auditor General has been fairly clear that the rules that exist right now don't allow her to analyze and look at

things basically as value for money for the taxpayer and that there are too many advertisements that she says are just solely there to create a positive impression of the government, which is good for the government and good for a party. We can see how in these advertisements, we have the same agencies, and the marketing is the same politically in parties as they are in government. It's a lot of money.

Apart from what's going on on the inside, which we talked about already, what's happening? Who's getting what contracts? How does this happen?

There are, as my colleague has said, 700,000 people out of work. Hundreds of thousands of children visit food banks every week. People are having to use their credit card instead of their OHIP card to get the health care services they need because they can't find a family doctor. Kids aren't getting the help they need in school, and our youth can't get a job.

In this fiscal year, I would imagine just with the two ads we're talking about, we're getting close to \$100 million. That's a lot of money. That's a lot of money that could help people. That's a lot of money that could be put into services for people.

We should all have a problem with that. We all have people who can't work or can't find a job. We all have young people in our ridings that can't find work. We all have people in our ridings who are visiting food banks. We all have people who don't have a family doctor.

I guess my question specific to this year is, how does the government justify spending that amount of money on an exercise not to protect Ontario? Because objectively, looking at that ad that ran through the World Series, I'm not sure what jobs they're protecting other than the people in the ad agencies that are employed to deliver this. There is no discernible benefit, and I think that any reasonable person could look at that and say that. I don't think all my colleagues across the aisle can defend that ad. It's not protecting jobs.

How does the minister justify spending that amount of money on a branding exercise that's not protecting one single job in Ontario other than at the ad agencies that we talked about this morning?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I appreciate and I share your sense of needing to stand up for the people in Ontario in these tough, unprecedented economic times, and I get your frustration.

You also come from a former Liberal government. I preface this with how I appreciate David Herle's podcast, but you are coming from a government that had given a particular campaign chair a contract for more than three quarters of a million dollars the second you left government. I get your frustration because you were there in a government that made millions of dollars that could have gone to Ontarians, which is what we're doing in this fall economic statement.

Mr. John Fraser: Minister, thank you very much. I'll reclaim my time.

You brought up something that's really important. You mentioned you listen to Herle's broadcast, so here's an

excerpt from David Herle's podcast with Kory Teneycke, somebody who you might know, or, as I describe him, the man behind the curtain: "I think the other thing they need to start doing is government advertising, which ... I would say, in terms of volume and amount of money that you should spend, outstrips what you can do with party advertising about 10 to 1. It's just such an important strategic tool to be using...."

"Well, I don't think you would see the Ontario PC Party where it is in the polls if it wasn't out there telling its own story in a positive way using government advertising." He went on to say that all political parties' ad budgets are water guns compared to the "fire hose" that governments' can be.

Do you agree with Mr. Teneycke?

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Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Look, I get your frustration, given the government that you had come out of, with the misspending that was happening.

You talked about health care. We have \$60-billion-plus that are going towards health care and primary care teams. Those are jobs. I know MPP Firin painted it quite well just a few weeks ago. These are jobs that you voted against when you talked about health care investments.

You talk about protecting—what does the advertisement do to protect Ontario jobs? Everything, because these trade agreements are on the line.

Have a sense of urgency. You talk to constituents just like I do—

Mr. John Fraser: I'll reclaim my time because I want to give some time—look, I do want to say—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I appreciate you reclaiming it. I also would appreciate if you would make all your comments through the Chair.

Mr. John Fraser: I'm going to make a comment, through you, Chair, which is that I think the minister is mistaking frustration for muted outrage. What the government is doing is wrong.

I'll turn it over to my colleague.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I'd just like to start by commenting on the minister's comments about a government that's doing less with more; in fact, it's the opposite, Chair. They're doing—sorry, she said they're doing more with less; I'm going to say they're doing less with more.

Spending is climbing every year under this government; in fact, even in the Premier's office spending is up. We know from the sunshine list that the salary load for the Premier's office went up from at least \$6.9 million to \$7.3 million, and it's very clear that the minister does not want to answer the question of what the total salary in the Premier's office is. But it's not surprising. We know this is a government that doesn't like to be transparent. The Auditor General said so herself recently in her audit of the Skills Development Fund, which she called not fair, not accountable and not transparent.

I think the people of Ontario deserve to know how much taxpayer money the Premier spends on his staff. I think it would be the transparent thing to do, to share that number.

So a simple question to the minister, through you, Chair—I'll give her another chance: Pre-allocations to other ministries, what is the total salary expense of the Premier's office?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, I will point to the estimates and information before you in public accounts, which tells you the amount. But I get your frustration because—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Excuse me, Chair. I'd like to reclaim my time. Again, I know the minister knows—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm continuing my answer, Chair.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I would just suggest, obviously, we all speak through the Chair. I also would recommend that when a question is asked through the Chair that there is at least a minimum amount of time for the answer to be given before we reclaim the time. If you reclaim the time right away, the truth of the matter is, then you never wanted an answer.

With that, MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I certainly do want an answer, but the answer I'm looking for is a dollar amount, and the minister is pointing me back to the estimates document, which is a post-allocation number. Maybe she doesn't have any accounting training, but what I'm asking for is pre-allocations. What is the dollar amount that the Premier's office pays to the 70-plus staff in that office? It's not \$2 million, Minister. It is over that, according to the sunshine list. I'm just looking for a number, and if it's not a number, Chair, I will reclaim my time.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Chair, I may not be an accountant, but I will point to how public accounts work and it's laid out in your briefing documents.

Your member beside you, MPP Fraser, is on record saying that—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Sorry, Chair. I will reclaim my time—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Okay. Well, I guess you don't want your record on the—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: No. Chair, I will reclaim my time—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm trying to answer to your question.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I am looking for a dollar amount of what this government spends on the staff in the Premier's office. It's very clear the minister doesn't want to give the answer. It's a very simple question: It's a dollar amount.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: With all due respect, Chair, you're not letting me answer, so if I can't answer, it's up to the—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: No, I'm just looking for a dollar amount.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We're getting a debate again. I would suggest that, as the minister has mentioned, the actual spending is public accounts; the projection of future spending is estimates.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Yes.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We are not here for public accounts; we are here for estimates. The exact dollar is in the estimates, and if the member wishes to refer to that, go for it.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Okay. The time is yours, MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: It is. Thank you, Chair.

I will once again highlight that the salaries and wages in the estimates is \$2,007,100. What I am saying is, I'm looking for that number pre-allocation. This is an allocated number, which the government has explained before, and the number on the sunshine list is actually in excess of \$7 million. I'm simply looking for the number that is the top line in the estimates, before the allocations are deducted. Again, I'm just looking for a dollar amount, Minister. If you can't answer that question, I'll move on to my next line of questioning.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you, Chair. Again, with all due respect to the member, this is the committee that reviews government estimates. I appreciate you bringing this up—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Okay, thank you, Chair. I'm going to reclaim my time. It's very clear—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: This isn't question period—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you.

MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I'm reclaiming my time. The minister is not answering the question. I will have a follow-up written question. I would like the Clerk to record that I would like a written answer to the question of the salary load of the Premier's office, pre-allocation. That is my question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: So, Chair—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I am moving on, Chair, to another topic.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: We are here for two hours, and—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I would like to move on to—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —we are able to answer these questions—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I would like to move on to—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —but they have to allude to estimates.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Yes. I'd like to move on to—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: What you're asking about is not in the estimates.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Order.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I'd like to move on to services, Chair. In the estimates we have an amount in excess of \$8 million in services in the Cabinet Office. It's an increase of, I think, about 50%, but that's less of what concerns me. My question, really, is about what's in that number. Again, I think that the government probably does a bottoms-up estimate, a budget of how that estimate is going to be spent, that \$8 million in services. What I'm

looking for is a category of the kind of expenses that are in that number.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Minister?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Can I just seek clarity on your question? Which part of the estimates are you referring to? Is it the travel? Is it—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: No, it's the line item "Services."

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: If you were to elaborate on services, again, you can look at public accounts on the different services rendered. Some of them are things like media monitoring, especially given what's happening south of the border. There are also agencies we work with in terms of US-based relations. We talked about inter-governmental affairs, being able to have real-time information with what's happening with the US tariffs. I'm happy to have the deputies elaborate on the service expenditures which are needed, especially in this time.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Again, to the deputy, Chair, thank you. I would like a description of the kind of items that are in there and the reason for the significant increase year over year.

Ms. Anna Boyden: Services typically capture items like legal services, which are charged back from the Ministry of the Attorney General. They are IT-related charges and seat charges for individuals in the ministry. It supports things like record storage and records information management. It supports recruitment fees. It also supports items like leadership training for staff.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Ms. Anna Boyden: Some of the services that are being used this year include \$4.1 million for the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction's IT projects, the AI project that the minister referenced earlier—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I'd like to just reclaim my time, given I only have a minute left.

I'd like to know, given the increase in scandals that this government has experienced—there was, of course, the greenbelt scandal, now we have the Skills Development Fund—I'm wondering whether or not any of that amount of services will be for training for your staff to address these issues around conflict of interest and how they need to conduct—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I know your party is very familiar with conflict of interest, but as a result of the greenbelt report, we followed through with all those recommendations and training has been administered to all ministers' offices and is available on demand through the Integrity Commissioner.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: My question is, has there been any increase in the estimates on training to address the increase and the continuation of the scandals—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time.

We will now go to the government, MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you once again, Minister, and your staff. Minister, I believe in growing a strong economy and I know that the Minister of Red Tape Reduction plays a very important role moving forward.

Minister, can you expand on some of the exciting news about AI that you mentioned a few minutes ago and, as you provide an overview, how your ministry plans to use these funds outlined in the estimates?

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Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you. I appreciate the question. Yes, you would have seen an increase there in the budget, and the ROI, which we'll get the deputy minister to elaborate on, on RegAI, is quite remarkable.

So what RegAI is going to allow our government to do—and it has been launched—is it's going to be able to go through all the regulations and laws of Ontario and be able to come and create a spreadsheet of information and data and bring out data on regulations that are too complex or outdated. The benefit of those things is it's something that a policy analyst can then analyze and say, "Okay, based on the AI's recommendation, should we actually go with this?" So there is a human element in it. There are no labour disruptions in it. It actually creates more meaningful work within the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction as well.

On the complexity side, it allows us to put things in more layman's terms as well. They're more understandable when it comes to the complexity of regulation to clarify things. The outdated factor is really important work for our government as well because if you look at some of our regulatory framework within the government of Ontario, some of the regulations haven't been updated since the creation of the iPhone. Government needs to keep pace with technology. So what RegAI will let us do is keep pace with it. As I mentioned, in talking to some of my counterparts in other provinces, they're really excited to see what the outcome of this tool is.

It is prudently a financially fiscal tool as well, given the bulk of the work it's going to do is within its first fiscal years—it does kind of teeter off at the end. It's a prudent financial investment, but also, the outcomes will be great because, as MPP Kanapathi rightly stated in his questions, we've been able to say we've reduced for businesses, not-for-profits and Ontarians \$1.2 billion in red tape reduction. But can you imagine what the art of the possible will be once RegAI is at its full capability? The amount that we can save businesses in a time where every time and every saving that we can provide for them is more money back in their pocket to do what they love to do best, which is run their business and give back to their community—so it is incredible work.

I do want to cede the floor to my deputy minister because she was very excited about this particular project. When I started at the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction, it was one of the first things that I got briefed on. I do want her to elaborate on the outcomes of this particular tool.

Ms. Maud Murray: As the minister stated, RegAI—regulatory intelligence—is a tool that we have been building. The current functionality that we have developed with RegAI is the ability for it to identify regulatory compliance requirements within all of the regulations and statutes of the province.

The next functionality that we're working towards is for it to be able to identify those compliance requirements

within forms as well. That's our next functionality that we'll be adding.

The ultimate vision, with regard to RegAI, is the ability for it to support the policy work that exists throughout the organization, the enterprise, on red tape reduction. It will then be a tool that's used by policy advisers and others to be able to identify the red tape.

In the future of it, we're hoping that it can also compare regulations from different jurisdictions and then identify the areas where things are duplicative in nature, or maybe they're outdated or overly complex, thereby giving ministries the opportunity to make those changes and reduce red tape.

There has been a lot of excitement that we have within the ministry and even outside. As the minister alluded to, we've been speaking to some colleagues in Saskatchewan, in Nova Scotia and in Alberta. This tool is something that they've all been asking us about and wanting to know more about. So, as we're developing, we are also sharing the knowledge that we're gaining as a result of it.

