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Lundi
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CONTENTS / TABLE DES MATIÈRES

Monday 26 May 2025 / Lundi 26 mai 2025

ORDERS OF THE DAY / ORDRE DU JOUR

Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025, Bill 24, Mr. Bethlenfalvy / Loi de 2025 sur le plan pour protéger l'Ontario (mesures budgétaires), projet de loi 24, M. Bethlenfalvy

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria	787
Mrs. Michelle Cooper	789
Mr. Dave Smith.....	791
Mr. John Vanthof.....	794
Mr. Brian Saunderson	794
MPP Alexa Gilmour.....	794
Mr. Deepak Anand.....	795
Mr. Chris Glover	795
Second reading debate deemed adjourned	795

Member for Hastings–Lennox and Addington

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Jennifer K. French)	795
---	-----

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS / DÉCLARATIONS DES DÉPUTÉES ET DÉPUTÉS

Quinte Health

Mr. Tyler Allsopp	795
-------------------------	-----

Good Neighbour Awards

Ms. Chandra Pasma.....	796
------------------------	-----

Children and Youth in Care Day

Mr. Deepak Anand.....	796
-----------------------	-----

Jewish Heritage Month

MPP Stephanie Smyth	796
---------------------------	-----

Airport noise management

Mr. Tom Rakocevic	797
-------------------------	-----

Member for Hastings–Lennox and Addington

Mr. Ric Bresee	797
----------------------	-----

Indigenous affairs

Mr. Sol Mamakwa.....	797
----------------------	-----

Veterans

Mr. Steve Clark	797
-----------------------	-----

Riding of Mississauga–Erin Mills

Mr. Sheref Sabawy.....	798
------------------------	-----

House sittings

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly)	798
---------------------------------------	-----

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS / PRÉSENTATION DES VISITEUSES ET VISITEURS

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly)	798
Ms. Chandra Pasma.....	798

Hon. Nolan Quinn	798
Mr. Andrew Dowie	798
MPP Robin Lennox.....	798
MPP Lisa Gretzky	798
Mr. Mike Schreiner	798
Hon. Kevin Holland	798
Hon. Graydon Smith	798
Mr. Chris Glover	798
MPP George Darouze.....	798
Hon. Todd J. McCarthy.....	798
Mr. Steve Pinsonneault	799
MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam	799
Mr. Sheref Sabawy.....	799

Tragedy in Etobicoke

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon	799
---------------------------------	-----

Sign-language interpretation

Mr. John Vanthof	799
Motion agreed to	799

QUESTION PERIOD / PÉRIODE DE QUESTIONS

Government accountability

Ms. Marit Stiles.....	799
Hon. Rob Flack	799

Government advertising

Ms. Marit Stiles.....	800
Hon. Caroline Mulroney	800
Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy	800

Government spending

Mr. John Fraser	801
Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy	801

Government spending

Mr. John Fraser	802
Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy	802

Indigenous affairs

Mr. Sol Mamakwa.....	803
Hon. Greg Rickford.....	803
Hon. Stephen Lecce.....	803

Ontario Science Centre

Mr. Adil Shamji	803
Hon. Doug Ford	803

Ontario budget

MPP George Darouze.....	804
Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy	804

Landfill

Mr. Peter Tabuns.....	804
Hon. Todd J. McCarthy.....	804

Public transit	
Mr. Rob Cerjanec	805
Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria	805
Housing	
MPP Chris Scott	805
Ms. Laura Smith	806
Labour dispute	
MPP Lisa Gretzky	806
Hon. Michael Parsa	806
MPP Jamie West	806
Post-secondary education	
MPP Tyler Watt	807
Hon. Nolan Quinn	807
Ontario economy	
Mr. Ernie Hardeman	807
Mr. Logan Kanapathi	808
Mr. Joseph Racinsky	808
Infrastructure funding	
MPP Wayne Gates	808
Mr. Amarjot Sandhu	808
Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens	808
Hon. Kinga Surma	808
Notice of dissatisfaction	
The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly)	809
Armenian Heritage Month	
Mr. Aris Babikian	809

**INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS /
PRÉSENTATION DES VISITEUSES
ET VISITEURS**

Hon. Graham McGregor	809
Hon. Jill Dunlop	809
Sign-language interpretation	
Mr. John Vanthof	809

**INTRODUCTION OF GOVERNMENT BILLS /
DÉPÔT DE PROJETS DE LOI ÉMANANT
DU GOUVERNEMENT**

Emergency Management Modernization Act, 2025, Bill 25, Ms. Dunlop / Loi de 2025 sur la modernisation de la gestion des situations d'urgence, projet de loi 25, Mme Dunlop	
First reading agreed to	809
Hon. Jill Dunlop	809

**INTRODUCTION OF BILLS /
DÉPÔT DES PROJETS DE LOI**

Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Amendment Act, 2025, Bill 26, Mr. Dowie / Loi de 2025 modifiant la Loi sur les parcs provinciaux et les réserves de conservation, projet de loi 26, M. Dowie	
First reading agreed to	810

Mr. Andrew Dowie	810
------------------------	-----

PETITIONS / PÉTITIONS

Environmental protection	
Ms. Peggy Sattler	810
Tuition	
Ms. Doly Begum	810
Cycling infrastructure	
Ms. Jessica Bell	810
Social assistance	
Ms. Jennifer K. French	810
Transportation infrastructure	
Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady	811
Lupus	
Mme France Gélinas	811
Land use planning	
Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady	811
Social assistance	
MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam	811
Emergency services	
Mme France Gélinas	811
Social assistance	
MPP Alexa Gilmour	812
Health care	
Mme France Gélinas	812
Personnel de première ligne	
Mme France Gélinas	812
Visitors	
The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly)	812

ORDERS OF THE DAY / ORDRE DU JOUR

Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025, Bill 24, Mr. Bethlenfalvy / Loi de 2025 sur le plan pour protéger l'Ontario (mesures budgétaires), projet de loi 24, M. Bethlenfalvy	
Ms. Jessica Bell	812
Ms. Natalie Pierre	820
MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam	821
Mr. Brian Saunderson	821
MPP Alexa Gilmour	821
MPP Stephanie Smyth	821
Hon. Graham McGregor	822
Ms. Stephanie Bowman	822
Mr. Adil Shamji	825
Mr. Stephen Blais	827
Ms. Jennifer K. French	829
Mr. Stephen Blais	830
Mr. Anthony Leardi	830
Mr. Terence Kernaghan	830
Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon	831

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson	831	Mr. Guy Bourgouin.....	843
MPP Catherine McKenney	834	Mr. Mike Schreiner	843
Mr. Brian Saunderson	834	Mr. Dave Smith.....	844
Mr. Guy Bourgouin.....	834	MPP Wayne Gates	844
Mr. Rob Cerjanec.....	835	Mr. Rob Cerjanec	844
MPP Lisa Gretzky.....	835	Hon. Michael S. Kerzner.....	844
MPP Wayne Gates	836	Mr. Anthony Leardi.....	845
Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon	838	Mr. John Vanthof	845
Hon. Sam Oosterhoff	838	Mr. Rob Cerjanec	845
Mr. Terence Kernaghan	839	Ms. Chandra Pasma.....	846
Mr. Adil Shamji	839	Mr. Anthony Leardi.....	849
Ms. Chandra Pasma.....	839	MPP Catherine McKenney.....	849
MPP Andrea Hazell	840	Mr. Rob Cerjanec	849
Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon	841	Mr. Dave Smith.....	850
Hon. Sam Oosterhoff	842	M. Guy Bourgouin	850
MPP Catherine McKenney	842	Ms. Lee Fairclough	850
Mr. Rob Cerjanec.....	843	Second reading debate deemed adjourned	850
Hon. Sam Oosterhoff	843		

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Monday 26 May 2025

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Lundi 26 mai 2025

The House met at 0900.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Good morning, everyone. Let's stop and take a moment of silence for inner thought and personal reflection.

Prayers.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

PLAN TO PROTECT ONTARIO ACT
(BUDGET MEASURES), 2025
LOI DE 2025 SUR LE PLAN
POUR PROTÉGER L'ONTARIO
(MESURES BUDGÉTAIRES)

Mr. Sarkaria, on behalf of Mr. Bethlenfalvy, moved second reading of the following bill:

Bill 24, An Act to implement Budget measures and to enact and amend various statutes / Projet de loi 24, Loi visant à mettre en oeuvre les mesures budgétaires et à édicter et à modifier diverses lois.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the minister.

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Good morning, Madam Speaker. I want to start off by saying that I will be sharing my time with the member for Peterborough–Kawartha and the member for Eglinton–Lawrence.

I am pleased to lead off the second reading debate for the Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025. Nearly two weeks ago, our government introduced in this House the Plan to Protect Ontario, when the Minister of Finance tabled the 2025 Ontario budget. Today, I stand before you to lead off the bill's second reading debate. Let me start by saying that I am proud of our government's work, despite the economic challenges we are facing today—challenges that our country and province have never faced before.

For many years, Ontario and Canada have valued our relationship with the United States—a relationship which has benefited the growth of both economies. We supported each other not only as friends but as family. However, the country that we once considered our greatest ally and trading partner has started a trade war against us. The recent actions taken by the United States revealed that we can no longer rely on them as a partner, as their trade policies seek to put our industries and economy at risk.

On February 27, 2025, the people of Ontario elected our government with a mandate to protect Ontario, and that's exactly what we will do. No matter what challenges or threats that we face as an economy and as a province, we

will do whatever it takes to protect Ontario and the people that reside here. That is why we titled this year's budget A Plan to Protect Ontario. This is a plan that will help businesses, will help workers, will help them weather the storm caused by US tariffs. This is a plan that will build more infrastructure in every corner of our province. This is a plan that will keep costs down for individuals and families while supporting our world-class workforce. This is a plan for everyone living in our province today and for generations to come.

Madam Speaker, I am proud to stand before you today to state that we are delivering on this plan. It is thanks to the success of this government's fiscally responsible plan for a path to balance the budget that we are in a strong position to protect this province, all while being able to build our economy. Since we took office in 2018, our government has helped create nearly one million more jobs and bigger paycheques. We have attracted nearly \$70 billion in new investments across manufacturing, life sciences, technology. Our GDP has grown to over \$1 trillion. We have reversed the trend of credit downgrades, improving our province's credit rating profile. Madam Speaker, there is no denying that our economy is growing, all while responsibly managing our province's finances. Our key debt metrics remain some of the best seen in the province in over a decade, and we are doing this while retaining a path to balance by 2027-28 and doing so without raising a single tax.

With all of this in mind, we are well positioned to protect our workers, businesses and families for the foreseeable future. As I stated earlier, it is because of our responsible approach to managing the province's finances that we can do more to build our economy. To help build a stronger economy, we have a strong capital plan. This capital plan of over \$200 billion over the next decade is the most ambitious of its kind in our province's history. It will help accelerate the building of highways, hospitals, schools and other public infrastructure that the people of this province depend on.

Our plan includes investing \$2.4 billion in the Municipal Housing Infrastructure Program and Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund to support the construction of more homes that our communities need. To help deliver priority infrastructure projects that would otherwise not get built faster, we are proposing to provide an additional \$5 billion in funding to the Building Ontario Fund.

Our plan includes investments of nearly \$56 billion in health infrastructure. And so far, we're delivering on building and enhancing 50 major hospital projects, from Campbellford to Kenora, to ensure that everyone in our

province has access to the health care they need when they need it.

Our plan includes nearly \$61 billion for public transit to make commuting more accessible and more affordable. Through this investment, we're upgrading our GO train and bus service, making it easier and faster for people across the province to get where they need to go. We've made progress in advancing GO 2.0, which will deliver the next generation of passenger train service to get more people moving in the greater Golden Horseshoe.

Our plan also includes how we aim to alleviate gridlock. Simply put, gridlock is problematic to everyone. Gridlock not only costs substantial time to our people's daily lives, keeping people away from their families and delaying movement of goods for businesses, but it also costs our economy, costing Ontario nearly \$56 billion every year. Change needs to be made. It needs to be made now. That is why we are moving forward with major highway projects—projects such as Highway 413 and the Bradford Bypass, as well as expanding existing highways, like the widening of Highway 69 to four lanes.

But we are thinking bigger than that, Madam Speaker. I would like to share with this House a statistic: By 2051, the population in the greater Golden Horseshoe is expected to reach 15 million, growing by approximately 800,000 new residents every five years. This stat demonstrates the pressing need for critical infrastructure investment to prepare for this growth and to help alleviate gridlock, particularly on Highway 401, a highway that is one of the busiest corridors in all of North America.

Our government is thinking about this. We are thinking about how we can improve the effectiveness of existing highway infrastructure, including moving forward on the feasibility study for a Highway 401 tunnel expressway—a tunnel expressway to address the most congested area of the 401. Our government is committed to alleviating gridlock, saving commuters time and keeping goods moving.

0910

Madam Speaker, our plan to meet the province's growing needs does not end there, because we recognize that our growing province does not only need more infrastructure, but more power. Another statistic: The province's electricity demand is expected to grow by 75% by 2050. Our province's energy policy will play a huge role in the success of Ontario's economic future, and our government is prepared with a plan to launch us into the economy of tomorrow by transforming Ontario into an energy superpower. Whether it's hydro, nuclear, natural gas, wind or solar, we are investing in new energy production, transmission and storage to ensure that families are connected to reliable and affordable power. This includes leading the largest expansion of electricity generation in more than three decades.

Since 2020, we have attracted more than \$46 billion in new investments from global automakers, parts suppliers, and manufacturer of EV batteries and battery materials. We are also refurbishing hydroelectric stations across the province, which will secure more energy power generation to power five million homes and create more than 2,000 good-paying jobs.

Likewise, we're making major strides in powering Ontario's economic growth with clean, affordable, Ontario-made nuclear energy. We are advancing four small modular reactors at Darlington nuclear, the first in the G7, and refurbishing the Darlington, Bruce and Pickering nuclear generating stations. This is the work that we are doing and we will continue to do as part of our plan to position Ontario as a leader in the clean energy economy.

Our great province is also home to the critical minerals that the rest of the world needs. Copper, lithium, nickel, cobalt and graphite are just some of the resources that we have in the north and that are needed to build electric vehicles, clean energy and other advanced technologies the world depends on. The resources that we have in our northern communities are key to the competitive advantage we have as a province, and we want to make sure that we work alongside Indigenous communities in these efforts to ensure they can reap the benefits of critical mineral development.