The other thing I would say about RegAI is that it's a tool that we worked on with our colleagues in the Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement. They have been very great partners in helping us as we build this tool and its functionality.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you, Deputy. Thank you, Minister. It's great to see how far technology has moved ahead over the years. There's probably a few of us—maybe the Chair and maybe MPP Fraser—when we went to school, they didn't even have calculators. So it's great to see.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Vickers.

MPP Paul Vickers: Chair, my question is through you to the minister. It will be a short question. Hopefully I'll give her lots of time to give us a great answer here.

It actually is about time. It's interesting to note the Minister of Red Tape Reduction is saving everyone 1.8 million hours of time, which is a remarkable feat by the minister and the government.

Can the minister please explain how funding for the MRTR allows us to achieve this result?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: At the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction, we've been able to put together 15 red tape reduction packages. So much of the funding goes towards those particular packages.

In addition to that, it's the behind-the-scenes regulatory work that happens. Every time a ministry submits an idea or regulation, they have to do what's called—and I had to learn about this process through Deputy Murray—a RIA, a regulatory impact assessment. Basically, for any idea the government does, they have to say, "What is the cost?" or "Is it overly burdensome in terms of regulation, and what was the work done to address that burdensome piece of the policy?"

In certain circumstances, of course, it's going to be necessary. I think about public safety for instance, where we wouldn't want to compromise such things. But in other circumstances, it's a good check-in to say, "Are we being a little bit too complicated in creating regulations?" That's

why, as Deputy Murray had talked about a little bit earlier in one of the questions from other members of the committee, we have this report that we do every year, the burden reduction report.

Part of that funding is also in addition to supporting the legislation we put before the House. I want to thank the members on the government side of this committee who supported that great work in passing a red tape reduction bill. We have another one ready to be debated.

In addition to that work, there's the burden reduction report. It basically is a combination of all the work the government is doing to reduce regulation. It's an accountability measure because this government takes transparency and accountability quite seriously. We lay it all out in the red tape reduction burden report, a public-facing document which lays out those things. It actually lays out the burden reduction principles we have, MOPBA, which are actually really interesting principles that we always apply to any of the policy work through government.

I know Deputy Murray is very excited about the MOPBA principles as the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction principles, so I do want her to elaborate on some of those principles that we adhere to.

Ms. Maud Murray: In terms of the seven principles that we have under the Modernizing Ontario for People and Businesses Act, MOPBA, as the minister stated, the first that comes to mind is national and international standards. Really, what that's meant to do is encourage ministries when they're developing standards in their regulatory framework to use national and international ones so that they're easier for businesses to then apply and they don't change when you change your jurisdiction, as in going from province to province.

The other principle that we have is the principle of using a small business lens as we know that 95% of businesses in Ontario are small or medium-sized businesses. So using that small business lens is critical to ensuring that businesses are able to follow the regulations that have been developed and don't need to go and consult a lawyer in order to understand that.

The other principle that we have is celebrating good actors. This is something that we try to do in our burden reduction report in terms of being able to speak to all of the great work that's happening.

The other principle that we have is plain language. This is something that we hear from businesses over and over again, that the way the regulations are drafted make it difficult for them to understand what's actually expected of them. So we do encourage ministries to use plain language in their drafting.

This is one that we hear about over and over again, the principle of outcomes versus prescriptive. What that means is that, often, in our regulations, we will state exactly what we expect a business or a regulated entity to do in order to fulfill the compliance requirements instead of focusing on what the intention is or what the policy outcome we're seeking is versus how it needs to get done. We hear from businesses all the time that sometimes those prescriptive requirements prevent them from being

innovative, as they need to be, because they have to follow exactly what we've set out. So, again, that's also another principle under MOPBA that we have.

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I'm happy to go on to talk about the others but, through you, Chair, I don't know if you'd like me to continue with that.

MPP Paul Vickers: I'd just like to say thank you to the minister and to the deputy. Plain language is such an important part. You don't need to have to go to a lawyer every single time to understand something. I applaud you for making it in language that the common person can understand. I think that's a great way to work.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Triantafilopoulos.

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: To my colleague here: Being a lawyer, I must agree with you. It's important to be able to use plain language as much as possible.

Minister, my question is on affordability. With the introduction of legislation such as the Protect Ontario by Cutting Red Tape Act, Bill 46, the government has signalled its commitment to reducing administrative barriers and making life more affordable. Could you provide us an update on the key initiatives within this legislation and how they align with the broader goals of competitiveness, prosperity and affordability?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you for that question and thank you again for the work you did on Keira's Law. It really talks about how we always need to look to strengthen our laws and take care of the most vulnerable.

When it comes to the most vulnerable, you see that in our current red tape bill that is before the Legislature. We had different community members who received Ontario disability as well as the new federal disability benefit, and they came to Minister Parsa and said, "We have concerns because our situation hasn't changed, and yet, if we have both benefits, there's a clawback that happens." Frankly, that's a lot of red tape.

So we listened to their concerns, and it's within the bill that will eventually, I hope, be debated in the Legislature. That just speaks to the policy work, the team approach that we're taking to not only talk about affordability, especially in a time like now, but it builds on the measures we've taken.

I was just talking to someone at Shoppers Drug Mart not that long ago about the One Fare program. Her son is pursuing post-secondary education, and they chose to go to the GTA. Thanks to One Fare, now her son is saving \$1,600 per year. The red tape on that was that you would have to pay a different fare every step of the journey. So if you're taking Barrie Transit, then you're hopping on the GO train and then you're hopping on the TTC, you would get nickelled and dimed at each step. So Premier Ford said, "None of that anymore. We're not nickel-and-diming people. There's a lot of red tape here. We need to do something about it," and through the Ministry of Transportation, we were able to find a way to service this One Fare program.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: That's one of the many examples we've done, not only to reduce red tape but put meaningful actions to people's lives to save them money and make Ontario more affordable but also more competitive.

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks, Chair. I think we've only got about 30 seconds left?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Not that long—about 39.

Mr. Dave Smith: I really don't have time to get a question in, so I just want to say thank you to the minister and all the staff who have come in today to provide us with this information. It is great to hear something about the work that you're doing, especially on the red tape side. I know that there have been 16 red tape reduction bills that have come forward so far. When we first got elected, Ontario had more regulations than any other province—actually, twice as many as the next province with regulations. So it's good to see that we're taking that approach that we should regulate to integrity but not to interference. We had gone beyond interference with a number of the regulations, so kudos to you for—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes that time.

I will go to MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: How long have I got?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): You have six minutes and two seconds.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the minister.

This is a question about the Cabinet Office. I'm referring to page 17 of the estimates briefing book. On that page, the estimates briefing book outlines that a core mandate of the Cabinet Office is to provide strategic advice, coordination and operational support between the Office of the Premier, the House leader and all ministers' offices. That's its goal.

Yesterday, we learned that the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security undertook an order of Get A-Head Inc., also known as Keel Digital Solutions, in 2023 after irregularities were found and subsequently prompted a comprehensive forensic audit of the company. The result of the audit recommended that this matter be referred to the OPP, which the government has done. Yet a year later, in 2024, a different ministry from the ministry that produced an audit—this is the Ministry of Labour—gave that very same company funding as part of the Skills Development Fund scheme.

So you've got one department saying something irregular is happening here that is so bad we are going to refer it to the police, and yet, on the other hand, you've got a ministry saying, "Hey, here's a whole lot of cash."

My question is, it's the cabinet's job to provide coordination across ministries. Did the issue of Get A-Head reach the Cabinet Office, and if so, how did the Cabinet Office respond?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I appreciate your question, and as you had mentioned, the Ministry of Labour—and I can't comment on the specific person that you're alluding to, as it is under investigation. I will leave it at that. If you have further questions to the Minister of Labour—I believe they were ready in estimates. It's not directed to these estimates, but I cannot comment further, as it is being investigated.

Ms. Jessica Bell: To be clear though, it is the Cabinet Office to coordinate between ministries so that situations where, if one company is being investigated by the OPP, that another ministry doesn't just give them a whole lot of money. It's the Cabinet Office to provide that kind of coordination.

I've got a pretty simple question: Did this issue reach the Cabinet Office, and if so, how did the Cabinet Office respond? It's a pretty simple question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: And it's a pretty simple answer—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm not asking for your opinions; I'm asking you if Cabinet Office saw it.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: An audit is being conducted, and so, I refer the questions to the OPP, which is conducting an investigation.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'd be curious if the—I'd like the deputy minister to respond.

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Point of order: MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Pursuant to standing order 62, which governs the estimates, we have invited the minister to speak on behalf of the ministries. It is the minister's discretion if she wants to invite one of her staff that she has brought to support her. It is not up to the member to ask questions of anyone other than the minister. That is what the standing order points to, and it is the motion for this committee that it is the minister who is the one who is here to respond to it.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much for that. I would remind all members that we are hearing from the minister this morning, and if the minister deems to want assistance with some of the questions, she can refer it to someone else. The committee does not have the ability to ask anyone in the audience or anyone at the table to speak; the minister is the one being interviewed.

Back to MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'll tell you, either way, it doesn't look very good. So either the Cabinet Office is so disorganized that issues in one ministry don't actually reach the Cabinet Office so that it can inform the work of other ministries, or the Cabinet Office found out about it and decided to allow funding to be issued through the Skills Development Fund anyway. So you've got disorganization on one hand or questionable dealings on the other. That's what it looks like from my perspective.

The next question I have is about intergovernmental affairs. Page 11 states that a key responsibility of the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs is "leading the province's strategic approach to Ontario-US relations."

Recently, the United States terminated all trade negotiations with Canada in response to the Premier's Ronald Reagan ad.

My question is, did the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs raise any concerns with the advertisement prior to its distribution?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: The ad that you are referring to sent a strong message to Americans that we are stronger united and divided we fall, and that what is happening with Donald Trump's tariffs is sending not only ripple effects to the Canadian economy, but the American as well. There will be job losses on both sides—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time, because I only have a short period of time left.

My second question is—because you didn't answer that question, to be clear.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Ms. Jessica Bell: You gave a nice summary of the ad, but you didn't answer the question. So I'm going to ask a more simple question, a more basic question. Did the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs see the advertisement before it was made public?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: There is a process with all advertising. If you want to elaborate on the advertising process, I'm happy to pass that on to the deputy.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Great. Two questions: Did the ministry see the advertisement before it was made public? That is definitely a yes-or-no question. The second is, did the ministry, if they saw it, raise any concerns with the advertisement prior to its distribution?

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Thank you for the question. Yes, the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs had discussions about the ad in question. I would raise that the objective of the ad was to start a discussion, a discussion in terms of the US relations, utilizing the words of Ronald Reagan. I think we can—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That does conclude the time, and that concludes all the time for questioning—

Mr. John Fraser: Point of order.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Go ahead.

Mr. John Fraser: When I thanked the Cabinet Office staff, I forgot to include the minister, and I'd like to thank the minister for being here today.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The time has expired for the committee's consideration of the 2025-26 estimates of Cabinet Office and the Office of the Premier. Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 401, Cabinet Office program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 2401, Office of the Premier program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Cabinet Office carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Cabinet Office to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of the Office of the Premier carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of the Office of the Premier to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

That concludes our consideration of this ministry's estimates. I'd like to thank Minister Khanjin for so ably representing the Cabinet Office and everyone here today for their participation.

The committee now stands recessed till 1 p.m.

The committee recessed from 1204 to 1300.

TREASURY BOARD SECRETARIAT

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Good afternoon. The Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs will now come to order. We're meeting to consider the 2025-26 estimates of the Treasury Board Secretariat for a total of two hours.

We're joined today by staff from Hansard, broadcast and recording, and legislative research.

We're also joined by the Honourable Caroline Mulroney, Minister and President of the Treasury Board—welcome, Minister—Deputy Minister Carlene Alexander and ministry officials and staff.

Are there any questions from the committee? If not, I'm now required to call vote 3401, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement from the minister for up to 20 minutes.

As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. I trust that the deputy minister has arranged to have the hearings closely monitored with respect to questions raised so that the ministry can respond accordingly. If you wish, you may verify the questions and issues being tracked by the research officer at the end of the appearance.

As always, remember to keep your comments through the Chair—and that's much more important to the committee than it is to the presenters.

With that, Madam Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Good afternoon, everyone. It really is my pleasure to be here to speak to the committee today in my capacity as President of the Treasury Board. I had the privilege of speaking to an estimates committee last week as Minister of Francophone Affairs. I'm very happy to be here with my deputy minister and my team from the Treasury Board Secretariat.

In the spirit of transparency and clarity, we always welcome a review of our ministry's expenditure estimates. We will also be available to answer any questions that members might have about the important work that we do here at the Treasury Board Secretariat.

First, I'm glad to have the opportunity to share a refresher overview of the expenditure estimates process

for everyone today. The expenditure estimates represent the government's official request to the Legislature for legal authority to incur expenditures during a fiscal year. There are two volumes of expenditure estimates: Volume 1 of the expenditure estimates was tabled on June 4 of this year and represents the estimates for the government including government ministries. Volume 2 sets out the spending plans of the legislative offices, including the Office of the Assembly, the Office of the Auditor General, the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer and the Ombudsman of Ontario. Volume 2 will be tabled at a later date.

I should also mention the Treasury Board Secretariat will table supplementary estimates if a ministry experiences a substantial fiscal pressure that cannot be accommodated from within available spending authority. Similar to volume 1 and volume 2 of expenditure estimates, supplementary estimates are also referred to legislative committees for their review.

Following tabling, estimates and supplementary estimates are selected for review by legislative committees and ultimately voted on. Once all expenditure estimates from selected ministries are approved by their respective committees and reported back to the House, the government seeks a concurrence motion to allow estimates from selected and unselected ministries to be voted on together as part of the Supply Act. Following the passage of the Supply Act, the expenditure estimates become the legal spending authority for government ministries and offices and the legislative offices.

In addition to outlining the expenditure estimates process, it's important to highlight that this all ties into transparency and accountability in managing public funds. At Treasury Board Secretariat, we ensure that every dollar spent is not only accounted for but also delivers maximum value for the people of Ontario. This commitment is reflected in the rigorous review and approval process that accompanies the expenditure estimates. By involving legislative committees and seeking concurrence motions, we ensure that there is thorough scrutiny and debate over the proposed expenditures. This rigorous review process upholds the principles of good governance, and it reinforces public trust in how the government manages finances.

Now, before we turn to the details, it's essential to consider the broader context that we're operating in. Like all jurisdictions, Ontario is subject to the same global headwinds that have significantly reshaped the economic landscape since the end of last year. Our economy has been greatly affected by the threat and implementation of the unfair, unjustified and illegal tariffs by the current US administration. As all the committee members know, it has been a challenge, but I'm confident that we're meeting it head-on. Under Premier Ford's leadership, we introduced new measures that will protect Ontario. We acted quickly to ensure that our families, our workers and our most vulnerable are protected.

Right now, the best defence is a good offence. That is why our plan to protect and secure Ontario's economy is also designed to drive its growth. We are enacting policies that will make our province more self-reliant and resilient,

now and into the future. We're ensuring that Ontario does not fall behind. In fact, we are positioning Ontario to be a leader among G7 economies. Ontario has long played a central role in North American trade. As former President Ronald Reagan stated in his 1988 remarks on the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, "there's more US trade with Ontario alone than between most nations." That statement still holds true today, Mr. Chair.

Ontario facilitates nearly \$500 billion in balanced and fair two-way trade with the United States every single year. That's why our border, which President Reagan called "a meeting place, not a dividing line," must continue to stand as a model for the free world.

Since the US imposed these harmful policies, Premier Ford has been resolute in his commitment to protecting our economy and our people. When we work together, both of our economies succeed. The facts are crystal clear: US tariffs hurt businesses and workers on both sides of the border. These tariffs disrupt supply chains, increase consumer costs and negatively impact thousands of jobs in critical industries such as automotive, manufacturing and agriculture.

With the aim of protecting Ontario workers and securing the province's economy, the Ontario government has implemented retaliatory measures that are both justified and necessary to defend our province against unreasonable US tariffs.

This government's top priority is to protect Ontario, and that includes its people, its economy and its fiscal health. We will do that by building a stronger, more competitive and more resilient economy, an economy that can take its rightful place as a leader among the G7, an economy that will attract investment and create good jobs and an economy that will protect our workers, our valued public services and our communities.

Of course, we can't do it alone. A silver lining to these actions is that they have opened the door for Ontario to work with other provinces and territories to tear down antiquated internal trade barriers. Ontario has already signed trade agreements with 10 other provinces and territories, and we were the first province in Canada to remove all exceptions under the Canadian Free Trade Agreement. Our government looks forward to continued collaboration across Canada as we stand united against Donald Trump's tariffs.

Now, let us take a closer look at Ontario's fiscal position to get a sense of how the province is faring financially and to illustrate that the province's fiscal health is in good hands. A closer look at the particulars will clearly demonstrate that real progress has been made and that the budgetary process that we are discussing today has been beneficial to Ontario's economic health at such a crucial time.

Through budget 2025, our government is promoting investment, job creation and business growth, and we are transforming our economy into the most competitive and most resilient in the G7. Crucially, this is being done while retaining a path to budget balance by 2027-28.

It is to the government's credit that in the current economic climate the goal of a balanced budget is still attain-

able. In fact, Ontario's finances are in the strongest position that they've been in over a decade. The results speak for themselves: In 2024, Ontario's credit ratings were upgraded by both S&P and Morningstar DBRS. This is a clear signal of confidence from financial markets in our government's approach to fiscal management.

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These stronger credit ratings are more than just a financial milestone. For the private sector, they signal stability, predictability and a government that understands the influence of sound fiscal management. Lower borrowing costs mean that we can do more with every public dollar. That translates into real, tangible investments that benefit communities and businesses alike—investments like more schools and hospitals and more long-term-care homes. This evaluation of these independent credit rating agencies reflects Ontario's commitment to maintaining its targets for debt sustainability measures, despite global economic and geopolitical uncertainties.

I'm happy to take a closer look at these numbers and to highlight that the most crucial projections were unchanged between the budget and the Q1 release. This is noteworthy given the volatile nature of the current economic climate.

Chair, it was reported in the published Q1 results that the province's 2025-26 deficit is projected to be unchanged from the outlook of \$14.6 billion published in the 2025 budget. On the other side of the ledger, revenues in 2025-26 are projected to be \$219.9 billion—unchanged from the 2025 budget. Program expenses in 2025-26 are projected to be \$216.3 billion—unchanged from the 2025 budget.

As well, interest and other debt servicing charges in 2025-26 are also projected to remain unchanged from the forecast published in the 2025 budget, \$16.2 billion. Importantly, the net-debt-to-GDP ratio is still maintaining the same rate as was projected in the budget, 37.9%. These are crucial benchmarks that display both consistency and transparency when it comes to the province's finances.

Finally, the 2025 budget included a \$2-billion reserve in 2025-26 to protect the fiscal outlook against any unforeseen changes in the province's revenue and expense forecasts. I'm pleased to note that this \$2-billion reserve has been maintained as part of the current fiscal outlook.

Now, I would like to examine some other indicators that will put the province's fiscal situation in context. According to our latest release, in the first quarter of 2025 Ontario's real gross domestic product, our GDP, increased by 0.6%. This is significant as it matches the growth of the previous quarter. The Q1 release indicates that the real GDP growth in the first quarter was mostly supported by higher exports and household spending.

Since the release of the 2025 budget, Ontario's real GDP growth expectations from private sector forecasters have remained virtually unchanged. On average, these forecasters project Ontario's real GDP to rise by 0.9% in 2025, the same rate projected at the time for the 2025 budget. The private sector average forecast for 2026 has been revised slightly upward to 1.2% from 1.1% at the time of the 2025 budget. The private sector average forecast for Ontario's nominal GDP growth for 2025 is 3.2%.

This number has remained unchanged from the projection at the time of the 2025 budget, and the private sector average forecast for 2026 has risen to 3.3% from 3.1% at the time of the 2025 budget.

The positive news is that the global economic growth has been resilient despite elevated uncertainty and shifting US trade policy. While these are positive indicators and, as I have mentioned, many of the budget's fiscal projections remain on track, the government will continue its efforts to protect Ontario: to tear down internal trade barriers and to continue to retaliate against destructive trade policies levied against us by our neighbour to the south. These numbers indicate that this government's fiscal stewardship is benefiting the people of Ontario and is working to insulate the province from some of the most impactful adverse effects of the current economic landscape. The message is clear: We will leave no stone unturned when it comes to protecting this province.

Another key fiscal strategy to combat the negative effects of tariffs is to continue making smart investments—investments that will set the province up for success in the future, investments that will continue to make Ontario an attractive place to live, work and raise a family.

I'm happy to discuss some of our top-line investments. In the last budget, the government doubled down on the province's efforts to build, including the single most ambitious capital plan in Ontario's history. That plan includes investments over the next 10 years totalling over \$200 billion, including over \$33 billion in 2025-26. This ambitious 10-year capital plan includes nearly \$30 billion to support the planning and construction of highway expansion and rehabilitation projects. But this large investment isn't just about highway expansion, it also includes approximately \$61 billion for public transit and approximately \$56 billion in health infrastructure. As well, there is an additional \$30 billion to build more schools and child care spaces. These new spaces will help facilitate the expected growth in Ontario.

This landmark investment is an acknowledgement that Ontario is growing and growing fast. Between April 1, 2023, and April 1, 2024, the provincial population grew by 3.36%—that's 555,296 people, nearly the same size as a city like Hamilton. In fact, Ontario has had the second-highest population growth rate in the country, and the only way to make sure this growth can be facilitated is to be prepared.

It bears repeating that the investments this government is making are forward-looking and have all been carefully vetted through a rigorous process that reflects an ongoing commitment to transparency and fiscal responsibility.

Along with this significant investment in infrastructure, the government is also proposing to provide up to a further \$5 billion in funding to the Building Ontario Fund. This fund is administered by an arm's-length, board-governed crown agency enabled by the Building Ontario Fund Act, 2024. The Building Ontario Fund was designed to help build a stronger province for Ontario's quickly growing population. It will help lay a strong foundation for future

generations by providing access to funding to priority areas that contribute to the growth and the prosperity of Ontario. The fund is primarily focused on five key areas of investment: long-term care, affordable housing, energy, transportation, and municipal and community infrastructure.

Of course, the best investments are ones that grow our economy. That is why the government is also allocating an additional \$600 million to the Invest Ontario Fund. This investment will help provide Invest Ontario with greater stability in executing on its mandate of job creation and investment attraction. To date, Invest Ontario has been a success. It has announced more than \$7.5 billion in investments, which are expected to create almost 10,000 jobs.

Jobs are a particular point of focus for this government's investments, and not just any jobs, but good jobs that can support families and give the next generation a real chance to succeed.

To achieve all of this, any government must be strong fiscal managers; they must be transparent, accountable and responsible.

Earlier this year, C.D. Howe issued a report titled *Fiscal Accountability by the Letters: The Report Card for Canada's Senior Governments, 2024*, which evaluated the transparency and accountability of financial reporting by Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments. In that report, Ontario was specifically recognized for producing "high-quality public accounts."

Every fall, after the fiscal year ends, we table the public accounts in the Legislature. This process provides a clear and comprehensive picture of the government's financial operations for the previous year. The public accounts are made up of the following documents: the annual report, ministry statements and schedules and the detailed scheduled of payments. Once these documents are prepared, they're presented to the Legislature, ensuring elected officials and the public have access to detailed financial information. This step is critical for maintaining public trust and for providing oversight of government spending.

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In short, the public accounts process is a cornerstone of fiscal transparency and accountability, and I'm proud to say that through this process, we continue to uphold the highest standards of openness and integrity in financial reporting.

The relationship with the province's Auditor General is a critical part of the public accounts process. We are proud of our strong partnership with Auditor General Shelley Spence and her office, a relationship that is built on open communication and collaboration. This partnership ensures that any issues are addressed promptly and that we remain aligned with the best practices and regulatory requirements.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: It strengthens the quality of our financial reporting and reinforces our commitment to protecting Ontario's economy and fiscal sustainability for future generations and, for the eighth year in a row, we have received a clean audit opinion.

A clean or unqualified audit opinion is the gold standard in financial auditing, and it's not given lightly. It

means that there are no significant errors or omissions in our financial statements and that we have fully complied with Canadian public sector accounting standards. Receiving this opinion is a testament to the hard work and diligence of our government. It assures stakeholders and the people of Ontario that our financial reporting is accurate, reliable and worthy of their trust, and it stands in sharp contrast to the former government, which received two qualified audit opinions in its final years in office. The difference speaks to the strength of our fiscal management and—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. You've spent all your time, I'm afraid. Thank you very much for your presentation.

We will now begin the question-and-answer segment in rotations of 15 minutes for the official opposition, 15 minutes for the third party and 15 minutes for the government members for the remaining allotted time.

For the deputy minister, assistant deputy ministers and ministry staff, please state your name and title when you are called on to speak so that the proceedings can be accurately recorded by Hansard.

I will now start with the official opposition: MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, Minister. Thank you to the staff who are here as part of the estimates process.