That's why as part of our Plan to Protect Ontario we are proposing to invest \$500 million for the creation of a new Critical Minerals Processing Fund. But we are going to need all hands on deck to unleash the economic potential of these critical minerals, and we will work alongside Indigenous partners in the north to do it. Madam Speaker, as our government announced last week, we are starting now. Our plan includes tripling the total amount of loan guarantees through the Indigenous Opportunities Financing Program—formerly the Aboriginal Loan Guarantee Program—to \$3 billion. This expansion will support Indigenous participation beyond the electricity sector by including eligible projects in critical minerals, offering generational economic opportunities for Indigenous peoples in Ontario.

We are also investing \$70 million over four years in the Indigenous Participation Fund to support Indigenous communities and organizations in areas of high mineral activity to improve their participation capacity in the regulatory processes related to mineral exploration and mine development. And we are supporting First Nations post-secondary students who are interested in pursuing careers in resource development by investing \$10 million to create new scholarship opportunities. These investments are key to our vision for Ontario—a vision that sees a stronger skilled workforce and supply chain, increased economic independence, and unlocking the full potential of our supply of critical minerals. This will all be done right here in Ontario, and we are going to work alongside our Indigenous partners to do it.

Madam Speaker, while we are working to build up Ontario through our infrastructure investments and unlocking the potential of our northern and Indigenous communities with expanded investments and critical mineral processing, we are also doing as much as we can to help businesses weather the storm caused by the economic uncertainty of the US trade policies and tariff war. Last month, this government took immediate action with \$11 billion in relief and support for workers and businesses to protect the province against economic uncer-

tainty, which is being influenced by US tariffs. We have deferred provincial taxes until October, providing up to \$9 billion in liquidity to about 80,000 businesses. To support employers and help keep workers on the payroll as they weather the storm, we issued a new \$2-billion rebate for safe employers through the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, and we are doubling down on our commitment to protect workers and businesses by proposing to create the Protecting Ontario Account, which will make available \$1 billion in liquidity relief for businesses affected by US tariffs, with critical support to protect jobs, transform businesses and grow strategic sectors of the economy.

Our government is taking the necessary steps to support businesses and protect workers amid the current economic uncertainty. By taking these steps, we are protecting Ontario and our economy, but that is not all. Our government will build on the work being done to protect Ontario and our economy by supporting our local economy by all means possible. Our government is committed to continuing to promote and prioritize small producers, including Ontario-made products. As part of our plan, we will soon be implementing several changes to foster a more dynamic and competitive alcohol marketplace while creating conditions to support affordability for consumers—changes that, if passed, would provide tax relief by lowering the basic beer tax rates for beer produced by Ontario microbrewers and enhancing the Small Beer Manufacturers' Tax Credit. Together, these measures would bolster supports to the province's dynamic beverage sector and will protect jobs, workers and the economy in the province's expanded marketplace in the face of US tariffs for years to come.

I will finish off by emphasizing once more that, without a doubt, we are facing one of the single-greatest economic challenges in our modern history. Tariffs and threats to our economy and sovereignty from the United States risk undoing all the progress we've made to revitalize our economy and make life more affordable for the people of Ontario, but our province has been challenged before, and we have always emerged stronger and more united as a result, and the same is true today.

0920

A stronger future for Ontario is ours for the taking—a future where we can harness our economic resources, clean energy, infrastructure, technology, advanced manufacturing and skilled workforce to become the most competitive economy in the G7. This is why our government's 2025 Ontario budget and this bill, a Plan to Protect Ontario Act, is the foundation to turn the vision of our future into a reality. Our government is ready to do its part. But it cannot be achieved by our efforts alone.

As a united province, as a united country, we've done it before, and Ontario is ready to do it again. Madam Speaker, I urge all members of this Legislature to support these budget measures, whether it's the \$70 billion in public transit, the \$28 billion in building highways, the \$500 million in the critical minerals fund or many of the other projects—over 50 hospital projects that are being put

forward in this budget. I urge the members of the opposition to take a careful look, be united and support this very important piece of legislation as we continue to weather the storm of US tariffs.

With that, Madam Speaker, thank you very much, and I will turn it over to the member from Eglinton–Lawrence.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Eglinton–Lawrence.

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Today I have the honour to rise before you to speak as part of the second reading of the Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025, in follow-up to the Minister of Finance, Peter Bethlenfalvy, who began second reading of this crucial bill for our province and its people.

We are most certainly at the doorsteps of a new era. Today, our province and our country are going through unprecedented times. We face new and complex challenges like we have never done before. The United States, our neighbour, our closest ally and our most cherished friend, has overturned one of the most successful economic relationships the world has ever seen. These unwarranted and unjust tariffs critically threaten our economy at its heart. These measures have targeted some of the most critical industries. Canadian steel and aluminum got 25% tariffs; our potash and energy got 10% levies. The automobile industry, one of the central pillars of our economic activity, was attacked with 25% on Canadian content in vehicles, too. And as if this wasn't enough: 25% tariffs on everything else not covered by the CUSMA trade agreement.

In the face of economic uncertainty created by the United States through this trade war, one thing emerges clearly: The status quo is no longer an option. The last few months have proven that we should no longer assume the benefits of our economic partnership with our southern neighbour. The future of Ontario's economy can no longer depend on a partner that has proven itself to be fundamentally unreliable.

Naturally, Madam Speaker, this trade war has taken a toll on our businesses, our workers and our families. Ontarians are worried and concerned. Business expansion plans got replaced in the minds of business owners by worries about making payroll; career progress and growth gave place to job stability concerns, next week's paycheque and making ends meet, in the case of workers; and dreams about their children's future are now uncertain and worry parents. This is why our government is taking immediate action. These are the stories we hear every day and that are top of mind when delivering on our promise to protect Ontario. As Ontario families, workers and businesses go through this storm, they can rest assured that our government will go through these bumps with them, too. Together, we will come out stronger.

Over the last seven years since our government was first elected, we accomplished so many things. Our province has come so far. Under the leadership of Premier Doug Ford, we put shovels in the ground and got things done. To echo what Minister Bethlenfalvy mentioned, almost one million more jobs have been created since 2018, Ontario's GDP grew to over a trillion dollars and we

attracted nearly \$70 billion in new investments in key sectors.

Madam Speaker, these accomplishments are nothing but the result of relentless and purposeful work. These is no chance or luck here: They are results of our government's focus on reducing costs for businesses and creating the conditions for them to grow and thrive. But above all else, they are the results of the hard work of millions of Ontarians across the province in the various industries and sectors that build the economic engine Ontario is.

Unfortunately, we find ourselves now in a very tough position. All this work we have secured for our province and our people is now at risk. As Minister Bethlenfalvy put it, Ontario is at a crossroads, and we must take serious steps to make sure we don't find ourselves anywhere near the bottom. We all know that the people of Ontario are particularly exposed to these tariffs and the widespread economic uncertainty. Across the province, 285,000 jobs depend on exporting goods to the United States, which represents almost 3.5% of our total employment. On top of that, many more jobs—thousands of them—rely on US exports across domestic supply chains.

This is why our government's 2025 budget includes measures to protect the livelihoods and paycheques of hard-working Ontarians. We are taking action to help workers, businesses and communities weather the storm by providing urgent relief and support. What our Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025, does, first and foremost, is take immediate and urgent action in response to the impacts of tariffs, to defend our economy, to protect our industries, to protect our businesses, to protect our workers. In one word, a plan to protect Ontario and its future.

These are the reasons why our government, as a first measure, took action to support about 80,000 Ontario businesses and job creators impacted by US tariffs. We are providing a six-month deferral on interest and penalties on select provincial taxes. From April 1 to October 1 of 2025, all businesses who pay taxes under 10 of Ontario's business-focused tax programs can defer payments for taxes owed, without incurring interest nor penalties. This measure, Madam Speaker, provides them with up to \$9 billion in cash flow, giving them more flexibility to deal with any challenges resulting from US tariffs and put their money where it's most needed for them.

Secondly, there is a new and added \$2-billion rebate through the WSIB that is being distributed directly to safe employers, so that employers can weather the storm and use their money in protecting their businesses and keeping their employees on the job. Our government has taken significant steps to help businesses over the past years. WSIB rates have been reduced to the lowest in half a century. These premium rate reductions will save businesses in Ontario about \$150 million annually. We were able to do this, to give their money back to our businesses, because we have a surplus in the fund.

0930

Keeping costs down for businesses and giving money back to them are not the only tools at our disposal to help

job creators optimize their resources. Cutting red tape and simplifying cumbersome bureaucratic and unnecessary processes to prompt economic development is in our agenda, too. In Bill 24, Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025, we're taking another step in that direction, in this opportunity on the Employer Health Tax Act. The government is proposing some amendments to the act that would expand how notices of assessment under the act may be sent, including electronic means, getting rid of this way of unnecessary rules and benefiting employers. Because when prudence and responsibility is exercised in fiscal and public management, as our government has done, taxpayers benefit from this. All these measures reflect nothing else but this government's strong commitment to fostering a robust and resilient business environment for Ontario's economy to thrive.

To continue to put forward measures designed to promote capital formation, enhance access to investment opportunities, and maintain market integrity and investor protection, Bill 24, Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025, includes some legislative amendments to favour a nurturing business environment. Through this bill, the government is proposing several amendments to both the Commodity Futures Act and the Securities Act that would expand the enforcement powers of our key partners in the local capital market: the Canadian Investment Regulatory Organization and the Ontario Securities Commission. We are confident these measures will reassure investors, not in Canada, but across the globe, that Ontario is open for business, and that it is the best place in the G7 to invest in.

Madam Speaker, these are only the first and immediate measures taken by Ontario in response to uncertainty and global instability. To protect the province's local economy, the Ontario-based businesses forced to reconsider their US trading dependencies, we are creating the new Protecting Ontario Account, a fund of up to \$5 billion designed to provide businesses with critical support to protect jobs, transform businesses and grow strategic sectors of the economy. The Protecting Ontario Account will work in tandem with federal government supports to make immediately available up to \$1 billion in liquidity relief. That is \$1 billion readily available for Ontario businesses and workers facing significant tariff-related business disruptions. This liquidity relief will build on top of the existing supports, and it operates as an emergency backstop for those businesses who have exhausted available funding. Our team is committed to protecting Ontario.

When thinking of our businesses and industries, it would be remiss of us not to specifically protect the accomplishments we have achieved in the auto and electric vehicle battery sector. With President Trump's tariffs aiming at our auto industry, there is no doubt that we must stand firmly behind the industry and the tens of thousands of auto workers in Ontario. To do that, our government is extending its investment in the Ontario Automotive Modernization Program and the Ontario Vehicle Innovation Network through a total envelope of \$85 million. Ontario

will be providing an additional \$73 million over the next four years to continue the Ontario Vehicle Innovation Network program. This funding will continue to support regional technology development sites, research and development partnerships, and incubator project for automotive and mobility small and medium-sized enterprises. To date, the program has leveraged over \$850 million in private-sector investments, supported over 600 Ontario small and medium-sized enterprises and helped secure more than 6,000 jobs.

But that is not all. In addition, the province will be investing another \$12 million in the next three years to continue the Ontario Automotive Modernization Program. The program is designed to support our automotive parts suppliers by helping small and medium businesses upgrade their equipment and adopt new tools and technologies.

The numbers on this program are also amazing. Since inception, the program has supported a total of 215 projects, creating over 1,000 jobs and retaining nearly another 16,000 jobs, and has leveraged over \$59 million in private sector investments. We have come a long way. That is why now, more than ever, we must protect the progress our manufacturing sector has seen since 2018.

Madam Speaker, I have mentioned workers several times so far. The hard-working people of this great province are the backbone and true motor of Ontario's success. Nobody knows that better than us, and nobody is more aware of the worries, concerns and instability with which they are faced today. To provide immediate transition supports for laid-off workers in these uncertain economic times, the government is investing \$20 million to mobilize new training and support centres. The centres provide temporary places for affected workers to receive services, including referrals to in-demand training, job search assistance, upskilling and Employment Ontario programs.

Because our communities are also hurting and may face major disruptions as well, our government is taking actions to be there for them too. Through the new Trade-Impacted Communities Program, we are proposing to allocate \$40 million to respond in a tailored manner to the unique and unprecedented needs of individual communities and local industries.

This funding would provide tailored and flexible grants to help communities respond to trade disruptions and pivot to procure more from domestic and local suppliers. Municipalities, economic development organizations, business accelerators and incubators, among other eligible industry associations, would also receive the funding to support large-scale strategic initiatives to help businesses grow, find new markets and investments, and diversify their supply chains.

Our plan to protect Ontario is about more than just ensuring our businesses, workers and communities have the necessary tools to weather the storm. This is about much more than just tariffs. This has been a wake-up call for all of us, not only across Ontario but across Canada. Business as usual and the status quo are no longer an option. It is imperative that we reflect and acknowledge

that we are in the face of a new paradigm, and that we face a more profound and much larger problem. Our over-reliance on our ties and trading relationship with the United States has made us vulnerable.

On top of that, we must recognize the fact that our country has some long-standing issues that are capping our productivity and growth. This is why our government is putting forward this plan to protect Ontario. We must take bold action to ensure we make Ontario the best place to do business in all the G7. Our government's commitment with fiscal responsibility and prudent financial management put our province in a strong position to respond to these challenges and to do more.

0940

Our plan to protect Ontario is a road map that looks into the future. It is a plan to take action today to make the necessary changes to protect Ontario in the years and decades to come. It is a plan to build a more competitive, more resilient and more self-reliant economy that can withstand whatever comes our way. Our government is putting forward a plan to secure that our children do better than we did, that our real GDP grows in the years to come, that there are better opportunities for our workers with bigger paycheques and more money in their pockets.

Our government got a strong and clear mandate to do whatever is necessary to protect Ontario workers, businesses and communities. We will leave no stone unturned. Together, with Ontario workers, municipalities, union leaders and Indigenous communities, we will unleash Ontario's enormous potential, we will continue to put shovels in the ground and build infrastructure, we will put more money back in people's pockets and we will continue delivering better services Ontarians can rely on.

In one word, Madam Speaker, we will protect Ontario—today and for the generations to come. And so I call on all members to vote in favour of the Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Jennifer K. French): I recognize the member for Peterborough–Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's good to see you in the chair and it's even better to see that boot has been removed from your leg, so congratulations on that.