Treasury Board includes the Office of the Comptroller General, which is vote 3412, and I want to quote from the minister of the Treasury Board last year; I believe that was you: "One of the most important priorities is fiscal transparency and accountability across the entire Ontario public service. Our goal is to ensure that every taxpayer dollar is treated with the respect that it deserves." That was the minister of the Treasury Board on September 23, 2024.

Given that the Treasury Board is responsible for the internal audit of ministries, did the Treasury Board know about the issues with the Get A-Head company, which was originally contracted by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and then an internal audit found that there were some forensic issues there and it was referred to the OPP? So, my question is, did the Treasury Board initiate that forensic audit of Get A-Head?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Thank you for your question and thank you for quoting me back to myself. I stand by those statements. Really, my work is the work of myself, the deputy minister, her office and all the officials who are sitting behind us and who are also still at Treasury Board right now.

The work that you're referring to with respect to the internal audit division is an important part of the work that we do at Treasury Board Secretariat. Chair, before I turn it over to the deputy minister to speak in a more fulsome way about the work that OIAD does, I want to say that we have a great opportunity to work with them on a reactive basis but, really, now more and more on a proactive basis where, as ministries come forward and they're looking to bring programs forward, they'll often consult with the internal audit division—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I'm going to reclaim my time—

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Yes. Thank you. I'll turn it over now to the deputy minister to speak specifically about the work—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm just going to clarify what my question is. My question is very specific: Did the Treasury Board initiate a forensic audit of Get A-Head? It's a very specific question.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Hello. I'm Carlene Alexander, the deputy minister at Treasury Board Secretariat. I will answer your question, but I would just like to provide a little bit of context first.

Our forensic investigation team is part of the Ontario internal audit division, part of Treasury Board. They provide forensic services at the request of ministries, and this team did conduct the audit.

Ms. Jessica Bell: When was that audit conducted?

Ms. Carlene Alexander: I will ask Sanjeev Batra to come up and answer questions. I would, however, like to state that this matter is under investigation, so the answers that we can provide are very limited. But we can provide a time frame as to when the audit was conducted.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you.

Mr. Sanjeev Batra: Afternoon. Sanjeev Batra, assistant deputy minister, chief internal auditor for the province of Ontario.

There was an internal audit that was initiated in 2023. It was followed up with a forensic review, which was recently concluded on. The matter is under investigation, so beyond that, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further on that matter.

Ms. Jessica Bell: My next question is, when the audit was conducted in 2023, what irregularities were found by that audit?

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Smith: Point of order.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks, Chair. We are discussing the estimates of the 2025-26 budget. Anything that is prior to the 2025-26 budget or is not part of the 2025-26 budget would be out of scope for this committee and for estimates itself.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I'm sure the member will get back to the 2025-26 estimates.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes. I am referring to the Office of the Comptroller General, vote 3412.

So the audit was conducted in 2023, and—

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order: Right from the member's statement, the 2023 audit makes it out of scope. We are discussing the 2025-26 budget and the estimates for the 2025-26 budget year.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I would suggest that the member gets back from 2023 to 2025 as quickly as possible.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to move on from the question of what irregularities were found by the audit of Get A-Head by the TBS or the internal audit committee. My question then is, why is it that Get A-Head received more government funding from the Skills Development Fund after 2023,

when it was already identified by the Treasury Board that there were some serious issues with this company?

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order again: We are discussing the 2025-26 estimates. Anything that is outside of the budget year for 2025-26 is out of scope and is not part of the estimates for 2025-26.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): As I said, the member will know that she should be on the 2025-26 estimates.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I do believe this is an active investigation that's taking place now.

It is concerning to me, just hearing the information that I've already received in this committee today, that an audit was conducted in 2023, irregularities were found, and then another ministry decided that it was okay to give skills development funding to this very company that's now being investigated by the OPP. It makes me question what kind of auditing is actually going on at the Treasury Board when one ministry is doing one thing and another ministry is doing something completely different. It begs a lot of questions. It makes me wonder, and I don't think I'm the only one that's wondering right now.

I'm going to move on from that for now. I will probably get back to it in additional rounds.

The next questions that I have refer to the Bulk Media Buy—this is vote 3411. The Treasury Board is responsible for the Bulk Media Buy Program, and it's a lot of money, \$51 million—that's a lot of money.

I look at the Auditor General's reports on government advertising, and they did an investigation into the kind of advertisements that this government is issuing. One that comes to mind, one of the biggest, was "The Future is Electric" video, which had people with their hair standing on end when they thought about Ontario's future in the manufacturing sector. That is literally what the ad was about, and it literally had people with their hair standing on end. I don't know if you've seen it. I saw it, and I was like, "Huh."

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How do Ontarians directly benefit from the government spending \$51 million on an advertisement about electricity that involves people with their hair standing on end? That is a question.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Mr. Chair, I will say that the specific question relates to expenses from the previous year, so they are out of scope of estimates, but I'm very happy to speak more broadly about the Bulk Media Buy fund and why government advertising is important. This government and previous governments have a responsibility to advise Ontarians about the public services and the programs that are available to them. Each ministry decides based on their mandate what those marketing campaigns should be, but they include just critical programs and services. During COVID, they were an essential part of letting people know what new programs were available, but of course, it also includes standard ones like Foodland Ontario, cancer screening, organ donation. I think that we can all agree that it's essential for a value for taxpayer dollar that Ontarians know about the investments that we

are making on their behalf and what's available across the different ministries that we have here. So I think the Bulk Media Buy fund exists to work with Cabinet Office and different ministries as they develop their own marketing plans.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, Minister—

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Maybe the member opposite doesn't appreciate the advertising style, but I think overall it's important.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Now, I'm going to take back my time. Thank you very much.

So I'm going to ask another question related to that. I think we can all agree that government advertising on cervical screening or reminding people to get their mammogram or reminding people to get a flu shot are important public service announcements. The issue that the Auditor General has—and I also have—is that the government is spending a very large amount of money on ads that the Auditor General has flagged as partisan. While these ads technically complied with the law, they were flagged for being partisan because their primary job was to create a favourable impression of the government, and these ads would have been banned if the government returned to the more strict allowable definition of advertising on what government money can be used for when it comes to advertising. So you've got your cervical screening ads; you've got your flu ads—we're not talking about those ads right now. We're talking about general ads where the purpose is to present a favourable impression of the government.

Now, I want to ask some questions about this because the Auditor General and the Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommended unanimously, including Conservative MPPs, this year that the government return to the original 2015 definition of "partisan advertising," which means ads promoting the electricity sector with people having their hair stand up on end when they think about manufacturing would not be allowed, and the advertisements would be focusing more on those bread-and-butter public service announcements like "get your cervical screening."

As the Treasury Board, would you implement this recommendation to return to the 2015 definition of "partisan advertising," given that your own Conservative MPPs have recommended it?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Again, a lot of this is out of scope, Mr. Chair, but I will say with respect to the Government Advertising Act, which is under Treasury Board, obviously, and I think all the members here know, the Office of the Auditor General, she herself and her office, continue to review all of our advertising as it's set out under the act. All components of our advertising campaigns, our digital advertising are reviewed. Our social assets that are created for the campaigns provide the same message, the same look and the same feel, and they're all reviewable under the act. So all of the advertising that we conduct, that we have in market today and that we have in the past, have all been reviewed and approved by the Auditor General.

I wonder if the deputy minister would like to add a little bit more on that, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Thank you very much, Minister, and through you, Chair, thank you for the question.

What I would like to add is that every year in the Auditor General's report the Auditor General does include a full list of all of the ads, including the amounts for each of the ads so there is full transparency and accountability there for all of the ads that the government runs.

Ms. Jessica Bell: So getting back to that question: We have a recommendation to return to the 2015 definition of "partisan advertising." My question to you is: Would you return to that definition of "partisan advertising," given that some of your Conservative members on that committee recommended it to your very government? Is that something that you would do?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I think I've responded to the question about government advertising, and I think that we're here to talk about the estimates for 2025-26. I will wait to respond to questions directly—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Sure. I can ask another question. We are referring to the Bulk Media Buy Program, vote 3411, as part of the estimates process. This is directly related to that.

My second question is related to what you just mentioned: The Standing Committee on Public Accounts made an additional recommendation about the Bulk Media Buy Program, which I'd like to outline to you. Contrary to what you mentioned, the Auditor General only reviews ads on TV, radio and print. It does not review ads on digital media.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Ms. Jessica Bell: The AG has explicitly requested that her scope is expanded so that she can also review digital ads to see whether they can comply with the law. This recommendation was also supported by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts—all members, including the Conservative MPPs. Can you move forward with a recommendation so that the Auditor General can also review digital ads?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Mr. Chair, I'll just clarify that digital ads, digital banners, digital advertising is part of what the Auditor General reviews. Social media is not technically, but it does have the same look and same feel as digital banners.

I want to make sure that I'm presenting that properly, so I'll turn it to the deputy minister to advise.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Through you, Chair, I will actually ask our legal counsel, Len Hatzis—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time for this round.

MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the minister and her team for being here today.

I would like to come back to some of the comments that the minister started with in terms of the fiscal health of the province. One thing that the minister left out was that under this government, we've got 700,000 people unemployed. We have had rising unemployment for the

last nine quarters—so long before US tariffs. We're at about almost two and a half years, and yet we have rising debts and very large deficits.

I wanted to start my questioning along the lines of Treasury Board spending, which is up about 24% year over year. One of the biggest elements of that increase is the contingency fund. You've added half a billion dollars to that. I wonder if you could talk about how you justify increasing the budget by 24% when we've got rising unemployment, rising deficits and a debt that's barrelling towards half a trillion dollars.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: What I would say is that we—and it's been reflected by the Auditor General in her eight consecutive clean audit opinions—have been prudent and responsible fiscal managers of this province. We continue to do so. Our TBS budget increase reflects strategic investments that we have made in modernization, in risk management and in workforce sustainability. I think I'll turn it over to the deputy minister to give more detail.

But with respect to the contingency fund, this represents a standard practice to ensure that we have funding available in the event of unforeseen events. I think that we can all agree that we are in a difficult economic situation with the headwinds that have been created by Donald Trump's tariffs. We want to make sure that we have the fiscal room available to respond to emergencies should they arise.

I'll turn it over to the deputy minister to speak more detail on the budget.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you for the question. We do view the contingency plan as part of our prudence to ensure that we are able to reduce any impacts of fluctuations that may occur that would impact our fiscal plan. So every year when we are budgeting, we do look at what the potential expense risks are, where we're at in the economy etc. and we ensure that we have a prudent budget and plan to address any potential expense risk that may occur.

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Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you.

I'd like to dig in a little bit on that. The latest numbers for the government in terms of the deficit of \$14 billion do not include the latest increase for the energy rebate, which is likely to be—again, according to experts—at least \$2 billion. So it looks to me like your contingency fund might be used up by that.

Are there any other unexpected surprises that you see on the horizon that are not reflected in the estimates to date?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I thank the member for the question because she highlights an example of the need to have a contingency. But I do go back to the point that we are now in a difficult situation, and we need to make sure that we have the fiscal room necessary to respond to unforeseen circumstances. I mean, anything that comes from the United States is unforeseen. But we do know that we need to be prepared, and that's what building that fiscal room in through our contingency fund is for.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I would just like to add that the increase in energy cost was known prior to FES. I don't know if you knew about it at the time of the estimates when they were prepared. It would be interesting to know that. But I think that that's back to transparency, that those were not reflected in the fall economic statement. So, again, the contingency fund, if it's going to be used for that, does leave no room for any other actual, unexpected events.

I'd like to turn now to vote 3405, around the centre for people, culture and talent program. The Treasury Board delivers human resource services to all ministries and that work includes, in your own words, Minister, "shaping the organizational culture." So I want to talk a little bit about—I presume that you would agree that conflict of interest and how to perform duties in an ethical and responsible manner would be part of the culture that you would want. Yet following the greenbelt scandal, where we've got an \$8.3-billion potential windfall, we now have the RCMP investigating. A couple of years later, it appears that no lessons have been learned, and we now have the Skills Development Fund where we've got ministers interfering in the process for how applicants are selected and in fact admitting that.

I'm wondering if you could comment on whether or not there is a need, or how much money of that budget is going to be spent, on training your staff and maybe even your ministers about what conflict of interest includes and whether or not you think that that would be money well spent?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Mr. Chair, I'm happy just to highlight some of the great work and then pass it over to the deputy minister, because she and her team are leading that.

The centre for people, culture and talent within the OPS does tremendous work. Over the past few years, we've taken a close look at how we can improve and modernize things like recruitment in the OPS and what is essential for retention and performance.

Two years ago, we introduced a strategy called the OPS people plan, and this plan is a blueprint to address the fundamentals of attracting and developing and retaining the talent needed to serve Ontarians with inclusion, integrity and excellence.