Bill 24, Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025, is more than just a collection of budgetary measures. It represents the foundation of a forward-looking, comprehensive plan. I rise to speak about a plan—a plan that puts Ontario first; our government's plan; a plan that protects what matters most to the people of this province: good jobs, affordable living, strong communities and a secure future. This is the 2025 plan as laid out in the 2025 Ontario budget, A Plan to Protect Ontario. It's built around one mission: to protect our great province and everyone who calls it home.

Ontario families are working harder than ever. They're facing higher costs. They're dealing with global uncertainty and they're asking us—their provincial government, their elected representatives, every one of us—to do the same thing that they are doing every day: That is, to make

smart decisions, responsible choices that protect what we've built for ourselves here and secure it against what may come next. That's exactly what the measures in this bill do.

Seen as a whole, they're not just a response to today's challenges—they're an investment in tomorrow's stability and in tomorrow's opportunities. They protect workers. They protect jobs. They protect our energy supply, our roads and our hospitals. And also protected is our innovation economy and our local communities. The investments support our small businesses that are getting established and trying to grow, and they further strengthen protections for investors and increase confidence in Ontario's capital markets.

At a time when US tariffs and trade barriers threaten so many of our province's key industries, from manufacturing to agriculture, we've taken bold action to shield Ontario's economy. The disruptive trade measures thrust on us by the Trump administration hurt our workers, raise costs and undermine growth. As a government, we will stand up for Ontario and fight for fair access to markets, whether they are Canadian markets or global ones. Open markets underpin our way of life. Open markets help ensure our children inherit a province that's not just surviving but thriving—one where opportunity is shared and hard work is rewarded.

That was the vision that Ronald Reagan and Brian Mulroney had when they first signed a free trade agreement in 1988 between Canada and the United States, removing tariffs. Those are the ideas and promises that are at the core of open markets: opportunity and reward. It's about making Ontario not just the economic engine of Canada, as laudable as that goal may be. It's what made Ontario the number one trading partner with 17 US states. It's about making Ontario a place where every person, regardless of background or postal code, can succeed. Because, Madam Speaker, in a world where so much is changing, one thing must remain constant: our commitment to protecting the people of Ontario. And it's not just about those who call Ontario home today. It's for the generations yet to come.

While external pressures are mounting, we must turn our attention inward to the barriers that still exist within our own country. Right now, it can be easier to trade with another country than to trade with another Canadian province or territory. That's not just an inconvenience; it's a serious obstacle to growth. Ontario producers, farmers, manufacturers and service providers too often face a patchwork of rules and restrictions that vary from province to province. These outdated barriers limit our competitiveness. They drive up costs and prevent businesses from scaling across Canadian borders. This government has always said that these types of regulatory barriers create burden, obstacles and hurdles for Ontario businesses that do not make sense—not for today's economy and definitely not for our future. And that's why our government introduced legislation to unlock free trade across all of Canada. We're dedicated to tearing down barriers and reducing red tape.

And we're dedicated to easing tax burdens. In fact, Bill 24, Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025, contains a number of measures aimed at addressing Ontario's tax landscape. One of the changes in this bill that, if passed, would make the biggest difference for everyday people is our plan to make gas and fuel cuts permanent. We know families are feeling the pinch, and this is one of the ways that we can help lower costs for hard-working families, support local businesses and put more money back into people's pockets. This change, if approved, would save households, on average, \$115 per year moving forward.

But that's not all: We're saving daily commuters even more and helping to address traffic gridlock in the GTHA region by proposing to remove the tolls from Highway 407 east. We're proposing to remove tolls from the last stretch of provincially owned tolled highway in Ontario, and if passed, it's expected to save some daily commuters almost \$7,200 a year. By removing the tolls from the stretch of the 407 from Brock Road to Highway 35/115, we would deliver on our commitment to remove tolls from provincial highways, just like we did on Highways 412 and 418.

Speaker, for my own community, this opens up economic opportunities for all of the people that I represent in Peterborough-Kawartha. And that's why I'm adamant that the city and the county of Peterborough need to work together to solve our employment land challenges. We have an opportunity, with the 407 not being tolled, to move more product. Our government is taking action to make travel more affordable for thousands of Ontarians who rely on this route every single day. It's part of the commitment to ease gridlock and ensure drivers keep more money in their pockets.

Madam Speaker, lowering costs is just one part of the plan. We know that investing in infrastructure is essential to support economic growth, supporting the needs of today, but also preparing for the needs of the future. Our government continues to invest in building infrastructure like no provincial government has before, building the roads, hospitals, schools and transit the people of Ontario need today and will need in the future. Hospitals like the one just announced in Campbellford that will ease pressure on my own PRHC.

0950

Just as we're building roads and hospitals, we're also building the energy systems that will power them and power our economy in the years ahead—not just electricity, but clean power. We're expanding it across all of Ontario, because we all know that electricity demand is set to increase with the increased connectivity and technology that the economy of tomorrow will run on. For example, our plan sees the province investing \$4.7 billion to upgrade and expand hydroelectric stations, creating over 2,000 jobs and producing enough clean energy to power up to five million homes. As part of our plan, we're supporting the Ontario Pumped Storage project. Once completed, this project would store electricity when demand is low and release it when it's needed the most, helping to keep power reliable and affordable. Speaker, it

could power up to a million homes for 11 hours. It would be the biggest project of its kind in Canada. These investments will help lower bills, create jobs and make sure these are the building blocks of long-term prosperity, a goal that drives every decision in our plan.

But to keep pace with growth and changing demands we must continue investing wisely—and we are. As explained in the 2025 budget, we're moving forward with the most ambitious infrastructure plan in Ontario's history, over \$200 billion dedicated to building roads, transit, hospitals and schools. Our plan isn't just about big infrastructure investments. It's a plan about real, visible change for the people of Ontario. Our plan is about improved commutes, shorter ER wait times, better access to schools and stronger connections between communities. These are public goods and public services. Our plan, and the measures contained in this bill, gets its meaning from the knowledge that we're not only investing in roads and buildings, these physical things; our plan is about investing in people, in their jobs, in their communities and in our collective long-term prosperity.

From the biggest dollar item in the 2025 budget to the smallest technical amendment in Bill 24, they all have one thing in common: Ontario's long-term prosperity. Long-term prosperity is why we're moving ahead with projects such as critical transportation corridors like Highway 413 and the Bradford Bypass, projects that will reduce gridlock, unlock housing, and move goods and people more efficiently across the province. These aren't just highways; they're economic lifelines and the foundations of long-term prosperity. Long-term prosperity is why, with our plan, we're improving access to modern care, adding more hospital beds and ensuring front-line health care workers have the tools that they need to care for our growing communities.

Madam Speaker, while I discuss long-term prosperity, let me be clear that our government isn't waiting for the future to sort itself out. We're not waiting years to make changes or break ground. Our plan will get shovels into the ground faster, giving Ontarians access and use of this critical infrastructure when they need it. This is the plan to protect Ontario's economy, not just with words in budgets or measures in proposed legislation, but with cranes in the sky and boots on the ground. Our plan is about how we keep workers employed, how we keep attracting investment and how we keep ensuring families can count on the services they rely on every single day. We're building faster, smarter and stronger, because that's how you protect Ontario.

As explained in the 2025 budget, as part of making the Ontario economy faster, smarter and stronger, we're also providing an additional \$5 billion to the Building Ontario Fund. Partnering with trusted institutions to bring even more priority projects to life, especially in areas like housing, Indigenous community infrastructure and long-term care, is what the Building Ontario Fund is focused on. Investments made through these partnerships will ensure that critical projects are not delayed due to a lack of funding. Funding these investments will also ensure that

communities across our province receive the support they need to grow sustainably, equitably. From new affordable housing developments in Elliot Lake to modernizing long-term-care homes in Peterborough, it all comes down to vision. As a government, we aren't shy about that. Our vision is optimistic. Our vision is ambitious. Our vision provides hope.

Perhaps nowhere is our vision more ambitious, or arguably, more necessary, than in northern Ontario. It's a unique region with a unique way of life and with that, unique challenges. Far too long, the region has been faced with underdeveloped infrastructure, limited access to essential services and barriers to economic opportunity. That's why we're doubling down on our commitment to northern and Indigenous communities. Our plan is focused on bringing to the region better roads, expanded rail networks and high-speed broadband that connects people and businesses to the global economy.

At the same time, from north to south and east to west, we're working to keep Ontario competitive on the world stage. That's why, as part of our plan, we're increasing our support for Invest Ontario, our province's investment attraction agency. With another \$600 million added to the Invest Ontario fund, we're giving global companies another reason to choose Ontario. We're sending a clear message: Ontario is a place where businesses can grow. Ontario is a place where businesses can innovate. And most importantly, Ontario is the place where businesses will succeed.

In just a few short years, Invest Ontario has helped announce over \$7.5 billion in new investments. Those investments are expected to create nearly 9,500 jobs. That's 9,500 new jobs in sectors like life sciences, advanced manufacturing and technology. And these aren't just numbers; they represent high-quality careers with futures to help Ontarians build better lives for themselves and for their families. And the reality is, this is all about Ontario families. I've said many times there is no such thing as luck. Luck is simply the intersection where opportunity meets preparation. As a government, from day one, we haven't waited, hoping that opportunity would knock. We've been opening the door and ensuring Ontario is prepared: We're rolling out the welcome mat to clearly say Ontario is open for business.

I'll begin to conclude my remarks on Bill 24, Madam Speaker, by saying this: As the global economy shifts, we're focused on future-proofing our provincial economy. With our plan, we're laying the foundation for a more resilient, innovative, and prosperous Ontario for generations to come, because it's not just about today. Today is important. But what is more important is being prepared for tomorrow and all of the tomorrows to come, by expanding Ontario's clean energy capacity and by securing critical minerals and the supply chains that will drive the future of mobility, medicine and manufacturing.

1000

Ontario has an opportunity to be the world leader in so many things. And this budget sets the groundwork for us to do that by investing in people, through skilled trades

programs, through education and training, that connects people to new opportunities, and by partnering with First Nations, with municipalities, with industry, with businesses and with individuals—because no matter where you live, whether it's in downtown Toronto or a fly-in community in northern Ontario, our plan is about protecting your future.

As the 2025 budget measures in this bill demonstrate, our plan is not just a list of programs and policies. It's a vision. It's a strategy. And most importantly, it's a commitment—a commitment to Ontario workers, a commitment to businesses that want to grow, a commitment to Indigenous communities seeking a better path forward and a commitment to families that want stability and security in uncertain times. Our plan is about protecting the foundations of what makes Ontario strong: our people and our potential, our province and its unique place in Canada and the entire world.

Madam Speaker, I call on every member of this Legislature to join us. Let's choose action over delay. Let's pass Bill 24. Let's send a clear message that Ontario is ready, united and moving forward, and we will protect Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Jennifer K. French): Questions and responses?

Mr. John Vanthof: I listened intently to the members, particularly to the Minister of Transportation and others, talk about northern Ontario and our resources and how we are going to drive the economy, which we have for years. But the words sound a bit hollow because what we've always noticed is, as soon as the resources are a little bit depleted, we move someplace else and the government lets the infrastructure deteriorate and decline.

One example right now is the Gardiner Ferry, north of Cochrane. It's on part of a provincial highway system. The sawmill on the other side of the Gardiner Ferry closed, but there are many people still living there. And now there's great concern that the Gardiner Ferry is going to be closed and there will no longer be highway service to that community. Could the Minister of Transportation commit to look at that situation and work together on the Gardiner Ferry?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Thank you very much to member. Absolutely, we will continue to work with the member and the community there in some of these challenging times, but one thing is for sure: This government remains committed to supporting northern Ontario and all regions and cities and towns that are so important and going to be so important to the prosperity of this province, especially as we develop the Ring of Fire. I look forward to continuing to engage, have that dialogue and ensure that we protect not only Ontario but the north, because we know there is enormous potential there. There is a lot of work to be done.

We're making historic investments in the north, whether it comes to building infrastructure like highways, bringing back the Northlander as well. These are generational projects that we will bring back to the people of the north that deserve it and something that our government will support and do.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Jennifer K. French): Question?

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank my colleagues this morning for their comments on this important budget.

In my riding of Simcoe–Grey, I think we have seen the hard work of this government in terms of, as my friend from Peterborough–Kawartha mentioned, the intersection between opportunity and preparation. I have a number of manufacturers. I have Honda in the south end of my riding, Pilkington Glass in Collingwood, and VOA, all of which are very connected with the automotive sector.

We've seen incredible growth in that sector since 2018 with this government, \$46-billion in foreign investment, creation at Honda of 1,000 new jobs. We know that the spinoff from those jobs is somewhere between six and seven jobs, so those are huge economic drivers.

My question is to the member from Peterborough–Kawartha about the Protecting Ontario Account, and I'm wondering if he could explain to the House how this critical funding will help to sustain these industries in the immediate threat.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Jennifer K. French): Response? I recognize the member for Peterborough–Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I recognize you as the member for Oshawa.

To address the question that has come from my colleague from the seat beside me, the Invest Ontario Fund is one of those funds that we have set up specifically to deal with these challenges. We know that right now, the Trump administration is doing everything possible to take jobs from Ontario and bring them down to the United States. We know that this is going to create challenges for us as we move forward.

But Ontario, in the last four years, has added more jobs than all 50 US states combined. The reason that we've done that is because we have a plan to put businesses back to work, opening Ontario up. This fund is designed specifically to protect those industries, to make sure that they know that we have their back, because we want to make sure that the people of Ontario continue having opportunities for those long-term jobs and the long-term prosperity.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Jennifer K. French): Further questions?

MPP Alexa Gilmour: In my riding, there's a wonderful little boy named Rowan who's been waiting since 2022 for autism support. So my question is to the minister today—because there's another family member that I'm meeting with on Friday who's been waiting for about four years. They are relieved to see the additional \$175 million that is being proposed in this budget for the Ontario Autism Program. However, with 60,000 children on the wait-list and the rate of registration that is higher than the rate of entry into the services, we still don't have the funds we need to make sure that children are going to get cared for. With a five-year wait-list, early intervention is now just a pipe dream for these children.

So my question to the minister at this point is, how is this funding going to meet the promise that this government made in 2018 to end the wait-list for children with autism?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: I thank the member for that question. As she mentioned in her question, this government, in this budget, has introduced additional funding to support children in the community as well. This is because our government, under the leadership of not only Premier Ford but the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, has increased investment almost every single year to support the community, and also the challenges that present themselves.

We are going to work tirelessly with the advocates. The minister has been meeting very regularly and engaged in dialogue with parents and others. That is why, in this budget, we have increased the funding, as the member has mentioned as well. We'll continue to work very, very closely, not only with children but also with the community as we continue to work on this.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Jennifer K. French): Further questions?

Mr. Deepak Anand: My question is to the member from God's country. At the time when US tariffs are creating economic uncertainty, and we're talking about protecting the workers, what is this government doing to protect the workers through the Skills Development Fund? That's my question, Madam Speaker. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Jennifer K. French): Response? I recognize the member for Peterborough–Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: Or God's country, as the member for Malton just said.

What we're doing in the budget is expanding the Skills Development Fund. We've added to it; it's over two and a half billion dollars now that we have in the Skills Development Fund, specifically to help retrain people, to upskill people.

But not only that, we recognize that we have to have more training facilities available. So there's additional funding in there to support the uprising, so to speak, of more training facilities to make sure that those individuals who want to upskill, those individuals who want to have a higher paying job, have the opportunity to get the training for it and those individuals who might find themselves in the position where their industry is being affected by the tariffs have the opportunity then to be retrained to get into industries that are less dependent or less challenged by what the tariffs are causing for us.

1010

Ultimately, we want to make sure that we put Ontario in a position where we have the greatest resilience to counter all of the measures that the Americans are putting on us.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Jennifer K. French): Further questions?

Mr. Chris Glover: I would like to ask the members opposite—I heard their comments on the budget this morning, but I'm really going to ask them honestly how they can expect the opposition to support a budget when

this government is squandering \$2.2 billion of taxpayer dollars on a private spa at Ontario Place, \$38 million for a private hotel in Wasaga Beach, and we just found out this morning that they squandered \$40 million on partisan ads in the lead-up to the last election, but at the same time, they're cutting \$1.2 billion from our colleges, \$140 million from our public and Catholic schools in the city of Toronto. Our public colleges, hospitals, universities and schools are all being driven to bankruptcy while this government spends our tax dollars on private vanity projects.

Why doesn't this government spend our tax dollars on the public services that Ontarians depend on?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: Here are the facts: This budget introduced by the Minister of Finance will see over 54 new hospitals being built in this province. Will that member stand up and vote and support those 54-plus new hospital developments that are happening?

This budget will invest over \$70 billion in public transit. I hope that member's residents will benefit from many of those public transit projects, whether it be GO trains or subways. I hope that member stands up and invests and supports his community and the enhancements of quality of life that these transit projects and investments will bring with them.

When it comes to highways, the economy, the north, the Ring of Fire, we are making historic investments within this budget. I hope that member will support the largest investment in health care in this province's history that has been tabled before this Legislature when it comes time to do so on both second reading and third reading of this piece of legislation.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

MEMBER FOR HASTINGS–LENNOX AND ADDINGTON

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Jennifer K. French): I beg to inform the House that, pursuant to standing order 2, the member for Hastings–Lennox and Addington is authorized to indicate his desire to be recognized by the chair to speak by raising his hand. He is authorized to signify during any proceeding relating to voting and divisions by raising his hand, to signify by raising his hand in any proceeding that requires members to stand in their places, and to similarly signify by raising his hand in any relevant proceedings in any committee of the Assembly.

Additionally, upon being recognized to speak, the member is authorized to do so while seated in his assigned place. This arrangement will remain in effect until the member notifies the Speaker that it is no longer required.

Also, welcome back.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

QUINTE HEALTH

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Thank you, all my colleagues. Happy Monday. It was an emotional morning at Belleville

General Hospital this Friday. Just over a year earlier, on May 21, our community tragically lost a respected, vivacious and bright colleague, registered nurse Shannan Hickey, to intimate partner violence. Before Shannan's co-workers from Quinte 6 and her aunt and uncle, Michelle and Joe, I had the privilege of announcing an additional \$140,000 in base funding and \$96,000 for a clinical nurse team leader in 2024-25 for the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Response Program team at Quinte Health's four hospitals. It's part of a \$9 million increase to 14 response centres across Ontario.

While we strive for change that ensures survivors and families no longer experience the horrors of this violence, it is comforting to know that we are supporting strong, talented teams in Quinte and across the province, ready to provide compassionate care when it is needed most.

Thank you very much and thank you to those workers on Quinte 6 and to Shannan's family for keeping her light bright and spreading her message as we all move forward to make sure that we end the scourge of intimate partner violence. Thank you very much.

GOOD NEIGHBOUR AWARDS

Ms. Chandra Pasma: On May 9, I was pleased to host the third annual Ottawa West–Nepean Good Neighbour Awards. Nominated by community members, these awards celebrate the individuals in our community who brighten the lives of their neighbours every day in both big and small ways.

Some of them, including Elvira, Gemma, Elizabeth and Lynda, lend neighbours a helping hand, from delivering baked goods to helping seniors transition between homes.

Kathy is the president of the Queensway Terrace North Community Association; Bob supports his community of Copeland Park; and Glenis and Len are long-time contributors to the Ambleside Two community.

Michael, Cathy, Patric, Rodrigo and Doris are known for their warmth and generosity, as well as Alan, who built a new wheelchair ramp for his community.

Darlene and Gail ran the local Dairy Queen, where they mentored many young employees, helping them develop strong work ethics, confidence and teamwork.

Mark, Curtis and Gilles play a crucial role in maintaining community infrastructure: a garden, a rink and Knox United Church.

Carson, Sue, Yves and Cathy are exceptional community builders.

Andrea works hard for environmental education and sustainability efforts, and Susan advocates for development-related issues.

Abi and Grace have created impactful community initiatives, such as food programs for those experiencing food insecurity and support for seniors.

These compassionate and dedicated individuals remind us of the importance of community. Congratulations to all the winners and thank you, each one of you, for being a good neighbour.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CARE DAY

Mr. Deepak Anand: Speaker, it is our shared responsibility to ensure that every child grows up in a safe, supportive and nurturing environment. When we invest in the well-being of our children, including those in care, we build the foundation for a more just and compassionate society.

May 14 is Children and Youth in Care Day, a time to recognize their courage, celebrate their voices and reaffirm our collective duty to support their well-being and success. Children and youth in care show remarkable strength and resilience. They deserve our admiration and our action.

This year, Peel Children's Aid Society marked the day with a vibrant celebration and ongoing wellness-focused activities through its Trailblazers Youth Centre, a youth-led, empowering space in Mississauga–Malton designed to foster belongingness, build leadership and support youth in shaping their futures. To the youth, staff and partners, and the leaders, Mary Beth and Prasad Nair: Thank you for your vision and leadership.

Peel CAS also proudly co-leads Ontario's first youth wellness hub, led by our CAS, offering integrated mental health support for our youth.

Let's stand together every day to uplift, invest and empower youth in care. Their future is our future. Let's build a stronger, prosperous Ontario together.

JEWISH HERITAGE MONTH

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Good morning, everyone. As we near the end of May, I am proud to rise in this House to recognize and celebrate Jewish Heritage Month, a time to honour the enduring contributions of Jewish Canadians in Toronto–St. Paul's and across Ontario.

Jewish culture is an essential thread in Toronto's rich tapestry. In Toronto–St. Paul's, we are proud to be home to one of Canada's largest reform congregations at Holy Blossom Temple, as well as many synagogues, schools, cultural centres and vibrant Jewish-owned small businesses. These businesses are not only vital to our local economy; they help shape the character of our neighbourhoods. Many have been in our community for generations, each with a story rooted in hard work, resilience and in compassion.

Jewish Heritage Month is a time to celebrate but also reflect and recognize the strength and perseverance of Jewish communities throughout history, especially in the face of rising anti-Semitism. It's a time to stand firmly against hate and recommit to the values of inclusion and mutual respect. This month also invites us to learn—to deepen our understanding of Jewish history, faith and culture, and to recognize the profound impact Jewish Ontarians have had in every aspect of our society.

I've been honoured to attend local events that uplift Jewish voices, celebrate cultural pride and foster meaningful connections. Jewish Heritage Month reminds us that Ontario's diversity is its greatest strength. To the Jewish

community in Toronto–St. Paul’s and across the province—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I apologize. Members’ statements time is allotted to 1:30.

1020

AIRPORT NOISE MANAGEMENT

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: Pearson international is our country’s largest airport, with almost 50 million yearly passengers, and growing. For communities who live close to Pearson, airplane noise has an effect on their quality of life. Although airports and airplane travel are a federally regulated matter, many residents continue to reach out to all levels of government, hoping for some relief from loud planes running at all hours of the day and night.

I’ve shared the concerns of my residents with officials from Nav Canada and the Greater Toronto Airports Authority, and I’ve reached out to officials in other countries to learn their best practices in dealing with airplane noise. I learned that there are countries around the world that have strong airplane noise mitigation programs that provide full grants for home sound insulation retrofits and more.

That’s why I tabled motion 9. It calls on the federal government to protect near-airport communities by establishing a strong airport noise mitigation program to provide our communities the same level of protection that many others receive around the world. If they can do it, so can we. I hope my colleagues here at Queen’s Park will join me in asking the federal government to make it happen, because our communities deserve better.

MEMBER FOR HASTINGS–LENOX AND ADDINGTON

Mr. Ric Bresee: Good morning. I am so very glad to be here in the House this morning. As the members of this House will recognize, I missed some time in the assembly recently. Over the Easter weekend, I had the unfortunate incident of breaking my left knee—to be technical, a tibial plateau fracture. I’ve been very fortunate; the orthopedic specialist is telling me that I’m healing very well and I should be able to return to weight-bearing on it within a couple of weeks. As my father would have said, it’s a long way from the heart.

But it has been impactful, and I would not have made it through this so quickly and so comfortably if it wasn’t for the people around me. So I need to thank the people: the health care teams at the Lennox and Addington county emergency department, the specialists at Kingston General Hospital and, specifically, the amazing team here at the Legislature who have bent over backwards to make sure that I’m able to be in this seat today.

I need to thank my colleagues here in the chamber. So many of you have reached out, expressed your concern and encouragement to get better and get back to work. I have to thank my incredible constituency team who have worked way beyond the call of duty to ensure that I can

still meet with my constituencies and my stakeholders either in person or virtually.

But most especially, Speaker, and I’m going to beg your indulgence a little bit, I have to thank the most important person who has been through absolute terror through this, and that is my absolutely amazing wife, who has supported me, driven me everywhere, even helped me dress. She’s been absolutely amazing. I love you. Thank you, Heidi Galloway Bourgoin.

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: A classroom of grade 8 students from Pikangikum First Nation emailed me to share how they’re feeling about Bill 5. They have some issues with it and are asking the Premier and the House to reconsider because their actions are not in good faith with First Nations.

One student said: “I think that it is not a great thing to do for First Nations communities and land. I also think that it’s wrong how Doug Ford thinks he can do whatever he wants with”—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I have to interrupt the member. We do not refer to members by their first name.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Withdraw.

“I ... think it’s wrong how” the Premier “thinks he can do whatever he wants with Ontario land and is trying to change the law to have an excuse to do whatever in First Nations territory. I think he doesn’t have the right to touch these lands without proper permission.”

Another student said: “It made me feel a bit concerned and I got chills because of how it talked about nature and how the government will be putting it in danger.”

Lastly, a student said Bill 5 sucks and, “The one thing I want you to say in the House is, don’t think about the present generation. Think about the future generations.”

Meegwetch.

VETERANS

Mr. Steve Clark: On Saturday, I was honoured to attend Charter Night at the Royal Canadian Legion, Fort Wellington Branch 97 in Prescott. It was a privilege to join MP Michael Barrett and Prescott Mayor Gauri Shankar in presenting five lifetime membership awards. Recognized for their years of dedicated service were Terri-Lynn Beach, Veronica Burchell, John Martineau and Linda Wing, and we presented one posthumously to Bev Kirkland that was accepted by her husband, Eric Place. It was an emotional moment for everyone to honour Bev’s legacy of service.

Speaker, the commitment to service above self is what motivates volunteers in the 14 Legion branches in my riding of Leeds–Grenville–Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes. They provide invaluable services to our veterans, foster the spirit of remembrance in our youth and host celebrations that bring communities together.

For years I've championed provincial recognition for our veterans whose service we can never fully repay, so I'm proud that our government has launched the Ontario Veterans Award for Community Service Excellence to recognize the contributions our veterans make to make a stronger Ontario. We're the first province to establish an award specifically dedicated to honouring veterans for their community service. I've written to all the Legions in my riding to advise them of the award and its August 31 nomination deadline, and I look forward to presenting these awards in ceremonies to recognize the recipients.

RIDING OF MISSISSAUGA—ERIN MILLS

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Speaker, I had the honour last week of visiting the University of Toronto Mississauga alongside the Minister of Colleges and Universities for the one-year anniversary celebration of SpinUp. SpinUp is an innovative partnership, allowing startups and entrepreneurs access to the scientific resources they will need to get started with their life science innovations. I am thankful to SpinUp, UTM and AbbVie for making this project so successful.

As I have often said, Mississauga is becoming a world-leading hub of life science, the Silicon Valley of pharmaceuticals in Canada. Our government is supporting innovation, fostering the conditions for prosperity in this sector. This project is a boost for life science innovation in Mississauga, and we are happy to see more attention and investment from the industry leaders.

Last week, I also visited a number of schools as part of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association's Take Your MPP to School Week. I met principals, trustees, teachers and students at Garthwood Park Public School, Erin Mills Middle School and Erindale Secondary School. It is always lovely to see our schools in action, meet students and see the future generation flourish.

Last week, the long weekend, was the seventh annual Discover Egypt Festival in Mississauga. It was an incredible experience, with over 100,000 attendees in Celebration Square. Thank you to the Canadian Egyptian Heritage Association—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): It is now time for introduction of visitors.