I'll now turn it over to my deputy minister.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Actually, it's okay. Thank you, Chair. I'll reclaim my time just to confirm my question, which is whether or not the money that's planned to be spent in that budget related to conflict of interest training, ethics training—is it the same, less or more than what was spent in the year that the greenbelt scandal occurred?

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Through you, Chair, I will actually call up our chief talent officer to respond to that question, but maybe I will give a little bit of context first.

I would say that this particular program is for OPS staff. It is not for political staff, so I just wanted to clarify that. It is for OPS staff and there are multiple streams of training that happened. We actually have a learning and develop-

ment action plan that would cover a whole range of different types of training, and this program is really to try to position the OPS as an employer of choice, focusing on recruitment, focusing on retention, focusing on development of staff.

With that, I will ask our chief—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Actually, that's not necessary. Thank you.

I think that I'd like to go on with the line of questioning, though, around the training that is required. So I guess I would ask whether or not the President of the Treasury Board thinks that the government should be planning to increase spending, whether it's in these estimates or other ones that she oversees related to the overall culture of the government. Do you think that that training needs to be increased based on what happened with the greenbelt and now what you see happening with the SDF, where we have a particular company being investigated by the OPP and that that company was, again, given money via the minister? Perhaps his staff were involved; perhaps OPS staff were involved. We don't know, because we're getting very few details, but I'm asking whether or not you think the government needs to spend more money training both its ministers and its staff on what those rules are, given the latest scandal related to the Skills Development Fund.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Well, Mr. Chair, I'll say I don't think this question relates to the vote item specifically. But with respect to the centre for people, culture and talent program, which is the vote item specifically, as I said, the purpose here is to improve and modernize recruitment within the OPS. I understand that our recruitment numbers are up with the great work the deputy and her team have been doing at Treasury Board to modernize the OPS and to make the OPS an employer of choice for Ontarians is bearing fruit.

I think, Deputy, I'll turn it over to you to talk about the great work you've been doing, because I think this is what taxpayers' dollars are planning to go towards: funding this centre.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you.

I'll reclaim my time, Chair.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: The minister talked about hiring within the public service, and she has talked about a hiring freeze that's actually been in place for a number of years, so I'm interested to hear more about how much hiring is going on.

But actually, I'd like to talk about vote 3402, related to payroll services and client services to all OPS employees and select agency employees. I'm hoping the President of the Treasury Board can provide Ontario taxpayers with some clarity with respect to statements that were made in September regarding the hiring freeze for government agencies. As I'm certain that she will recall, she announced a hiring freeze at the same time the government revealed that they had a \$1.1-billion deficit for the 2024-25 year. That was the government's fifth deficit, by the way, since taking office. I imagine that it might have been a little embarrassing to be talking about adding debt and

increasing—another year of deficits from a party that said reducing the debt was a fiscal and moral imperative.

So maybe perhaps the minister could clarify what this plan related to the hiring freeze will actually accomplish. A journalist, at the time, asked if the hiring freeze is going to save any money at all and the response really was—there was no response to that in terms of any savings.

So I want to give the minister a chance today to clearly communicate with taxpayers. How much money will this hiring freeze save taxpayers, and how many jobs would be impacted?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I thank the member for the question. There's absolutely nothing embarrassing about this policy, this decision. In fact, we were pleased to be able to announce it. This is about ensuring that we are delivering an accountable and efficient public service. We announced a hiring freeze at the OPS when we were elected back in 2018, and we've been delivering high-quality public services to Ontarians ever since.

We have been, at Treasury Board, working for years on our number of agencies. When we were elected, there were 191. Our government has done a lot of work to reduce that number, and we've continued to—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I'd like to reclaim my time.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: No, I still would like to answer. I haven't had a chance to answer the question about the hiring freeze on the agencies.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Excuse me, Chair. I'd like to reclaim my time.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If we could, MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: What I'm really looking for from the minister here is a dollar amount in terms of what the savings might be from that hiring freeze from agencies.

I can give her a little help; I know at the time she wasn't able to provide an answer to the reporters there, so I did a little math. Assuming a 5% turnover on a 25,000-to-35,000-sized workforce at about an average salary of \$100,000 a year, you would save about \$125 million. So on a \$1.1-billion deficit, that's less than 10%. On a \$14-billion deficit, it's a drop in the bucket.

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I would just like again to give the minister a chance to talk about how much this hiring freeze will actually save, or was it really just a ploy to try to deflect from the increasing debt and regular deficits this government is running?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Well, Mr. Chair, I'm surprised to hear the member opposite say that \$125 million of savings for taxpayers is not a lot of money. I happen to think, and I think that most members of my caucus think that that is worthwhile savings to generate. But what I'll also say is—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I'd like to reclaim my time.

I think the minister maybe didn't hear me. What I was talking about was that she was not able to give a number. That's the number I'm coming up with myself. It's an

estimate. It certainly is a lot of money, especially from a government that is going to be hitting a trillion dollars of debt very soon.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Also, we talked about a hiring freeze, and yet the Premier's office—which we couldn't get a clear answer on—has tripled its staff since this government came to office. I'm not sure a hiring freeze has been applied consistently across the board, but if you're able to give me an estimate of what you believe the hiring freeze would be, whether that is \$125 million, more or less, I would welcome that answer.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: The impetus for the hiring freeze was to ensure that taxpayer dollars that fund our agencies, our boards and our commissions are treated with the same respect as we do within the OPS. We have done tremendous work with the Treasury Board to strengthen accountability and transparency between government and our agencies, boards and commissions—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I'd like to reclaim my time. I've had no answer on what the estimates savings will be.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much, but that concludes all the time.

We now go to the government: MPP Rosenberg.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you, Minister. First, I want to say it's a privilege to be a PA at the Treasury Board, and I'd like to acknowledge the incredible work that the minister, the deputy and the whole team do. It's an enormous fiscal responsibility, and they're doing a great job.

Minister, as we know, the Treasury Board closely works with the Minister of Finance on several files, including offering support for important mechanisms involved in the government's public financial reporting. This reporting is a key aspect of many ways the government demonstrates its keen interest and commitment to the principles of transparency and accountability for all Ontarians.

I would like to ask the minister if you could please take us through the expenditure estimates process, particularly how the coordination with other ministries is handled and what kind of expertise and advice the Treasury Board brings to the process. What does the Treasury Board do to assist the government in the implementation of the fiscal financial management and performance frameworks? Specifically, I would ask the minister to give us a quick summary of the detailed work that informs the preparation of estimates.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Thank you, MPP Rosenberg, and thank you for all the great work you do at Treasury Board. It is a big lift. There's a lot of reading and analysis that goes into the work we do at Treasury Board. So thank you for all that you do and thank you also for raising this important question.

This is a very significant topic in which the Treasury Board Secretariat plays a central and major role. I take the extensive role that the Treasury Board Secretariat plays in the fiscal cycle very seriously, and I'd be more than pleased to walk you through the key aspects of how we contribute to the cycle.

First, I would like to stress that, foremost, the expenditure estimates support the initiatives and the investments outlined in Ontario budget 2025, A Plan to Protect Ontario: a budget that was designed to unleash Ontario's economic potential while keeping costs down to protect Ontario workers, businesses and jobs in the face of US tariffs and economic uncertainty.

It is worth emphasizing that all the government's fiscal efforts are focused on building an economy that is more resilient and self-reliant while taking action to mitigate the harmful impacts of US tariffs. Put simply, the expenditure estimates represent the government's official request for legal authority to incur expenditures during the fiscal year from the Legislature. Notably, as I mentioned, there are two volumes of expenditure estimates. Volume 1 of the 2025-26 expenditure estimates was tabled on June 4, 2025, and it provided a detailed public record of government ministries and offices' budgets. Of course, its content was in alignment with the spending plans outlined in the 2025 Ontario budget.

At a later date, volume 2 will be tabled. Volume 2 covers different ground than volume 1. It sets out the spending plans of the Office of the Assembly, the Office of the Auditor General, the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer and Ombudsman Ontario. It outlines the spending plans for what we call the legislative offices.

In addition to this, Treasury Board Secretariat will also table supplementary estimates at a later date. These are tabled if a ministry experiences significant fiscal pressure that cannot be covered by available spending authority. Supplementary estimates, just like volume 1 and volume 2, are also referred to legislative committees for their close review. Following the tabling, both estimates and supplementary estimates are then selected for review by legislative committees and ultimately voted on at the committee stage. That's why we're all here together today.

When I was first elected in 2018, the estimates of all ministries were referred to just one standing committee, which—as you can imagine, given the size and complexity of a provincial budget—meant that oftentimes only a handful of ministries would face legislative scrutiny in any given year. But for every ministry that had to appear before the committee, there were another two or three that escaped this scrutiny, with their spending plans deemed to be concurred in without so much as a glance.

But in 2022, we changed that. Now, when the estimates are tabled, they are automatically referred to one of the Legislature's standing committees. As before, the members of the committees take turns selecting which ministry to study and in which order. Once picked, the committees decide how much time to spend on any particular ministry, where before the standing orders placed limits on how long any one study could last.

This process ensures transparency and legislative accountability, while at the same time ensuring the government is able to operate efficiently and deliver on its commitments. Following this, the government then seeks a concurrence motion, once all expenditure estimates from selected ministries are approved by their respective com-

mittees and reported back to the House. This motion allows estimates from selected and unselected ministries to be voted on together, as part of the Supply Act. After the Supply Act passes, the expenditure estimates become the legal spending authority for government offices, ministries and the legislative offices.

The expenditure estimates process is a great illustration of how the Treasury Board Secretariat displays its commitment to fiscal transparency and responsibility. The stringent review process that I have outlined highlights this government's dedication to these principles.

To conclude, this comprehensive approach is in place because it reinforces our government's steadfast belief that every single tax dollar spent goes directly towards meeting the needs of the people of this province.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you very much, Minister.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you, Minister, for being here. Minister Mulroney, Treasury Board Secretariat has, really, an important role, as the employer for the public service, with over 60,000 employees at the OPS. I know that many of us around this table have constituents who are proud public servants. I know in my career prior to elected office, I dealt with them almost every day, and so I just truly appreciate their contributions to the well-being of Ontarians. They always, always work hard to ensure that the people of Ontario are receiving high-quality public services across the province.

In your position as the President of the Treasury Board, I'm hoping you may be able to outline how the government is ensuring that there is a strong and inclusive Ontario public service.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Thank you very much, MPP Dowie, for that great question. As I mentioned and as I say all the time in the House: Our government is fortunate to be supported by a world-class, highly professional public service—truly the best in Canada.

The Ontario public service helps deliver the vital services that touch the lives of every Ontarian, from health care and education to infrastructure and transportation. As stewards of the public trust, the people of Ontario deserve to know that their tax dollars are being managed by a strong, responsive public service, one that is focused on efficiency and service excellence. I'm proud to say that Ontario is the leanest and most efficient public service in Canada, achieving results and serving more people with fewer employees than anywhere else in the country.

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As President of the Treasury Board, my mission each day is to create a resilient public service to protect Ontario. That mission starts with the people who serve this great province. We were elected on an ambitious, nation-leading agenda, and we are facing a critical threat from tariffs and economic uncertainty coming from south of the border. We could not deliver on our mandate and face down this threat without the leadership, the support and the professionalism of our public service.

In order to deliver the best services, we need to attract and retain the highest-quality talent. This is the driving force behind the OPS people plan, our human resources strategy that outlines how we will focus our energy, our efforts and our investments to improve talent management and organizational culture in the OPS. The priorities of the people plan include helping ensure that employees have a workplace that is modernizing, growing, developing and upskilling; and that we are growing and upskilling our workforce. A number of initiatives have been launched and implemented as a result of this important plan. From mentorship to learning and development and more, our work continues on these important initiatives.

We are also actively developing future leaders through targeted programs like the Ontario Internship Program, the Summer Employment Opportunities program and the Master-Level Policy Co-op Program which offers paid work experience to students, recent graduates and interns.

Each year, the Ontario Internship Program helps recent graduates, many of whom graduated from some of Ontario's world-class post-secondary institutions, start and accelerate their careers through a year-long, full-time, paid opportunity that provides practical hands-on experience while delivering important public services to the people of Ontario. Interns can choose to work in business, financial planning, policy development, communications or one of several other areas.

Students in the Summer Employment Opportunities program put the knowledge they've acquired at school into action, enhancing their skills and expanding their network by working on projects, participating in a range of engaging initiatives and sharing their ideas. They then transfer the skills they learn with the OPS to future school and work experiences. These programs are not only building skills and confidence, they're shaping the next generation of public service leaders who will help to protect Ontario.

Now, excellence in service requires more than just talent. It requires deep, in-person collaboration and engagement. We've monitored in-workplace standards across the province, and the evidence is clear: Our best work, our most impactful solutions and our highest levels of service delivery happen when we're working together and in person.

To maximize our collective expertise and to reinforce our commitment to service excellence, the OPS is reinstating its five-days-per-week in-office standard, effective January 5, 2026. In-office work leads to more collaboration, better exchange of ideas and opportunities for mentorship—all of which result in better public service outcomes. This return reinforces our dedication to reflecting the businesses and communities that we serve and to ensuring a consistent standard of excellence in every public interaction.

This strategic commitment to collaboration will enhance our efficiency and accountability and is an important step in building a more competitive, resilient and self-reliant Ontario. By fostering a motivated, respected and highly engaged workforce, we honour the investment of every

taxpayer and we fulfill our promise to deliver high-quality public services.

We will continue to build a responsive, accountable and, ultimately, stronger public service to continue to protect Ontario.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Gualtieri.

MPP Silvia Gualtieri: Thank you, Chair. It is a privilege for me to be here today among my very hard-working MPPs, and also to be here today with our very own Caroline, Honourable Minister Caroline Mulroney, and her ministry staff.

I recall, if I may, Caroline, when you were a little girl along with your family, attending events in my neighbourhood of Mississauga, it was a joyful experience for our team. Then, later on, it was also a joyful experience when my daughter Erica presented your very elegant mother with beautiful roses at the citizenship court. It was a joy for her and an honour for me.

But now, my question: My question is to the President of the Treasury Board. Ontario and Canada are facing challenges unlike anything we have ever faced before. Our closest ally and trading partner, the United States, has shaken the economic relationship that we've had for decades. The result is that the cost of living, which was already problematic for many Ontario families, is now worse than ever. This seems that we have to take our responsibility as guardians of taxpayer dollars more seriously than ever.

It is my understanding that the Treasury Board Secretariat steers the ship when it comes to reducing waste and streamlining government processes, working with ministries to reduce waste and improve programs and services. Can you expand on the work that the TBS does to protect Ontario and the services everyone has come to rely on?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Before I answer the question, I want to thank MPP Gualtieri for her kind comments about my family. It just highlights how you and your family have been in and around politics and public service for a very long time, so thank you for your long-term commitment to public service and the people of your community.

Thank you so much for the important question. I don't think I'll get a chance in the time allotted to me to respond, because I have so much to say about it. Maybe in the next round I'll have a chance to respond in a more fulsome way. But obviously our government understands that we must continue to protect Ontario's economy and fiscal sustainability for future generations. This is why we were elected back in 2018: It was to restore fiscal sanity to this province after 15 years of Liberal mismanagement. That starts with respecting taxpayer dollars and it really continues—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much.

We will now go to the official opposition. MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I want to just go back to some questions that I have around the government's auditing process. I've got to say, the fiasco with the Skills

Development Fund, along with the greenbelt and now this issue with Get A-Head, sends a pretty clear message that the Treasury Board should significantly improve its internal auditing system.

The question that I have is: Is Get A-Head the only company that the government has referred to the OPP as a result of an audit?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Mr. Chair, I'm not sure that this relates to our estimates, our Treasury Board Secretariat estimates. This is a question that—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If it doesn't relate to the estimates, then I recommend that the minister, then, does not answer it.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Okay.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Well, I would argue, given that it's related to the work of the comptroller and vote 3412, that it is related to the estimates. I also think that people just want to know: Does the Treasury Board fulfill its job of auditing ministries properly? We have an example today where a company was audited. The audit was then sent to the OPP and then the government—another ministry—gave that very same company a very large amount of money to deliver a training program. You've got to wonder: What involvement did the Treasury Board have in this and if they didn't have any significant involvement, then why did it happen? How could this happen under your watch? It's a pretty reasonable question.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Mr. Chair, I'll say, as the deputy mentioned, that this is the subject of an investigation, so it would be inappropriate for myself or any of the officials to comment.

What I will say is it was indicated that we did conduct an audit. I will say that I am very proud of the work that the internal audit division does, and also some of the modernization that our government brought to the internal audit process by strengthening the internal audit division and creating the audit and accountability committee that works directly with the Treasury Board Secretariat.

I think that it's worth having the deputy share a little bit more about that work because I think it is an important modernization that we brought forward a few years ago. Deputy?

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Thank you very much, Minister. Through you, Chair, I would like to say that our internal audit division and our internal audit committees are considered to be world-class. We have undergone a significant restructure, which includes members from external—from private sector as well—to provide a different insight. They are subject-matter experts in various areas, and they complement the work that the internal audit teams do.

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We have nine sector audit committees. These sector audit committees have a very particular focus in certain areas, and they go deep. They conduct many audits throughout the year. We have a significant, very comprehensive internal audit plan that is risk-based and is client-focused, and so—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm going to reclaim my time.

I actually very much appreciate the summary that you were providing about the Treasury Board's world-class internal audit system. I wonder why a world-class internal audit system has resulted in a company that is being investigated by the OPP getting money from another ministry shortly after. It makes me wonder.

So, my question to you is, given the world-class auditing that the Treasury Board does, has the government referred any additional audits to the OPP or is Get A-Head the only company?

Ms. Carlene Alexander: I would have to call on our chief internal auditor to answer that question.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: But I don't know how that relates to our 2025-26 estimates, Mr. Chair. I actually don't see how it does relate. I think this is a historical question and so I'll wait for another question.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The minister has answered the question.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Maybe that was a historical question. I've got a more specific question: Is the OPP investigating any other third-party contractors that have been audited by the TBS?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I would say that's a hypothetical question, and if there is an investigation under way, it would be inappropriate to comment.

Ms. Jessica Bell: That is definitely not a hypothetical question—definitely not.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I would say it's inappropriate.

Ms. Jessica Bell: "Are there any other active investigations?" is not a hypothetical question.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: As it relates to the estimates of the Treasury Board Secretariat, I will wait for another question that relates to my ministry.

Ms. Jessica Bell: All right. I'll move on.

Chair, now I'm going to move my questions to vote 3402. This is the labour relations and compensation vote of the TBS.

What I noticed with that is that there is a jump from \$68 million in 2023-24 in actual expenses to an estimate of \$135 million in 2025-26. What that looks like is there is an increase of \$67 million in the cost of operating—about double.

Can the minister explain what this \$66-million increase is going towards?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I thank the member for the question. I'll turn it over to the deputy to provide some specifics.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Thank you, Minister—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Page 61.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Thank you. I will actually call on the CAO, Sandy Yee, to speak to this.

Ms. Sandy Yee: Thank you for the question. Sandy Yee, chief administrative officer and assistant deputy minister, corporate services.

Could you just repeat the tail end?

Ms. Jessica Bell: There has been a \$66-million increase in the budget allocated to labour relations and

compensation and I'd like to know what that increase is being spent on.

Ms. Sandy Yee: So you're referring to the increase between the interim and the actual budget, right?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes. I'm actually referring to the increased actuals for 2023-24, \$68 million, to estimates 2025-26. It's just the most recent data we've got.

Ms. Sandy Yee: We have a couple of different provisions, both within the labour compensation area as well as across our budget. Some of the provisions within the labour relations budget would be used offsetting actuals within some of the other vote items where our expenditures are related.

You will see that the actuals within the labour relations, as well as actual expenditures across our other talent areas for example are combined together, and they work together within our budget so that the actuals, the expenditures and the budget in the budget are offsetting.

If you look at labour relations as well as the centre for people, culture and talent, the actuals for the spending are related to their combined budgets together, and you see that the provisions within there are together adding up to the same amount. So there's a balance between the actual spending and the expenditure estimates.

We do that through year-end processes, internal throughout the year. We balance out our budgets within the year so that if there is higher spending in one program, lower spending in the other, we're balancing against our budget. You can see that within our budgets, our actual spending is very close to our budgets at the end of the year.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, that sounds a little creative—

Ms. Sandy Yee: It's technical. I'm an accountant.

Ms. Jessica Bell: My question is, has the ministry increased staffing or increased salary compensation in the last two years?

Ms. Sandy Yee: Thank you for that question. The staffing is around the 2,000 mark. We've maintained that. There were some staffing changes where part of our ministry was reallocated to another ministry. We moved our I&IT group of about 500 staff, for example, to another ministry. So if you are looking at actual changes in numbers you would see that that had moved.

Also, in prior years we had emergency management as part of our ministry, and that too has now been set up as a new ministry of emergency management and preparedness. So when you look at our numbers, our FTEs have stayed consistent, excluding the pieces that have transferred over.

In terms of salaries, there are natural salary pieces. There's a compensation component within our salary and wages of approximately \$16 million for 2025-26 relating to negotiated compensation.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, thank you. I'm going to move on from that question. I appreciate your answer. I might have some follow-up questions that I'll send to your ministry directly. Some of that stuff I don't exactly understand, but that's okay.

The next thing I'd like to talk about is the decision by the minister to bring in a hiring freeze that was announced

on September 26, 2025, that affected ministries. It also affected staffing in 143 agencies and commissions. It's pretty significant. Those ministries included Ontario Health, included Metrolinx—you're not going to see me complaining about that one today—the Ontario Energy Board, the Human Rights Tribunal and Legal Aid Ontario. It's pretty significant.

I want to talk about service levels and how this hiring freeze is impacting service levels. I want to start with ServiceOntario first. Is the ministry tracking the impact of the hiring freeze on service levels for ServiceOntario?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Thank you for the question. As I mentioned earlier, we imposed a hiring freeze on the Ontario public service back in 2018 that's kept our workforce relatively flat while making itself more efficient in delivering high-quality public services.

We've been doing more and more work through our agencies and appointments directive to increase transparency and reporting between Treasury Board Secretariat and our 143 agencies, boards and commissions. We determined that we wanted the same level of efficiency and culture of efficiency that we have in the OPS to be evident within our agencies, boards and commissions. You mentioned, for instance, Metrolinx, which you're not going to complain about, putting a hiring freeze on agencies.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Certainly not Metrolinx.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: But I will say that the hiring freeze itself, while it imposes a cap on agencies to work within, does not affect business-critical positions. "Business-critical decisions" will be defined and is defined by—it's sector dependent. So if you are in health, "business-critical" is defined one way. If you are in ServiceOntario, "business-critical" would be a customer-service-related—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm sorry to interrupt you, but—

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I'll just say that business critical, which is what I think you're getting at, is not impacted at all by the hiring freeze.

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The other thing I'll say is that as—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm sorry for being rude—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: —but I don't have a lot of time. I don't by my nature interrupt, but I have to here.

Okay, so what I'm hearing from you is that with ServiceOntario, you do track service outcomes. Would that be safe to say? Like how long people are served—

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I don't oversee ServiceOntario. I'll ask the deputy, but we do—as a minister, I track outcomes and KPIs for all the agencies that report to me.

Deputy?

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Through you, Chair, I just wanted to clarify that ServiceOntario is actually OPS. It's part of the OPS. It's part of MPBSDP, so Ministry of—

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: So it's not an agency.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: It's not an agency.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes, correct, but it is impacted by the hiring freeze because it is a ministry and some of them are public servants.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Yes, it would be impacted under the OPS, not the new agency hiring freeze. I would also like to confirm that MPBSDP, so the overseeing ministry, does track performance outcomes for ServiceOntario. They have service standards, and they track them very closely.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: I am not able to speak anymore to those because that's for that ministry, but I do know that those are in place.

Ms. Jessica Bell: What interests me when we're talking about estimates and the hiring freeze is what impact it's going to have on service levels. I will follow up with your ministry and relevant ministries to look at how it is actually impacting service levels, and ServiceOntario is a big one. People go to the store. They don't want to be waiting an hour or more to get their driver's licence renewed or whatever it is that they're going in there for. They want prompt service, and we're hearing anecdotally that wait times in ServiceOntario outlets are long. They're long.

I'm going to move on because I only have maybe 30 seconds left. Human Rights Tribunal: This is also an agency that's impacted by the hiring freeze. What we're hearing is that parties are waiting between three and five years for final decisions. That, quite frankly, is too long. What impact will this hiring freeze have on the functioning of the Human Rights Tribunal? Have you looked at that?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time.

We'll now go to the third party. MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Just a couple of cleanup items from last time: I want to make sure I asked for a written response around the savings that would be a result of the hiring freeze in the agencies. Also, I might have said "a trillion dollars of debt." I meant to say half a trillion dollars of debt, but I have no doubt that the government can get to a trillion dollars eventually, too.