HOUSE SITTINGS

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Actually, before we get to that, I beg to inform the House that, pursuant to standing order 9(g), the Clerk has received written notice from the government House leader indicating that a temporary change in the weekly meeting schedule of the House is required. Therefore, the afternoon routine on Wednesday, May 28, 2025, shall commence at 1 p.m.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): We have in the House, in the Speaker's Gallery today, His Excellency

Abdulrahman Alneyadi, the ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to Canada. Please join me in warmly welcoming our guest to the Legislature. Welcome.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm very pleased to welcome Alia Mufti, who is my new legislative assistant starting today with team Ottawa West—Nepean, along with Megan Ryan-Lloyd, my OLIP intern for the past few months, who has been doing amazing work on behalf of the constituents of Ottawa West—Nepean already. Thank you both very much for being here.

1030

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I'd like to welcome from my beautiful riding of Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry Adrian Bugelli, who's my new chief of staff out of my constituency office. Welcome, Adrian.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I want to give a warm welcome to my EA Brianna Robinson and my past EA Rachel Haddad, who are in the gallery today.

MPP Robin Lennox: I'd like to welcome from my riding of Hamilton Centre Ashley Fry-O'Rourke, a registered nurse with the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario and her partner, Anthony, who is a family physician in training looking to start his practice in Ontario very soon.

MPP Lisa Gretzky: My guests in the gallery today will be CUPE Ontario Local 2073, with Andrea Zackary, president Fred Hahn, Mara Waern, Marriott Otchere, Kelly Belbin, Jesse Mintz, Kelly Gawman, DJ Kohli, Sonya Yalda, Christina Gilligan and about 70 other workers that I know I do not have time to name specifically. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I'd like to welcome friends, community volunteers and community leaders from my riding of Guelph who are here today: Kris Sturgeon, Irene Szabo, Adam Heap and Abdullah Al-Jabji. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Hon. Kevin Holland: I'd like to welcome to Queen's Park His Worship Mayor Ken Boshcoff from the city of Thunder Bay.

Hon. Graydon Smith: I'm pleased to introduce a former colleague from my town of Bracebridge days, a councillor with me, Liam Cragg. Liam, welcome to your House.

Mr. Chris Glover: It's my great pleasure to celebrate that Vishantak Rai from the riding of Spadina—Fort York is our page captain today. His parents Sonia and Anjani Rai and his brother Vishvanabh Rai are in the House today as well. I'm looking forward to meeting you for lunch today. Welcome to the House, everybody.

MPP George Darouze: I'd like to welcome from my Carleton riding page Emilie's mother, Rochelle Trainor, attending today to see her in the Speaker's procession as a page captain. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: It's Durham advocacy day here at Queen's Park. From the region of Durham, I'd like to welcome regional chair John Henry and Oshawa mayor Dan Carter. We also have Bob Chapman, Oshawa councillor. We have mayor Kevin Ashe, the mayor of Pickering. We also have: Dave Barton, mayor of

Uxbridge; Marilyn Crawford, Ajax councillor; Willie Woo, Clarington councillor; and also, from the city of Mississauga, senior legal counsel Joseph Fudge. Welcome.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: I'd like to introduce some folks from my riding: Brian and Beth Smith, and Larry and Joan Morley from Lucan. They managed my sign campaign for both elections. I'd like to thank them for their help and welcome them to Queen's Park.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I'd like us to welcome into the House and back to the House Cait Alexander, a profound gender-based-violence advocate and founder of End Violence Everywhere.

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: I am honoured to introduce members from the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario and Ontario Building and Construction Tradeswomen organizations. The Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario serves as a voice for 150,000 construction workers across the province. Ontario Building and Construction Tradeswomen is a committee within the PBCTCO focusing on increasing the recruitment and retention of women and under-represented gender identities in the skilled trades. We thank them for being with us here today.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Unfortunately, we are out of time for introduction of visitors. I apologize to those who are in the gallery. They all wanted to introduce you, but I'm a really tough person when it comes to our five-minute limit, so I apologize. On their behalf, welcome, everyone.

TRAGEDY IN ETOBICOKE

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Beaches–East York on a point of order.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like to seek unanimous consent for a moment of silence for the three beautiful children who tragically lost their lives last week in Etobicoke. My heart goes out to the family, the friends and the whole Canadian Martyrs Catholic School community.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Beaches–East York is seeking unanimous consent for a moment of silence. Agreed? Agreed.

The House observed a moment's silence.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): You may sit down.

SIGN-LANGUAGE INTERPRETATION

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the opposition House leader on a point of order.

Mr. John Vanthof: I seek unanimous consent to move a motion without notice regarding ASL services during question period.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The opposition House leader is seeking unanimous consent to move a motion without notice regarding ASL services during question period. Agreed? Agreed.

I recognize the opposition House leader.

Mr. John Vanthof: I move that two sign-language interpreters may be present on the floor of the chamber today to interpret question period, and that broadcasting and recording services be permitted to incorporate the interpreters into the camera shot where possible.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The opposition House leader has moved that two sign-language interpreters may be present on the floor of the chamber today to interpret question period, and that broadcasting and recording services be permitted to incorporate the interpreter into the camera shot where possible. Agreed? Agreed.

Motion agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): It's now time for questions. I recognize His Majesty's loyal opposition—one moment, please. Would the interpreters like to come on the floor?

Turn the clock off. Please stop the clock.

Welcome.

I recognize the leader of His Majesty's loyal opposition.

QUESTION PERIOD

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

Ms. Marit Stiles: Good morning, Speaker. This question is for the Premier. Last week, at our request, the Cabinet Office was ordered to turn over more records related to the greenbelt scandal from former staff in the Premier's office. Those 17 records, heavily redacted, didn't come from official government accounts; they came from the staffers' personal accounts, where they were communicating with developers looking to have their land removed from the greenbelt. One of the developers emailed the Premier's top staff to thank them for helping solve "his greenbelt glitch."

Was the Premier aware that his top staff were communicating with developers about directly removing land from the greenbelt and hiding it in their personal accounts?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Hon. Rob Flack: As I've said before, I share the Premier's expectations that we expect everyone to fully co-operate, and that's exactly what's taking place.

Our government made it clear: The people of Ontario have a fully restored and protected greenbelt. The decision was made, it's final, and, yes, Speaker, our position remains that way and all accommodation, all co-operation, will take place.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the Leader of the Opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: All right, I'm going to try again. Back to the Premier: Not only did that developer thank the Premier's staff for helping him out, he actually sent over maps of the very areas that he wanted removed from the

greenbelt. And you know what? It worked. It worked because those lands were removed from the greenbelt as he requested.

1040

So we've got the Premier's top staff taking directions directly from a developer who is set to make windfall profits from a change in government policy and then using their personal email to keep this from scrutiny. Did the Premier instruct his top staff to meet with this developer, Sergio Manchia, to discuss the greenbelt land removals? Yes or no?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Hon. Rob Flack: As we have said consistently, we have zero tolerance—I repeat, zero tolerance—for any wrongdoing and expect anyone involved in the decision-making about the greenbelt to have followed the law to the letter. That remains the same. We continue to follow that consistently. Again, I share with the Premier and expect everyone to fully co-operate with the investigation going forward. That being said, Speaker, on this side of the House, we are focused on the economy, protecting Ontario. That is what this government will do and continue to do in the months and years ahead.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Once again: nothing to see here. Well, do you know what? We are not going to stop until we get to the truth. We know the Toronto Star did some investigation of this. They've reported that at least a dozen current and former staffers in the Premier's office have already been interviewed by the RCMP. But while this criminal investigation is still under way into that whole scheme, the government is continuing to give themselves extraordinary new powers under Bill 5. That's why this matters. And they're setting up the potential for new schemes that, frankly, are going to make the greenbelt look like small potatoes.

At a time when billions of new public dollars are about to go out the door, will the Premier finally course-correct and take some accountability, or is he going to keep handing over unchecked powers to his ministers to cook up new deals?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Hon. Rob Flack: Well again, Speaker, let us be very clear. We are protecting our economy, protecting our jobs, protecting our families, protecting our communities. The region of Durham is here. We are going to support that community, like every other one in the province. We've been clear about the greenbelt from the very beginning. It's being protected; it's enshrined; the decision was made; the decision is final. Let's get on with building Ontario. That's what we're here to do.

GOVERNMENT ADVERTISING

Ms. Marit Stiles: Well, Speaker, the greenbelt scandal was certainly an egregious abuse of power, and Ontarians deserve the truth. But this government has never seemed to worry about respecting the people that they serve. How

else could you explain the audacity of spending \$40 million of public money on a massive advertising blitz designed to promote their party, the party in power, just before the provincial election?

To the Premier, how can he justify this clear abuse of the taxpayers?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Treasury Board president.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: Obviously, I understand why the Leader of the Opposition is upset about us telling the story of the great work that we're doing on behalf of Ontarians under the leadership of Premier Ford. It is more critical than ever for us to tell the story about what we are doing to build Ontario up. Thanks to the leadership of this Premier and this government, we've attracted over \$47 billion of new investment to this province for EV manufacturing; we are building \$50 billion worth of hospitals and renovating them; we are building \$70 billion worth of new transit—measures that the Leader of the Opposition and her party and members opposite consistently vote against. It is important to let taxpayers know how we are spending their dollars, and we will continue to be transparent with Ontarians and let them know what their government is doing on their behalf.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the Leader of the Opposition for the supplementary.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, it's laughable, right? The PC Party's own campaign director talked about this like it was a firehose that they just turned on before the election. In fact, he said that the party's advantage in the polls wouldn't be possible, and I want to quote him here, without "telling its own story in a positive way using government advertising." He admitted it. Could this be any more clear? PC insiders are taking a victory lap after wasting \$40 million of taxpayers' money to buy an election at the time when we have the highest unemployment rates in the country.

My question to the Premier is, will he finally admit that his government used taxpayer dollars for pre-election, partisan puff pieces?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I can't believe my ears. What's the opposition got against non-partisan ads promoting Ontario?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The opposition will come to order.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: We have that side over there—minus that side there—not promoting Ontario. I'm not ashamed of Ontario; in fact, I'm proud of Ontario. When we took over the economy, it was \$850 billion. In this budget that I just tabled a few weeks ago, we're up to \$1.2 trillion. That's what the economic engine of Ontario is, and I'll never apologize to anybody for promoting the \$1.2-trillion economy in Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the Leader of the Opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, I want you to imagine for a moment that you're sitting in an emergency room in Ontario for 12 hours, and up there on the screen in the emergency room you're forced to watch the Hollywood-style ads telling you how darn good you have it. You can't get the care that you need in that emergency room, but you can sure hear the government ad that tells you that everything is fine. It's all happening here.

The Liberals watered down the rules—we remember that—to make it easier to use these tax dollars for partisan ads. And guess what? The Conservatives have taken full advantage of it. They spent \$40 million—\$40 million—on ads that didn't offer a service, didn't give you a number to call to find out something, information. No, no—\$40 million to buy a campaign.

Will the Premier do the right thing and have the PC Party refund the taxpayers of Ontario—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I'll ask the opposition leader to withdraw.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Withdraw.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Now, Madam Speaker—

Ms. Marit Stiles: Send the money back. Send the money back. \$40 million—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The opposition leader will come to order.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Now, let's for a second think about this: Imagine an Ontario where one million jobs were created since we took power in 2018. Imagine an Ontario where our economy has grown to \$1.2 trillion. Imagine an Ontario where our economy has created wealth for everybody in Ontario: families, workers, the great businesses in Ontario. That's the Ontario that we imagine. That's the Ontario of today.

Madam Speaker, it is my hope that the opposition and all those over there will vote for the budget to move Ontario forward.

GOVERNMENT SPENDING

Mr. John Fraser: Imagine an Ontario that's half a trillion dollars in debt. I don't actually have to imagine, because we're there. And while the Premier has been busy setting that record, he's been even busier on another record, and that's the amount of money his government has spent since 2018 on self-serving, taxpayer-funded, partisan ads. That's hundreds of millions of dollars. I thank the Leader of the Opposition for her help.

Speaker, through you: Will the government pay back the money they've wasted on taxpayer-funded, partisan ads?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Minister of Finance.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Through you, Madam Speaker, thank you for the question from the independent party, the Liberal Party, the party opposite.

Let's think about this in context: We inherited deficits—year after year after year of deficits—from the Liberal Party, supported by the NDP. What have we done since then? We've actually lowered the debt-to-GDP because our debt is much smaller relative to our economy. What a concept.

Our economy is growing. That's the way you dig yourself out of a hole that we inherited from those parties over there. As I mentioned, interest costs are the lowest since the 1980s, spending fewer dollars on interest so that we can fund world-class health care, world-class education, world-class social services. That's what a responsible Conservative government does.

1050

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the leader of the third party for the supplementary.

Mr. John Fraser: Never has the government spent so much, borrowed so much, incurred so much debt to do so little in the history of Ontario.

The Premier's "It's All Happening Here" ads cost \$40 million. Well, for the government, for the Premier, here's what's happening here: It's the highest unemployment rate in a decade—in a decade. We have the highest youth unemployment rate in Canada. And 2.5 million Ontarians don't have a family doctor.

So, given all these things and more—because I only have a minute—do you think that the right thing to do is for the Premier and his party to refund this money that they've spent on this self-serving ad?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I don't think math is perhaps their strong suit because I just highlighted that what the credit rating agencies look at, as everybody knows, is debt-to-GDP. In fact, the party opposite, they increased taxes and they got their credit ratings downgraded. We reduced taxes and fees, grew the economy, and got credit rating upgrades—what a concept.

But you know what else we inherited from that party over there is an infrastructure deficit. The majority of the debt that this party has incurred is to build the infrastructure that they didn't build because our population is growing and because the people of Ontario, the families of Ontario deserve world-class health care, world-class education and an economy that works for everybody.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the leader of the third party.

Mr. John Fraser: Well, the finance minister and I agree on one thing: They deserve the best schools in the world and they deserve the best health care in the world, and they're not getting it. That's the point.

So does the Premier think we were all born yesterday? You know, here's what Kory Teneycke, the Premier's campaign manager, had to say: "The fire hose is what governments can do.... I don't think you'd see the Ontario PC Party where it is in the polls if it wasn't out telling its own story in a positive way using government advertising." But the Ontario taxpayer is not the personal piggy bank for the Premier's party.

So once again, back to the minister: Will the PC Party, the Premier's party, pay back the money they've spent on this self-serving taxpayer-funded ad?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I think one thing that differentiates is very clear. On this side of the House and there, we are very proud of Ontario, and on that side, from the member opposite, he's not very proud of Ontario.

Ontario is leading the way, whether it's attaching individuals to family care, to a family doctor. We've got Dr. Jane Philpott, under the great leadership of the Minister of Health—a plan and a vision to make sure every person in this province has a family doctor.

And under the leadership of the Minister of Education, we're making sure we hold every school board accountable to make sure the billions that we've invested in students and teachers—make sure that that money gets funded directly to the people who matter in this province.

This side of the House will never tire of promoting Ontario. Why don't you join us?

GOVERNMENT SPENDING

Mr. John Fraser: On what planet does a minister of the government stand up and crow eloquent about 2.5 million Ontarians not having a family doctor? It is totally unbelievable.

So \$40 million for a single ad campaign is more than most Ontario governments have spent in a single year. All this, while our schools are crumbling and our kids aren't getting what they need in schools.

Does the Premier not think that all this wasted taxpayer money could have been better spent supporting our children?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The Minister of Finance.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I apologize to the minister. Will the House please come to order?

Minister.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: As my budget really outlined, we're protecting Ontario, we're battling the tariffs, we're meeting the moment, and we have a vision for the future.

But let me quickly address, Madam Speaker, what the member opposite just said about health care. Do you know under their watch they cut 1,600 nurses? They didn't build any hospitals—very few hospitals. As the Minister of Health just mentioned, they cut medical seats. If you're not thinking about building for the future, how can you take care of the people today?

That's why this government is putting a record amount of investments into our economy to grow our economy, support our workers, boost the prosperity for everybody so that we can afford world-class health care and education in this province.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the leader of the third party.

Mr. John Fraser: Speaker, this ad could have bought 495 teachers, 820 educational assistants to help students

with special needs. It could have gone towards badly needed repairs for our crumbling schools. Does the Premier really think that all this wasted money could not have been better spent on our children?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, I'm going to walk over a copy of the budget to the member opposite because obviously he hasn't read it. We've got 2,600 new teaching positions funded in this budget that support our teachers and our students. We've got \$30 billion of immediate tariff supports to support businesses and workers in this province. And, Madam Speaker, we put in \$750 million to increase the number of science, technology, engineering and math students at universities through this minister of education, colleges, universities and a few other things.

This budget is meeting the moment, and I call upon the member opposite to show some leadership and vote for this budget to support Ontarian workers, families and businesses.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the leader of the third party.

Mr. John Fraser: It looks like the minister is tripping back to that alternate universe.

Speaker, it's clear that the government is spending \$1,500 less per student in our public school system since 2018 and that our college system, our once proud college system, is on its knees.

At Algonquin College, they cut 37 courses over the last year, and they're not finished. They're not finished. These are our kids. Our kids depend on the college system—37 courses. I don't know how the minister can crow about education when that's happening here in Ontario, and it's not just happening at Algonquin College.

So I just think—and I hope everybody around here does, including people on the other side—that we would have been better off spending that money on our children, our colleges and our schools than we would on ads that promote the Premier because he wants to win a damn election.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I'm going to ask the member to withdraw the last word.

Mr. John Fraser: I withdraw.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: A lot of withdrawing going on on that side of the House, Madam Speaker.

Again, I refer—maybe we need to help the member opposite. I'm willing to give you a briefing on the budget. The budget increased the core funding for education by 3.3%—greater than inflation. The budget increased the funding per pupil by 2.6%—greater than inflation again.

It's under the leadership of this Minister of Education, who's going to make sure the billions of extra dollars that are going into our world-class education system get to the students and get to the teachers so that they continue to have the best education in the world right here in Ontario.

Madam Speaker, we have a plan to protect Ontario. We're investing to protect workers, to protect families and to protect businesses. Again, I call on the opposition to

vote for this budget and support families, to support the workers and to support moving Ontario forward.

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Speaker, First Nations are not stakeholders and our treaties are not red tape. In public hearings on Thursday, First Nations leadership and rights holders made their position very clear: Bill 5 is an assault on First Nations, our treaties and the future of our children.

Speaker, at the end of question period today, we will be seeking unanimous consent of the House to direct the committee to travel hearings of Bill 5 to Thunder Bay.

1100

Better yet, will the Premier listen to these voices and withdraw Bill 5?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation.

Hon. Greg Rickford: The member is in fact correct: First Nations are partners, not stakeholders. But I can assure the member opposite that there is nothing in Bill 5 that takes away from the treaty rights in Treaty 9 and Treaty 5 in the NAN territory. In fact, this is an extraordinary opportunity for this government and for those communities to converge on long overdue pieces of critical infrastructure that will fundamentally change the lives and the hope for prosperity in those communities and in that region.

After all, these are communities with diesel-generation power. These are communities without road access and shrinking winter roads. These are communities where young people have very few options, if any, for meaningful employment in their community, and that's why they're leaving in serious numbers. We hope to work with First Nations communities across northern Ontario and throughout the province to make sure that economic prosperity means—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Question?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Speaker, there's no way this government can perambulate their way out of this Bill 5.

In 2008, the chief and council of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug were unjustly imprisoned for defending their land from unwanted mining. In the end, Ontario paid a heavy price for approving that exploration. Developments fast-tracked without consent under Bill 5 will be opposed in court and, most importantly, on the lands.

Is the Premier prepared for what will happen if he goes forward with Bill 5?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister of Energy.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: We appreciate the feedback that has been received from First Nation leaders, and we look forward to working with them to improve the bill over the coming days. But I want members opposite not to lose sight of what we are trying to achieve with this bill. We have an opportunity to achieve economic self-reliance, and if we want to achieve that, if you want that to be more

than a talking point, we need an action plan to accelerate responsible resource development.

We are the 10th out of 10 jurisdictions in the country on mining investment. We are the second-slowest in the OECD. At what point do we say now is our moment as Canadians to step up with a responsible policy that respects rights, that respects the environment, that improves the compliance and even toughens the penalties but sends a signal? We will, as Canadians, chart our course as economically sovereign by using our resources for good, not allowing the Chinese or authoritarian regimes abroad to win the day. We need to stand up for Canada. This is how we do it.

ONTARIO SCIENCE CENTRE

Mr. Adil Shamji: For the Premier: Just last week, freedom of information documents revealed that Infrastructure Ontario officials colluding with the Premier's office pressured an engineering firm to massage their report about the science centre, forcing them to produce three versions of it before it finally said what they wanted it to: that the science centre roof might be unsafe under hypothetical circumstances. The firm was pressured so hard that the CEO of Infrastructure Ontario actually joked that its executives looked like "survivors of the apocalypse." The engineers didn't even feel comfortable enough with the report—they didn't even stamp it and assume professional liability for it.

To the Premier: Instead of listening to the engineers, why did he reverse-engineer the report, and was the engineering report always just for show?

Hon. Doug Ford: I love hearing the opposition complain about the science centre, Ontario Place, that sat derelict for 15 years. Only here—only here will the special-interest, left-wing crazies complain about a \$600-million investment. I can go anywhere in the world—anywhere—anywhere in the world, Madam Speaker, and say, "We're closing down an old, antiquated Ontario Science Centre. We're going to spend \$600 million, put it in a spot that people actually attend and go to, and make it a destination, second-to-none, anywhere in the world. We're going to have more exhibit space, it's going to be modern, it's going to be up-to-date and the place is going to be packed, and we won't have to subsidize it, which we've been doing every single year by tens of millions of dollars." Only their radical thinking—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back the member for Don Valley East.

Mr. Adil Shamji: Madam Speaker, the Premier spoke about dereliction, and I'd be more than happy to expand on his dereliction of duty in the province of Ontario: unprecedented traffic and congestion; record homelessness and encampments; home building that has fallen so far behind that even the budget's projections for home starts this year have already been proven wrong by the CMHC.

This Premier has failed our province so badly that everything he touches falls apart—except for the science

centre, which is the only thing he promised us would fall apart.

To the Premier, Madam Speaker: The Premier has proven under his watch Ford Nation really only means stagnation. Will he shed that reputation in Don Valley East and reopen the science centre?

Hon. Doug Ford: Let's talk about what they did for 15 years: They destroyed the province, bankrupted the province, chased 600,000 jobs out of our province, didn't build hospitals, didn't build a road, didn't build a subway, didn't build bridges, didn't build highways.

Let's look what we did, Madam Speaker. We're building highways and roads. We're building the 413, Bradford Bypass, Highway 3, Highway 11/17, expanding 401 west and east, QEW, 400-series. We're spending \$222 billion: building 50 new additions to hospitals; \$60 billion of infrastructure into hospitals.

They talk about long-term care. They created 600 homes in 15 years. We're targeting 30,000 new homes for long-term care. As they were closing 600 schools, we're building \$16 billion of schools. That's what we're doing. And by the way, Madam Speaker, we did it without ever raising a tax, ever. We saw—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Question? I recognize the member for Carleton.

ONTARIO BUDGET

MPP George Darouze: My question is for the Minister of Finance. The United States is becoming less stable and more hostile. Their leaders are talking about tariffs, trade wars and closing their borders to Canadian goods. That's a real threat to Ontario's jobs and future. But our government is not waiting and watching. We're building a strong Ontario that can stand on its own.

The 2025 budget is our plan to protect our economy and protect our people. It supports mining to the Ring of Fire, new energy projects and job-creating infrastructure. It helps us grow here at home—so we're less tied up to what's happening down there.

Speaker, can the minister please share how our budget protects Ontario from the risks we face abroad?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you to the member for that question.

You know, Madam Speaker, in the face of tariffs, our government is responding to that challenge, and as we just talked about, promoting Ontario, advertising that Ontario is a robust economy in the face of that tariff challenge. That's what we do, and that's why we've introduced \$30 billion of immediate tariff support to support our workers, our families, our communities, our businesses. That's why we introduced another billion dollars for the Skills Development Fund to support our workers so they have the skills and the training necessary for the jobs. That's why we announced \$11 billion in immediate relief: \$9 billion for tax referrals, \$2 billion for WSIB, \$200 billion for infrastructure, as the Premier just said.

Madam Speaker, I think this is a real opportunity to go across party lines in unity. Vote for the budget.

1110

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Question?

MPP George Darouze: I want to thank the minister for his response and leadership.

The threat from the US is growing. Their economy is shifting. Their politics are becoming more economically unstable. That means Ontario must be ready, because if we don't act, we could fall behind.

But our government has a plan. The 2025 budget makes smart, serious investments to keep Ontario strong. It supports the workers and industry that will carry us through tough times. It helps us build the roads, mines and energy systems we need to grow, right here in Ontario. It's a budget that says we won't back down. We'll protect our economy, and we'll protect our future.

Speaker, can the minister tell us more about how our budget will keep Ontario strong in a time of global risk?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you again—Madam Speaker, through you to the member—for that question. I think it's very clear to all Ontarians, to all Canadians that the status quo is no longer an option, and we have the means and we have the plan here in Ontario to move ourselves forward.

In fact, we're joined by some of the Durham mayors here. I see Mayor Carter right there. I see Regional Chair Henry there. And I'm sure, if I could see him, the mayor of Uxbridge, Dave Barton—there he is—and the mayor of Pickering, Kevin Ashe.

Because when we build together, municipally, provincially, federally, we can get more done, like in the Ring of Fire, like interprovincial trade under the leadership of Premier Doug Ford—to make our economy the most competitive in the G7. We have the means. We have the talent. We have the ambition. We have the plan. Protect Ontario.

LANDFILL

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Speaker, my question to the Premier: Last year, there was a by-election in Lambton—Kent—Middlesex. A key issue was the proposed reopening of the Dresden landfill. For the by-election, the Premier put in place a requirement for a full environmental assessment for that reopening. The election is over. His Trump-style Bill 5 overturns that environmental assessment requirement. Why isn't it important to him to protect the people of that community and the environment?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Response? I recognize the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: The member opposite will no doubt recall history. It's because of a failed Liberal government, propped up by the NDP, that we were put in the position that we are today, where we are exporting 40% of our waste to Michigan and New York.

And so we took action. On the very day before this government received its third majority mandate, Michigan, through its governor, announced that over 1,000% fee increases would be put in place when it comes to

receiving waste from Canada. That, in addition to the Trump tariff and trade war, has put us in a position where we must be self-reliant. That's what Bill 5 is about. It's about protecting Ontario by unleashing our economy act. It's about being self-reliant when it comes to waste management and all matters economic.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: That was an extraordinary response.

Interjections.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: That was not a compliment, my friends. That was not a compliment.

Again, to the Premier: In 2021, the Auditor General reported Ontario was facing a landfill crunch. This is not news. And the government did nothing about it from 2021—ignored the Auditor General's recommendations. The Premier knew about the landfill shortfall long before the by-election.

Media reports that the Dresden landfill proponents have been very generous to his party. From the greenbelt to the Dresden dump, why is it that when the Premier has to choose between the public good and the interests of generous party donors, the public loses every time?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Well, I am very pleased to confirm to this House that this government stands for balance based upon the third consecutive mandate we've received from the people of Ontario. That balance includes, specifically with respect to the expansion of the Dresden landfill site, strong environmental oversight. And of course, like every project, particularly landfill expansions, this Dresden project will face strict environmental scrutiny under the environmental compliance approval process. That will be part and parcel of moving forward in a balanced way, building the Ontario of tomorrow, protecting Ontario while ensuring strong environmental oversight.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Electrified passenger rail systems are the gold standard around the world for regional transit, but Ontario is falling behind. Now we're hearing that ONxpress, the company awarded contracts for GO electrification, is no longer working for Metrolinx. My constituents are already concerned that there's no express train from Durham region. They're wondering when they can experience service improvements instead of delays, delays and delays.

Electrifying GO service will mean more trains faster, reducing pollution and taking cars off the road. Can the Minister of Transportation provide this House with a deadline of when Lakeshore East line will be electrified and express GO train service from Durham region to Union Station will be restored?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: We've made great progress on the Lakeshore East line. Just in the past year, we increased service by over 33 trains. In fact, that investment was due to our investments in public transit, \$70 billion that we are putting forward on behalf of this province to invest and get a better public transit.

I'll ask that member—before you today, you have a bill, the budget act, that will enhance and continue to enable the delivery of more GO train service, of more investments on electrification. I urge that member, and I urge members of the opposition, to support the \$70-billion investment into public transit, into electrification, into improving service and to support this government's budget so we can continue to get it done.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member for Ajax.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Look, if we were able to take the budget and take out different clauses and different things, there might very well be things that I'd be happy to support. I appreciate the 407 east, for example, in Durham.