Moving on: I was happy to hear the minister talk about our public service here in Ontario, that it's the best public service in Canada. My question, though, is about why then, if that is the case, this government continues to ignore the public service as it relates to work on, for example, the Skills Development Fund. The public service gave their recommendations and yet we know those recommendations were ignored for \$742 million worth of grants. We know that the public servants did a fulsome study on the 413 which said the average time saved to be 30 seconds. We know that the public servants have recently done some work on the tunnel under the 401, and yet the government won't release the results of what I'm sure is very good work being done by the public servants. So I'm delighted to hear that there's a great public service, that she believes that. I would just ask that she think about actually taking their advice on those things.

Let me move to ask a question about internal controls within the Comptroller General's office, vote 3412. I'm wondering if you could talk about the kind of controls that are in place for things like the Skills Development Fund. When you get a request to issue a cheque to a company,

do you know in advance of issuing that cheque that they were a poor-scoring applicant? It's a simple question, yes or no?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I think given that this one is the subject of investigation, it would be best to just talk about the allocation of funds to different ministries for their programs, Chair.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: No, sorry, let me just clarify, Chair. I just want to clarify: I'm not talking about a specific program, about the one referred to the OPP. I'm talking about all of the many applicants that were medium-, low- and poor-scoring that did get cheques. I'm wondering what kind of internal controls are in place within the Comptroller General's office to sign those cheques, knowing that the applicants were scored medium, low or poor.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I think it would be worthwhile to ask the deputy to comment on how Treasury Board's allocations flow. As I said, this is the subject of an investigation, so we can't speak with any detail with respect to that program.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Thank you, Minister, and through you, Chair, thank you for the question. I do want to clarify that ministries are allocated budgets for particular items, and it would be their areas that would approve any allocation or any flowing of funds. The Comptroller General's office does not sign off on the funding for a particular transfer payment program or expense that is outside of their ministry.

I do, though, want to clarify also the role of Treasury Board Secretariat as it relates to various funding in general. Ministries would need to make a Treasury Board submission to Treasury Board. Treasury Board Secretariat staff would analyze that submission to ensure that the request is in line with government priorities, that the funding amounts are justified, that there's good value for money, that there are performance measures etc. That is the role of Treasury Board staff—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Great. Thank you, Chair. Just to reclaim my time—that's a helpful answer. I'd like to just dig a little bit more on that because, again, understanding that Treasury Board is responsible for value for money, I'd like to understand how funds went out the door under the President of the Treasury Board's signature to applicants that were scored medium, low and poor.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: And through you, Chair, the cheques do not get signed by Treasury Board's president or anybody in Treasury Board.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: But your mandate includes “strengthens the way government is managed and helps to ensure value for money.” What I'm asking is, if you don't sign the cheques and you have no oversight—I hear you saying you have no oversight of that program—how can you ensure value for money?

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Through you, Chair: Our value-for-money assessment comes when ministries come in to seek approval for the overall program and we assess the program at that point in time. When it comes to individual payments, our ministry is not involved at that point.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Okay. That's helpful. I guess what I would say is that the value-for-money function in

my mind is now up for question because if the Treasury Board is not looking at the value for money that comes when the cheques are—you can approve a program, but then how the money is actually spent is where you know whether or not there is value for money. Clearly, the Auditor General said the process was not fair, not transparent, not accountable, meaning there was not value for money. So I'm interested in how the Treasury Board would say that they are fulfilling their mandate around strengthening the way government is managed and helping to ensure value for money.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I will say that the member is talking about something that doesn't relate specifically to Treasury Board's estimates process, but with respect to our overall delivery of prudent fiscal management, I think the eight consecutive clean audit opinions that we received from the Auditor General speak to the great work that we're doing for financial transparency and value for money.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Just to clarify, those audit opinions are not about value for money. They're about how the financial statements are presented—just whether or not they reflect generally accepted accounting principles, not standards, so not about value for money.

Again, I would ask the Treasury Board how it is fulfilling its mandate around value for money for taxpayer dollars if they are not actually concerned about where money is going from the programs that they approve.

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Point of order.

Mr. Dave Smith: Pursuant to our standing orders, this is now a repetitive question. She's asked it four times. She's had it answered three times, and she continues on. That is pretty much the definition of a repetitive question.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I would suggest it's not the Chair's job to decide what's a good question or what's a good answer. The Chair's job is to keep order, and if the minister believes the question has been answered, I think they could say the question has been answered.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I believe the question has been answered.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I will disagree and say the question has not been answered around how the Treasury Board Secretariat ensures value for money as it relates to the programs that it says it approves. I'm not sure when that approval happens. If they don't actually follow up—and, again, I'm talking about internal controls here. Often, when a cheque is signed—I'm not sure now who signs the cheque. Again, I'm learning; I have not been in government. I don't know who signs the cheque—I'm hearing that it's not actually the Treasury Board.

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That actually brings into question, for me, the internal controls of how this is being reported because the value for money—signing a cheque when the applicant got a result of poor, a failing grade, yet you're writing a cheque, the government is writing a cheque, someone is writing a cheque to a failing-grade applicant. That puts into ques-

tion, for me, internal controls, which are the scope of the Comptroller General, which is absolutely in this budget.

I'll leave it there. I didn't get a clear answer.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Mr. Chair, I would just like to respond, if I may, just to give—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The Chair's position is—as I said, I don't get to decide which is a good question and which is a good answer. It is 15 minutes of the member's time, and as long as she's speaking to the estimates, she can speak all she wants. She may not like the answer she got so she may try again, but your answer doesn't have to change.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I'd like to move on to vote 3411 around the bulk media buy. The rough number is \$53 million or \$54 million. It's the same as last year, even though the amount spent last year was \$103 million.

I guess what I'm questioning is if the estimate of only \$53 million is an estimate of the total spend for government advertising, or, if not, what specifically is in that \$53 million and what is not in that \$53 million?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I'm going to turn it over to the deputy to give the specifics on that. The Bulk Media Buy Program, as I said, is administered by Treasury Board Secretariat, but we work with Cabinet Office on the delivery of the specific marketing programs, and they work directly with specific and individual ministries.

I'll turn it over now to my deputy.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Thank you, Minister. Through you, Chair: The Bulk Media Buy fund has an allocation—a budget—of \$51.9 million. The way that the Bulk Media Buy fund works is that ministries that are engaging in advertising activities will first look towards their own budgets to determine whether or not they can fund that advertising activity from their own budgets. If they are unable to, then they come to Treasury Board for access to the Bulk Media Buy fund, and that is done through a submission to Treasury Board. We would analyze that request and then provide access to that fund.

So not all advertising is funded through that fund. This fund is for advertising that cannot be funded through ministries' budgets.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I apologize; I had the number wrong—\$51,949,000 is the bulk media buy that goes through Treasury Board. I would like to understand what specifically that money will be spent on this year.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Through you, Chair: At this the point, I don't have a full accounting of that, because last year—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Do you have a partial accounting of that?

Ms. Carlene Alexander: I cannot say for sure because it actually depends on what ministries are able to provide or fund through their own budgets. When they are not able to—we know closer to the end of the year.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I would like to just submit a written question. I would like to understand what has already been requested, as it relates to the \$51,949,000, in

terms of the specific asks that the ministries cannot fund—which requests have come to Treasury Board as it relates to that so we know how that money will be spent.

Also, I would just like to, again, make sure that I get an answer to my question—written, please—around what internal controls are in place within the Comptroller General division to ensure that monies that are going out the door are going to programs that deliver value for money.

Those are a couple of questions that I would like to get some written answers to.

In my remaining time, I would like to come back to the Comptroller General's division and talk about how much money is going to be spent on forensic audits—how much of your budget would be spent on forensic audits, given the recent news about a referral to the OPP resulting from one of your audits. Are you increasing that money? What's the plan?

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Through you, Chair: In terms of our forensic audit team, it really does depend on what the demands are at the time, so I cannot give you an answer as to how much will be spent on forensic audits because it depends on the activity.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Yes, that's a fair point. I appreciate that. Maybe a way to do it might be to say, "I'm going to estimate this coming year's based on what I spent last year on forensic audits." So could you give us an estimate based on what occurred last year?

Ms. Carlene Alexander: I will ask the chief internal auditor to maybe take that question.

Mr. Sanjeev Batra: Sure. Thank you. As Deputy Alexander had mentioned, the model for forensic audits actually works on a chargeback model. So the bulk of the funds and the cost for forensic audits are actually incurred by the ministries that are requesting the audit work—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Sure, great. I understand chargebacks. What would the total of all of those be in the past year?

Mr. Sanjeev Batra: I don't have that number handy, but the cost of that—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Okay. I will ask for a written answer to that question, Chair, around an estimate for the year ahead based on what was spent last year. So if it was 5% of your audit budget last year, let's just assume it will be 5% this year, or are you actually thinking it might need to increase given what's been going on. That's kind of what I'm looking for.

Mr. Sanjeev Batra: Including, perhaps, providing clarity on whose budget that resides in. If it's a chargeback—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Right, but it starts in the TBS estimates because that's where the staff exists, right? They're in the Comptroller General's division. Then it gets charged out as the audit is needed, but there is a certain aspect of that total staffing that is being spent on conducting those audits and that's really what I'm getting at, not the charge-outs.

Mr. Sanjeev Batra: Sure.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Chair, the deputy has a response.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: I just wanted to add, through you, Chair, that internal audit, including forensic investigations, are also a way that Treasury Board provides value for money, as well as another process that we call the certificate-of-assurance process, where we work with ministries—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: That's good—thank you, Chair. I'd just like to reclaim my time quickly to say that's a great point. Internal audit really should look at every single applicant from the Skills Development Fund that had a medium, low or poor score to see whether or not there was value for money. I would really welcome that. I'm sure the public would as well. Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time.

We'll now go to the government. MPP Gualtieri.

MPP Silvia Gualtieri: Minister Mulroney, can you please elaborate on the question I asked previously? I will read to you the second half of the question, just for a refresh. It's my understanding that Treasury Board Secretariat steers the ship when it comes to reducing waste and streamlining government processes, working with ministries to reduce waste and improve programs and services.

Can you expand on the work that TBS does to protect Ontario and the services everyone has come to rely on?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Thank you again for repeating that important question. Our government understands that we must continue to protect Ontario's economy and the fiscal sustainability of our province for future generations. This starts with respecting Ontarians' tax dollars and continues with a whole-of-government approach to fiscal stewardship. At a time when businesses and households across the province are making careful choices on spending their hard-earned dollars, it has never been more important for the government to do the same when managing taxpayer dollars.

Treasury Board Secretariat continues to identify new opportunities to ensure that we are managing the province's finances responsibly. My ministry plays a critical role in ensuring that our government gets the best value for every dollar spent during this period of uncertainty. Our plan to build and protect Ontario is in large part delivered through our provincial agencies. Provincial agencies are essential to the delivery of public goods and services.

As the government's ambitious mandate has grown, so has the staffing growth in our agencies. To ensure growth in agencies is consistent with our commitment to taxpayers, we recently enacted a hiring freeze across all provincial agencies in Ontario. For the last few months, we have been working with those agencies to ensure that their human resource strategies align with this direction.

These measures are part of our government's plan to enhance oversight and strengthen data collection across our provincial agencies, which includes reducing the number of provincial agencies from 191 to 143 since we took office. The agency hiring freeze is but one way that

TBS works diligently to reduce waste, improve programs and enhance services.

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I'd like to share details of the additional work that we do at TBS and why it's so vital for the people of Ontario.

I serve as chair of the Audit and Accountability Committee, a sub-committee of Treasury Board and Management Board of Cabinet which was established by our government in December 2018. The Audit and Accountability Committee plays a key role in supporting strong fiscal management and is supported by the Ontario Internal Audit Committee and sector audit committees. They provide advice and recommendations based on the independent work of our Ontario internal audit division within the Office of the Comptroller General.

The Ontario internal audit division conducts independent, internal audit work to support government priorities and ministry strategic objectives. The division provides expert advice and recommendations for ministries to improve services and programs with a focus on helping the government reduce risks, explore potential cost reduction and avoidance and improve process efficiencies.

Within the Office of the Comptroller General is the Office of the Chief Risk Officer, which oversees enterprise risk management across the Ontario public service. The Office of the Chief Risk Officer enables a proactive, systemic, organization-wide process to understand and manage risks, including possible threats or opportunities. This includes review and advice on emerging enterprise ministry risk information and risk management practices. This allows ministries to avoid potential problems and thereby improve outcomes and reduce government waste. ERM helps to create and protect value, allocate resources wisely, improve decision-making processes and support the realization of government objectives.

The Office of the Comptroller General and the Office of the Provincial Controller Division provide oversight and direction on the development, implementation and oversight of controllership frameworks and policies. They drive enterprise reporting related to accounting; financial reporting; systems and controls, including delivering on the province's public accounts; and provide critical accounting and financial management strategic advice to senior leadership and the Treasury Board.