In 2018 and earlier, Speaker, a previous Liberal government started the process to electrify the GO train service, and they even committed to expanding service to Bowmanville, something that we're only seeing this government formally commit to in this year's budget.

But today, we continue to see the goalposts move further and further away. This work isn't new; 2025 has now turned into 2032. It's getting harder for my constituents to get to work, school and appointments reliably and conveniently. They're concerned that they cannot take an express train to Union Station and back to Ajax.

Can the Minister promise to this House today that, at a minimum—when can we expect GO train service from Durham to downtown, coming back, the express GO train?

Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria: We have 100 trains each weekday on the Lakeshore East line. We are delivering for the people of Durham. We are building the Bowmanville extension, Madam Speaker. And in fact, we've done even more for the residents of Durham.

Just two weeks ago, we announced that we were removing the tolls off the 407 east portion. That represents the last Liberal toll in this province's history. Under this government, under Premier Ford, there will be no tolls on any publicly owned highways. That's because we put more money into the pockets of hard-working Ontarians. The 412, 418, the 407 east—all tolls imposed by the Liberals that impacted the residents of Durham: We've removed them. We've put that money back into their pocket.

We're investing \$70 billion in supporting public transit in Durham region by adding and using over a hundred trains a week, and we'll continue to get it done. I hope that member and the Liberals vote to support this budget.

HOUSING

MPP Chris Scott: Today I rise to ask a question to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. We recently introduced some new legislation to get homes and infrastructure built faster and built smarter. This new legislation cuts down on pointless delays and removes overlap in the planning system. It means fewer roadblocks and more results.

This is because Ontario is growing fast, because people need homes and because families need more roads,

schools and hospitals. Today, many good projects are stuck in delays. There's just too much red tape. There are too many rules that sound great but just don't make sense in practice.

Can the minister please explain to this House how this bill is going to help protect Ontario's future by making it easier to build the homes, services and infrastructure that people need?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Thornhill.

Ms. Laura Smith: Thank you to the member for Sault Ste. Marie for his question and for the awesome work that he does for his community.

1120

Speaker, our government is protecting Ontario by making sure the homes, infrastructure and essential services we rely on can be built fast, not bogged down by unnecessary obstacles. With our newly proposed legislation, we're taking action to ensure Ontario can reach its full potential.

This legislation brings long-overdue clarity and efficiency to a planning system that has, for far too long, rewarded paperwork over progress. We're eliminating redundant requirements like overlapping studies, and setting clear, consistent timelines so housing applications don't languish for months or even years. We're aligning local rules with the Ontario building code, cutting down on the contradictory red tape that slows down projects. By making these practical, common-sense changes, we're creating an environment where shovels hit the ground faster, and you and your new neighbour can move in sooner.

MPP Chris Scott: I want to thank the parliamentary assistant for that great, great answer.

Building on that, we all know that under the previous Liberal government, the dream of owning a home slipped away for too many people—young couples, seniors, newcomers. Everybody wants a safe, affordable place to call home, but delays and high costs have held these projects back. That's why our government is acting now.

Our new bill will help builders manage costs and keep projects on track. It means more homes get built and fewer get cancelled. It means more affordable housing, more long-term care and support for people who need it most.

Speaker, can the parliamentary assistant please tell us how these changes will make it easier for people to find a home and help more families put down roots here in Ontario?

Ms. Laura Smith: We are protecting the dream of home ownership here in Ontario. We're protecting the ability of families, newcomers, seniors and young people to afford a home, and that starts with tackling the costs that are driving the costs up and the prices higher.

With Bill 17, we're addressing the costs head-on. We're giving home builders the ability to defer development charges until occupancy, providing greater financial certainty and improving project viability. That is critical for keeping projects moving and avoiding cancellations that only deepen the supply shortage.

We're taking steps to make it easier and faster to build affordable housing, long-term care and supportive housing by eliminating or reducing the unnecessary charges and standardizing the processes across Ontario. That means more beds, more units and more support for our most vulnerable, and we're going to get them delivered sooner and at a lower cost.

When we talk about protecting Ontario, we mean protecting Ontario's and people's futures, ensuring that housing is within reach and that our province remains—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Windsor West.

LABOUR DISPUTE

MPP Lisa Gretzky: To the Premier: CHS workers support deaf, deaf-blind and hard-of-hearing Ontarians, yet their wages have fallen 16% behind inflation. Staffing has been cut by over half, and workloads have doubled. The government's unconstitutional Bill 124 capped their raises at 1% over three years; now CHS offers just 2%, pushing workers to strike for fair wages. While some workers rely on food banks, management got double-digit raises. CEO Julia Dumanian earns \$340,000 a year, a 122% increase over her predecessor. Audit requests in 2022 and last month were ignored.

Will the Premier look at the people in the gallery today—the workers and the community members—and commit to an audit to explain why workers are offered scraps while executive salaries soar?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Response? I recognize the Minister of Children, Community and Social Services.

Hon. Michael Parsa: While it would be inappropriate for me to comment on a contract negotiation between the employer and the union, I will say that our primary concern is and will always be on the people that our partners serve in the communities, Madam Speaker. It's why we provide supports to all our partners.

In this case here, we have increased our support to the CHS to \$9.5 million, an increase of more than \$440,000. Unfortunately, the opposition voted against that raise last year.

Now, Madam Speaker, we will continue to provide supports to our partners, all agencies, that are delivering vital services to people who rely on them. It's why the funding of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services has increased every single year under the leadership of Premier Ford, because we want to make sure those services are readily available to people who need them in our communities.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Sudbury.

MPP Jamie West: Workers at Canadian Hearing Services love the jobs that they do and the people who they help, but they cannot afford to make ends meet. Instead of negotiating a fair contract, CHS forced a strike, and instead of trying to end the strike they created, CHS came back to the table with a list of demands. CHS didn't invent

this appalling behaviour; they learned it from the Conservative government, who steamrolled workers' rights with Bill 124, Bill 28 and, right now, with Bill 5.

My question is, what is the Premier doing to ensure that the CEOs like Julia Dumanian from Canadian Hearing Services respect workers and collective bargaining?

Hon. Michael Parsa: We're very clear: We want to make sure that all the supports and services that are being rendered in the province are done to the highest standard that we expect, which is why we continue to increase support to all our partners, to all these services and the programs that are being provided.

Madam Speaker, as I mentioned, when there are negotiations between an employer and a union, we don't interfere, but we will make sure that there are contingency plans in place to make sure those supports that people rely on are there when they need them. We will never waver from the commitment of protecting every single Ontarian in this province. That's a fact, and I hope the opposition will support us in that front.

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

MPP Tyler Watt: This question is for the Premier.

It's tough to sit here and listen to this government brag about world-class health care, world-class education and world-class post-secondary education when that is just not the reality. Ask any Ontarian, and they know. Seven years, and I continue to be surprised that this government can spend so much yet deliver so little.

Many constituents in my riding of Nepean are students of Algonquin College, and it was announced this year that over 37 programs alone are being cut this fall. Meanwhile, we seem to have an unlimited amount of taxpayer dollars for the government's self-congratulating ads, a fantasy tunnel under the 401 and a luxury spa here in Toronto.

With unemployment continuing to increase under this government and training programs critical to filling the gaps in our labour market defunded and shutting down, we need to reverse course and invest in our colleges and universities. Speaker, through you to the Premier: What is this government doing to address the crumbling post-secondary education system?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister of Colleges and Universities.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: What this government is doing is we've invested over \$2 billion in the last 14 months into our post-secondary education sector. That's on top of the \$5 billion we give on an annual basis.

On top of that, in this budget, we just announced another \$75 million for construction seats, another \$55 million for 2,600 teaching seats, another \$10 million for First Nations grants as well as almost \$57 million to expand nursing seats as well.

We will continue to be there for our post-secondary sector and continue to engage with our post-secondary sector to ensure that we have the world-class sector that everyone knows and everyone deserves to have. We are beginning a process of core funding review models this

year, as we promised and communicated to the sector. Any decisions related to programming, human resources and budgeting lies solely with the institution.

As we always have, we'll be working right alongside the sector to ensure it continues to thrive.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Nepean.

MPP Tyler Watt: I knew that would be the answer, touting these record investments, so I'd like to remind this government of their \$1.2-billion cut to post-secondary in the new budget, with further cuts projected over the next few years. I have constituents writing to me that their programs were cancelled and that their lives have been completely upended by this government.

This doesn't just affect the people in Ottawa. Because of the funding shortfalls, Algonquin has even had to close their campus in Perth, and this is just one example of something that we are seeing across the province. The cuts and lack of support to post-secondary education seem counterintuitive to building up Ontario and the next generations to come.

Speaker, through you to the Premier once again: What is this government actually doing to address our crumbling post-secondary education system?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: What we're actually doing is investing another \$2 billion in the last 14 months.

As the member opposite noted, falling revenues in the sector have been seen in the budget. To be abundantly clear: Funding from the government to the sector is the highest it has ever been. The explanation of declining expenditures in the years ahead is primarily due to a decline in partnership revenue. College revenues are consolidated on the government's books, so that the decrease in revenue is reflected in these numbers.

1130

As well, our government supplied a one-time sustainability funding of \$1.3 billion last year, an investment to support the sector in 2024. This was not part of the base or permanent funding, and therefore is not reflected in future years.

We're working closely with the sector as we always have, and we will. It's important to note that we are committed to a full-scale funding review this summer. These numbers should not be taken as the final outcome, but merely the way the accountants capture the current state for budget purposes.

ONTARIO ECONOMY

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: My question is to the Minister of Red Tape Reduction. Ontario businesses are facing real threats. US tariffs and global uncertainty are making it harder for them to grow and compete. That's why it's so important that our government is cutting red tape. We need to keep making it easier to do business right here in Ontario.

Since 2018, our government has acted to reduce costs and streamline approvals. We made smart changes that help businesses move faster and hire more workers.

Cutting red tape isn't just about paperwork and regulations; it's about protecting jobs, families and our future. Can the minister please explain how these changes are keeping Ontario and our businesses strong in the face of global economic threats?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Markham–Thornhill.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you for my colleague from Oxford for that important question.

Speaker, protecting Ontario means protecting people, jobs and businesses that keep our economy strong. One of the most effective ways we are doing that is by cutting unnecessary red tape that drives up the costs and slows down business. Since 2018, our government has taken bold, decisive action to eliminate over 16,000 regulatory burdens through 14 red tape reduction packages.

We are saving Ontario businesses over \$1 billion every year, money they can reinvest to grow higher and compete globally. These changes are not just numbers; they are the results that our government is delivering.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Question?

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: I thank the parliamentary assistant for the great response.

We know that global pressures from rising tariffs and economic uncertainty are putting a strain on our business and workers. That's why it's so important that our government is staying focused on making Ontario the best place to invest, build and grow. While others pile on rules and delays, we're moving in the opposite direction. We're cutting red tape, fixing permits and speeding up approvals. These aren't just small changes; they are big wins for job creators and for our economy.

Can the parliamentary assistant share how the next phase of the red tape reduction will help our businesses stay competitive and protect Ontarians from the global challenges they are facing today?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Wellington–Halton Hills.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you again to the member.

Speaker, protecting Ontario's economy means eliminating red tape to make life easier for the people and businesses who drive our province forward. That's why we're not slowing down. As our government plans to bring forward the next phase of our red-tape-reduction work, we remain focused on faster permitting, modernizing licensing and cutting duplication, to ensure Ontario stays competitive globally.

Now, contrast that to the record of the previous Liberal government, propped up by the NDP, whose failed policies led to the highest regulatory costs in Canada. Our government will protect Ontario's economy by cutting red tape to unleash innovation, accelerate investment, and make life easier and more affordable for everyone.

INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING

MPP Wayne Gates: My question is to the Premier. In 2023-24, the Premier committed to funding the south

Niagara waste water treatment plant, but not a single dollar has flowed to our region's largest infrastructure project.

Since then, water bills have jumped over 12% just to patch the aging infrastructure. Housing starts are stalling, and there are serious concerns about environmental impact. Local officials say we can't wait. The mayor of Niagara Falls put it plainly: Without capacity, we won't be building new homes.

The Premier found billions for Highway 14 in Toronto, yet no funding for basic water treatment in Niagara. Will the Premier finally put real dollars on the table for our waste water treatment plant in Niagara Falls? Yes or no?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Brampton West.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: Thank you to the member opposite for the question and for giving me the opportunity to highlight what our government is doing for the people of Niagara region.

When it comes to critical infrastructure like waste water systems, our government is not just talking about investments; we are making them. Let me highlight the investments our government has made in the region of Niagara in the Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund, round 1: \$8.6 million to the region of Niagara; \$13.6 million to the town of Lincoln; \$20.4 million to the city of Welland; and West Lincoln, \$4 million, to unlock thousands of new housing units in the region of Niagara. In the Municipal Housing Infrastructure Program, the Ontario government is providing \$11 million to the regional municipality of Niagara and \$4.78 million to the city of Niagara Falls to construct and widen McLeod Road, facilitating the construction of up to 7,900 new homes in the city of Niagara Falls.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for St. Catharines.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Back to the Premier: The south Niagara waste water treatment plant is necessary to increase flow capacity to the current St. Catharines plant. The plant is expected to cost half a billion dollars: This is more than half of the funding your government allocated to these infrastructure projects. That isn't going to work, and it certainly won't work for the needs of Niagara and of St. Catharines. Local taxpayers should not be expected to foot the bill for the project through yet another sky-high property tax hike.

Premier, will you commit to properly funding this project before construction is set to begin and work with the federal government to ensure local infrastructure is in place to reach our housing goals, or are you planning to flush your own housing targets down the drain once again?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister of Infrastructure.

Hon. Kinga Surma: Thank you very much to my wonderful PA that answered the question and spoke about the local investments.

Madam Speaker, we're investing \$2 billion in water infrastructure across the province, which will enable approximately 600,000 homes. This is part of our plan to build more homes in Ontario. In the most recent budget,

the Premier and the Minister of Finance added another \$400 million, which means we'll be able to build and enable more homes in the province. We also have a stream under way that's being reviewed, \$475 million, for a health and safety water stream.

But, Madam Speaker, what's important for her constituents to know is that she voted against all of these investments—

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Member for St. Catharines will come to order.