Finally, I'd like to touch on the work going on in the Office of the Treasury Board, which provides analysis, administrative and operational support to Treasury Board and Management Board of Cabinet. Their analysts review ministry submissions for new programs and initiatives and make recommendations as to whether these submissions align with the government's fiscal framework and overall priorities. These submissions then form the backbone of initiatives launched in the following year's budget. We couldn't do the important work at Treasury Board and Management Board of Cabinet without these dedicated professionals.

The Treasury Board Secretariat plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the government operates efficiently and effectively, always with the best interests of Ontarians in mind. By maintaining rigorous oversight, promoting trans-

parency and fostering a culture of accountability, we work to ensure that every dollar is spent wisely and that public services are continuously improved.

Our talented team helps with the government's goal to protect Ontario while also meeting the needs of everyone who calls this great province home.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Kanapathi.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Minister and President of the Treasury Board, for your presentation. You covered a lot of ground.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank you for your strategic leadership and your commitment and hard work for the taxpayers of Ontario. I'd also like to thank the deputy ministers—you have a big team here. Thank you to all your team for your commitment and hard work, and for respecting taxpayers' dollars in Ontario.

They're important topics. They're talking about fiscal responsibility, fiscal health and the money—it's a very, very important topic as a minister. Again, thank you.

My question is in regard to financial reporting. This government remains focused on ensuring taxpayers' dollars are spent in a prudent and efficient manner, which you elaborated on in your presentation.

Minister, can you explain the Treasury Board Secretariat's role in supporting financial transparency and accountability through your regular public reporting?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I'm sorry, I had trouble hearing. Could you repeat the question?

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Can you explain the Treasury Board Secretariat's role in supporting financial transparency and accountability through your regular public reporting?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Thank you so much.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: I have a sore throat.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: And I'm not well, so I can't hear very well. Thank you very much for that question, and thank you for all that you do, especially on the hard work of this committee.

I really appreciate the opportunity to speak to how the Treasury Board uses its central role in our government to support all ministries, as they ensure transparency and accountability to the people that we serve across the province of Ontario.

At TBS, we focus on embedding fiscal responsibility across the entire government and ensuring financial transparency in all of our processes. One notable example is the annual public accounts process, through which we release the province's final audited financial results every year. For eight consecutive years, we have received a clean audit opinion. That is considered the gold standard in financial auditing.

However, the annual expenditure estimates are the most direct way TBS promotes financial transparency. The estimates provide line-by-line details of ministry spending at a granular level. The estimates briefing books include the published plans and the annual reports, which highlight government accomplishments and strategic plans. They also include details on year-over-year spending variances by ministries.

All of this material is provided annually to legislative committees to support the estimates review process. To support transparency and accountability, it is also posted on ontario.ca for the public to read wherever and whenever they wish to.

TBS also supports publishing Treasury Board orders in the Ontario Gazette. Treasury Board orders, or TBOs, allow the government to move money between its programs. For example, money that is unspent from one program can be moved to another program that needs it. It's like moving money between accounts in a household budget. The overall spending authority of the government remains the same, but government funds can be used more efficiently by applying them where they are needed most. This maximizes the efficiency of the usage of taxpayer dollars.

Both of these important financial transparency processes, tabling expenditure estimates and publishing Treasury Board orders, are done in accordance with the standing orders of the Legislative Assembly. TBS also includes the Office of the Provincial Controller Division, which is part, as I've said, of the Office of the Comptroller General. This is an office that our government created to better plan and manage risk, to protect taxpayer dollars and improve services for the people of Ontario. Part of this division's important work includes providing government-wide direction and leadership for provincial controllership, audit and enterprise risk management, bringing the best practices of business to the business of government. This includes delivering on the province's public accounts each September, as well as the annual public sector salary disclosure.

These are just some of the ways in which Treasury Board Secretariat continues to support managing taxpayers' dollars prudently, protecting the province's assets and ensuring the integrity of Ontario's financial reporting. I'm pleased to report that our efforts are not going unnoticed. Last year, Ontario's credit rating was upgraded to AA- by S&P and to AA by Morningstar DBRS. These stronger credit ratings represent not only a financial milestone but also the confidence that financial markets have in our government's sound fiscal management.

The upgrades help lower the province's borrowing costs, which means that we can do more with each public taxpayer dollar. That means more investment in Ontario, creating more jobs and financing the province's historic infrastructure plan. These real, tangible investments benefit communities and businesses alike. Treasury Board continues to demonstrate its commitment to fiscal responsibility by prudently managing provincial finances in a transparent manner, while providing critical financial supports to protect Ontario's economy and to support jobs.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you minister for that hopeful and optimistic message.

Now I turn it over to MPP—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Triantafilopoulos.

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. Through the Chair, to you, the President of the Treasury Board: The public accounts is an

important financial milestone that compares the government's financial performance against projections in the budget. Now, in your remarks, you noted earlier that the government has received an unqualified or clean audit for the eighth consecutive year. That truly is a remarkable accomplishment for any government in our country.

So what I'd like to do is to ask you, can you elaborate and expand further on how the public accounts are prepared and tabled? Specifically, I'm interested in knowing as well how the government works closely with the Auditor General and the Auditor General's office and what this year's results have revealed.

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Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Bowman, point of order.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: The question relates to the public accounts, but today we're here talking about the estimates.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): The member will get back to the estimates going forward.

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to specifically refer you, then, to the 2024-25 public accounts. I would like to ask you how you work closely with your ministry and with the Auditor General specifically on the kinds of results we were talking about. You mentioned it strengthens the quality of our financial reporting and reinforces our commitment to protecting Ontario's economy and fiscal sustainability for future generations, and for the eighth year in a row, we have received a clean audit.

I'm bringing back your attention to the estimates of 2025-26.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Thank you very much. We are certainly very proud of the work that we do with the Auditor General, the office of the internal auditor.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I'll turn it over to the deputy to speak in more detail about the relationship and how it relates directly to the estimates that we're tabling for the committee's review.

I do always like to get the chance to highlight the fact that we did get eight consecutive clean audit opinions from the Auditor General. It speaks to the great work that everybody at Treasury Board does. They have such a collaborative relationship with the Auditor General.

Perhaps, Deputy, you can add something as it relates to the estimates process.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Yes. Thank you, Minister, through you, Chair.

We not only work with the Auditor General at the end of the year; we work with the Auditor General all through the year. If there are issues that we are concerned about, we work with the Auditor General to make sure that we are aligned in terms of how we might treat a certain accounting issue so that when it comes time at the end of the year to have public accounts—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That concludes the time.

We'll now go one more round. Before we do, I just want to point out a point of clarification during some of the debates I heard. In order to be an outstanding question, the ministry must have provided clear indication that the ministry intends to answer that question at a later time. Legislative research will take from the debate that we had which ones would apply and which ones would be answered.

With that, we will now go to the official opposition: MPP Bell. We have 7.2 minutes left.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, Chair.

My question is around the auditing process again. It's a really specific question. Is the Treasury Board's audit division auditing recipients from the Skills Development Fund?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Chair, I'll pass it to my deputy minister.

Ms. Carlene Alexander: Through you, Chair, our internal audit division works directly with ministries to audit ministries.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm going to ask the question again because it's very important. Is the Treasury Board's audit division investigating recipients from the Skills Development Fund? I understand that you're wanting to—

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I'm not sure how this relates to the 2025-26 estimates process.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'll tell you why: because the audit department is under the Treasury Board. This is an active issue, and I'm curious to know if the Treasury Board is actively auditing recipients from the Skills Development Fund—

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I'll say two things: It relates to a different ministry, and it relates to a historical transfer payment.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I haven't finished my question—

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: But if we could speak to how we audit transfer payment recipients, we could talk about that, Deputy.

Ms. Jessica Bell: No, that's not my question. If the Treasury Board has a comprehensive and world-class auditing division, which you have said that you have, then it makes sense to me that the Treasury Board would audit the recipients from the Skills Development Fund.

I understand that you're auditing ministries, but I'm asking about the recipients. Is your ministry investigating recipients from the Skills Development Fund? Is it yes or no?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Minister?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I think we've answered this question many times over the course of this committee hearing, but I will say that the work that the internal audit division does is world-class. They work directly with ministries. The question that's being raised relates to something that's not directly related to the estimates process—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, I'll move on.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: If she's interested in more detail about how—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you. What I've noticed is that the ministry allowed for money to go to a recipient of the Skills Development Fund even though it was being investigated by another ministry. That seems pretty concerning to me.

I want to move to the issue of the hiring freeze. I believe the hiring freeze affects Legal Aid Ontario. It's one of the agencies that was identified in that press release that was put out in September. Did your ministry assess what impact the hiring freeze would have on service delivery levels when it comes to Legal Aid Ontario before you announced the hiring freeze?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: As I said, the hiring freeze, which imposes a cap on the number of employees within an agency, board or commission, does not affect business-critical positions. That said, as agencies want to move forward with plans for growth, modernization, expansion, innovation, they will bring those plans forward to their respective ministries and work with them to get the approval, if necessary, to add more FTEs. This is designed to ensure that there's greater transparency and accountability—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I have to stop because I don't have a lot of time. As I mentioned earlier, I am concerned about the impact of the hiring freeze on service delivery levels. My hope, as the head of the public service, is that there is tracking on the quality of the service that is received by these agencies.

I'm going to move to my next question. It's my final question, and it's about the budget. When I look at what the Auditor General has said and what the fall economic statement has said about the budget, we see some pretty concerning trends. We see a government where debt is increasing very quickly; it has gone up nearly 50% in the last 10 years and it's on track to reach nearly half a trillion dollars by 2027-28.

We know that the interest on the debt is significant. It is expected to be \$16 billion this year. That's a lot of money.

We also know, when we look at the Financial Accountability Officer, that cuts are coming. When you factor in inflation, when you factor in population growth, we do expect a decline in service delivery levels for those key ministries that Ontarians really depend upon: health care, education, housing, services that municipalities provide.

My question is this: The government is legally required to have a debt burden reduction strategy, and it's required to report on its progress to implement this debt burden reduction strategy. But what the Auditor General has found is that the province has not met its requirement to outline actions it's going to take to implement a debt burden reduction strategy. Can this government do what the Auditor General is asking and outline its debt burden reduction strategy?

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order, Chair?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Point of order.

Mr. Dave Smith: This question came up in finance yesterday. This is a question that is for finance; it's not a question for Treasury Board. Therefore, it's out of the scope for estimates of Treasury Board.

Ms. Jessica Bell: To be clear, the issue around sound fiscal practices was raised by the minister in your opening statement, and it is about the treasury. It's related to the treasury. I'd really like an answer.

Mr. Dave Smith: Further point of order: This was answered yesterday in estimates of finance. It is a finance question; it's not a Treasury Board question. It was answered yesterday.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): That's not a point of order. The secretary of the treasury will tell whether in fact she is responsible for the question.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: The member is right: The debt reduction strategy is the responsibility of the Minister of Finance. I'm very proud of the work that the Ministry of Finance and Treasury Board do together to deliver the fall economic statement, to deliver the budget, but the specific question that—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One minute.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: —she's seeking an answer to is the responsibility of the Minister of Finance—

Ms. Jessica Bell: If you're not going to answer a basic question about debt, that's fine. Thank you for your time.

I'm going to cede the rest of my time to MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair and MPP Bell. I'd like to come back to the minister's comments on—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Excuse me. You can't share your time.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm sorry. Thank you for your question. I've ended my time.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): You ended your question?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes, correct.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Okay. Then I have to recognize the third party for 25 seconds.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: The minister talked about a culture of accountability that her office tries to create as she manages risks and they make recommendations to other ministries. So a simple question, and please, I'd like an answer: yes, no or don't know—will internal audit be recommending a change to how the Minister of Labour is administering the SDF?

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: The matter is currently under investigation. I don't have any comments.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That's a very good answer. That concludes the time.

The time has expired for the committee's consideration of the 2025-26 estimates of Treasury Board Secretariat.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

Shall vote 3401, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 3402, labour relations and compensation, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 3403, employee and pensioner benefits (employer share) program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 3404, Treasury Board support program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 3405, centre for people, culture and talent program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 3411, Bulk Media Buy Program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 3412, Office of the Comptroller General, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the 2025-26 estimates of Treasury Board Secretariat carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2025-26 estimates of Treasury Board Secretariat to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

That concludes our consideration of this ministry's estimates.

I'd like to thank Minister Mulroney and everyone here today for their participation.

There being no further business, this committee stands adjourned until 9 a.m. on December 4, 2025, for the 2026 pre-budget consultations.

The committee adjourned at 1503.

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