Hon. Kinga Surma:—investing in water infrastructure as a tool, as a way in which the province can help municipalities to build more homes so that our future generations can have the same opportunities as us and be able to—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Thank you.

NOTICE OF DISSATISFACTION

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Pursuant to standing order 36(a), the member for Ottawa South has given his notice of dissatisfaction with the answer to his question given by the Minister of Finance regarding government advertising. This matter will be debated tomorrow following private members' public business.

I recognize the leader of the official opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I seek unanimous consent for the House to direct the Standing Committee on the Interior to extend public hearings on Bill 5, An Act to enact the Special Economic Zones Act, 2025, to amend the Endangered Species Act, 2007 and to replace it with the Species Conservation Act, 2025, and to amend various Acts and revoke various regulations in relation to development and to procurement, and to travel these hearings to Thunder Bay.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Ms. Stiles is seeking unanimous consent for the House to direct the Standing Committee on the Interior to extend public hearings on Bill 5, An Act to enact the Special Economic Zones Act, 2025, to amend the Endangered Species Act, 2007 and to replace it with the Species Conservation Act, 2025, and to amend various Acts and revoke various regulations in relation to development and to procurement, and to travel these hearings to Thunder Bay.

Agreed? I heard a no.

ARMENIAN HERITAGE MONTH

Mr. Aris Babikian: Today, in the evening, I am organizing the third Armenian Heritage Month celebration in Queen's Park in rooms 247 and 248. The leaders of the community from all of the GTA, lay and religious leaders, will be attending. Everyone is welcome to join us and celebrate the heritage day with the community.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): That is not a point of order, but thank you.

This House now stands in recess until 1 o'clock.

The House recessed from 1141 to 1300.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

Hon. Graham McGregor: We've got visitors who are entering the chamber—anyway, we'll welcome them here when they arrive. But I'd like to welcome the members of the Knights and Ladies of Rizal, joining us here today at the Legislature.

The Knights of Rizal is an international order created to honour and uphold the legacy and ideals of Dr. José Rizal, a national hero of the Philippines.

I also want to wish them and the entire Filipino community a happy Filipino Heritage Month, which starts this coming Sunday.

Thank you for joining us here today. Welcome to your House. Maraming Salamat.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: On behalf of our caucus, I would like to wish a happy birthday to my seatmate, the Minister of Citizenship and Multiculturalism, MPP Graham McGregor. Happy birthday.

Applause.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Happy birthday.

SIGN-LANGUAGE INTERPRETATION

Mr. John Vanthof: Speaker, a point of order: I believe, if you seek it, you will find unanimous consent to allow interpreters on the floor of the House this afternoon for American Sign Language services.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The House leader of the opposition is seeking unanimous consent to allow interpreters on the floor during proceedings. Agreed? Agreed.

INTRODUCTION OF GOVERNMENT BILLS

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT MODERNIZATION ACT, 2025

LOI DE 2025 SUR LA MODERNISATION DE LA GESTION DES SITUATIONS D'URGENCE

Ms. Dunlop moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 25, An Act to make statutory amendments respecting emergency management and authorizing enforceable directives to specified entities providing publicly-funded community and social services / Projet de loi 25, Loi visant à apporter des modifications législatives concernant la gestion des situations d'urgence et autorisant la formulation de directives exécutoires aux entités publiques désignées qui fournissent des services communautaires et sociaux financés par les fonds publics.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Does the minister wish to briefly explain the bill?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: If passed, this legislation would help build stronger, safer communities that are better prepared

for emergencies, including by providing opportunities for people and organizations throughout Ontario to support emergency management in the province.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

PROVINCIAL PARKS AND CONSERVATION RESERVES AMENDMENT ACT, 2025 LOI DE 2025 MODIFIANT LA LOI SUR LES PARCS PROVINCIAUX ET LES RÉSERVES DE CONSERVATION

Mr. Dowie moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 26, An Act to amend the Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Act, 2006 / Projet de loi 26, Loi modifiant la Loi de 2006 sur les parcs provinciaux et les réserves de conservation.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry?

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Does the member wish to briefly explain the bill?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: This bill hopes to expand the protected spaces that we have in the province of Ontario by introducing two new classifications of provincial park that allow for increased outdoor recreation, no matter what the landscape of the environment may be.

PETITIONS

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to thank the many constituents in London West who dropped by my office all last week to deliver petitions calling on the Legislature to protect Ontario by scrapping Bill 5. Their petition notes that laws and regulations are very important in protecting our natural environment and ensuring a balanced and transparent approach to growth.

They are very concerned about Bill 5, which would allow unnecessary and sometimes dangerous exemptions to municipal laws and bylaws and provincial rules, that would be able to be doled out at the sole discretion of a minister of the crown without any consultation or notification to the people of Ontario.

They're also very concerned about the reduction in protections for endangered species and sensitive environments anywhere across the province.

They are calling strongly on this government to listen to the people and protect this province by immediately withdrawing and scrapping Bill 5.

I am very proud to support this petition. I'll affix my name to it and send it to the table with page Sarang.

TUITION

Ms. Doly Begum: I have a petition here from students across the province who would like to present this petition

called "Fight the Fees." It is a petition that speaks to the inflation that has happened over the past 20 or 30 years—but we have not kept up with the needs of our undergraduate funding for education.

The average domestic undergraduate tuition has increased by 215%, and the average domestic graduate student tuition by 247%. And 50% of students will have a median debt of around \$17,000 to \$20,000. It takes an average of almost 10 years to actually repay that debt.

The average undergraduate tuition for international students—which you know is just horrendous, when it comes to the amount of fees they pay—increased by 192% between 2011 to 2021. At colleges, they pay an average of \$14,306 annually, compared to the average domestic fee of \$3,228.

We're calling on the government to make the changes that are necessary.

This petition looks at OSAP and what the financial assistance needs are, and the fact that they have failed to cover students and support the students throughout the past years. The government of Ontario made changes to OSAP and student financial assistance in 2018-19 that actually resulted in over \$1 billion in cuts in assistance for students.

These students are calling for our government to support the Canadian Federation of Students across Ontario, and calling on the government and petitioning the Legislative Assembly to commit to three things. One is free and accessible education for all. Two is grants, not loans, so that students are not actually getting interest on their funding for education. Three is legislating students' right to organize.

I fully support this petition and will give it to page Allie to take to the Clerks.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Just a reminder for petitions: These are brief explanations of the petition.

Petitions?

1310

CYCLING INFRASTRUCTURE

Ms. Jessica Bell: This is a petition called "Safe Streets Save Lives." It's a petition given to me by constituents in my riding who are very concerned about the government's move to remove bike lanes on Bloor, University Avenue and Queen's Park Crescent. It doesn't make sense. It's going to result in an increase in the number of injuries and deaths, and it's going to make it harder for people to get to A to B on a bicycle. There's no evidence to suggest that removing bike lanes will reduce congestion times and speed up the time it takes for someone to travel via car.

I support this petition. I'm going to be affixing my signature to it and giving it to page Jessica.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I'm pleased to share this petition on behalf of constituents in my riding. It's entitled "To Raise Social Assistance Rates."

All of the members in this House have been hearing from folks sounding the alarm that individuals living with \$733 on OW, and \$1,368 for those on ODSP, are finding that that is inadequate to cover the rising costs of food and rent.

They highlight in the petition that they have reached out to the Premier and government—230 organizations have done that—recommending that social assistance rates be doubled for both Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. They have pointed out that small increases to ODSP still leave people below the poverty line, and that they and those who are on the frozen OW rates are struggling to survive in this time of alarming inflation.

This petition reminds all of us of the realities of those reliant upon social assistance.

They are petitioning the Legislative Assembly to double social assistance rates for OW and ODSP.

I am very pleased to support this petition. I will affix my signature and send it to the table with page Noah.

TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I have a petition before me entitled “Reconstruction of the Argyle Street Bridge is Well Overdue—MTO, Get It Done!” The petition reads that the bridge has been in a state of disrepair since 2001. The bridge was built in 1927.

The petition goes on to say that the people of Haldimand county and Caledonia do not believe they have received a satisfactory answer to my questions in the House with respect to when reconstruction of the bridge will begin.

The last line of the petition reads, “We the undersigned petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to: Immediately announce and commit to a firm date to commence reconstruction of the Argyle Street Bridge.”

I fully support this petition. I will sign it and send it to the table with page Soraya.

LUPUS

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Mrs. Linda Brown from Capreol in my riding for this petition. They basically talk about lupus, which is a complex, often debilitating autoimmune disease that can affect any of your organs—heart, lungs, kidneys, brain—and for which, right now, we have no cure. It affects about 40,000 people—mostly women and people of colour. There are a few medications available, but more and more lupus-specific biologics are becoming available, and they work.

They are asking that the government endorse the listing of new lupus-specific biologics approved by CADTH—including anifrolumab as well as belimumab, two new biologics—under the limited-use code, rather than the Exceptional Access Program, to make it easier for people with lupus.

We may be getting to new treatments that will bring us a cure, so that’s very encouraging, but for now, let’s make sure they have access to the treatments that are available.

I support this petition and will ask my good page Julia to bring it to the Clerk.

LAND USE PLANNING

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I have a petition before me entitled “Say No to the MZO.” It talks about the fact that a ministerial zoning order to accelerate development of a proposed city of 40,000 on industrial zone buffer land at the Nanticoke industrial park has been made—the application has been made to this government. The housing development will grow the population of the Port Dover and Nanticoke area from approximately 7,000 people to 47,000 people.

Those who have signed the petition are calling on the government to not grant Haldimand county the request for an MZO.

I fully support this petition. I’ll sign it and send it to the Clerks’ table with page Nathan.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I’m very proud to rise in this house to present this petition on behalf of Dr. Sally Palmer, who has—and she is from Dundas, Ontario—provided this petition to many of us on multiple occasions, and I rise again to present it.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas the Ontario social assistance rates are well below Canada’s official Market Basket Measure poverty line and far from adequate to cover the ... costs of food and rent”—individuals only receive \$733 a month if they’re on OW and \$1,368 if they are on ODSP;

Following an open letter to the Premier as well as two cabinet ministers calling on them to double the Ontario Works rate—and the ODSP;

Whereas we know that the ODSP rates leave citizens still well below the poverty line—despite the fact that rising inflation continues to jack up all the costs of living;

Understanding that even the federal government acknowledged during the COVID pandemic that the basic income in order for anyone to subsist in this country—in this province—is \$2,000, these individuals have signed this petition.

I’ll proudly send it back to the centre table with wonderful page Abd-Ur-Rehman.

EMERGENCY SERVICES

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Pauline Jean from Coniston in my riding for this petition: “911 Everywhere in Ontario.”

As you know, Speaker, when we face an emergency, we dial 911. But 911 is not available in every part of Ontario. Ontario is the only province that does not have 911 everywhere.

In my riding, if you come by Foleyet, you need to dial 1-888-310-1122 for police; if you want fire services, it's 1-800-247-6603; if you need ambulance services, it's 1-877-351-2345.

If you're in the Mattagami area, then for police it's 1-888-310-1122, and for ambulance locally, 705-894-1123—if you're a little bit further, it's 1-888-269-7729—and for fire, it's 705-894-2201.

Those are only a few of the communities in my riding that do not have 911.

This has to change. The summer season is coming, and more people will be coming to the north. We can do what every other province has done. Let's bring 911 to everywhere in Ontario.

I support this petition and will ask my good page Julia to bring it to the Clerk.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I rise to present a petition that has been delivered to me by Sally Palmer, and I thank her for this. This is a petition to raise social assistance rates.

As a former United Church minister who worked with the unhoused and precariously housed, I can tell you that the \$733 or the \$1,300 for OW or ODSP—either of those—is inadequate to find housing and food. What we're asking for here is, at minimum, to double those rates.

I fully support this petition. I'll be signing it and giving it to page Mayukh.

HEALTH CARE

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Victoria Ouellette from Val Caron in my riding for this petition. It's called "Improve Access to Primary Care."

Medicare is a program that defines us as Canadians, as Ontarians. We get the care we need based on our needs, not on our ability to pay.

Unfortunately, in Ontario right now, 2.5 million Ontarians do not have a family doctor or a nurse practitioner, do not have access to primary care.

The best quality primary care comes in interdisciplinary teams, multidisciplinary teams. We have community health centres, Indigenous primary health care teams, nurse practitioner-led clinics, community-governed health teams. They are all ready, willing and able to take tens of thousands of more patients right here, right now if only the government will fund them.

1320

The petition is asking the government to immediately fund existing community health centres, nurse practitioner-led clinics, Indigenous primary health care and community-governed family health teams so that tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of Ontarians gain access to primary care tomorrow. Let's do this.

I fully support this petition and will ask Emma to bring it to the Clerk.

PERSONNEL DE PREMIÈRE LIGNE

M^{me} France Gélinas: I would like to thank Sylvie Brûlé from Blezard Valley in my riding for this petition. La pétition s'appelle « Rendre les préposés » de soins personnels—en faire une carrière. On sait depuis longtemps qu'il y a une pénurie de préposés aux services de soutien personnel, autant dans les soins à domicile que dans les soins de longue durée. Souvent, les préposés font face à une charge de travail qui est quasiment impossible. Ils sont sous-payés et sous-évalués, ce qui mène plusieurs d'entre elles—ce sont surtout des femmes—à laisser la profession.

On sait que le manque de préposés crée une crise dans tout notre système de santé, que l'on parle des hôpitaux, des soins à domicile, des soins de longue durée. On pourrait tout changer ça en s'assurant de faire des emplois de préposés un emploi permanent, bien payé avec des avantages sociaux—des congés de maladie, des congés fériés, des congés de vacances—et peut-être même qu'on pourrait penser à des fonds de pension pour régler.

Il y a beaucoup, beaucoup de personnes qui ont les connaissances pour faire le travail de préposé, mais en travaillant comme préposé ne peuvent pas payer leur loyer et nourrir leurs enfants. Ça doit changer.

Je suis d'accord avec la pétition et je demande à Emma de l'amener à la table des greffiers.

VISITORS

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Before we move on to orders of the day, I just want to acknowledge some guests who did arrive in our gallery: the Knights and Ladies of Rizal. The Minister of Citizenship and Multiculturalism did introduce you earlier. I think you were going through security at the time. We welcome you to Queen's Park.

And while I have the chance, I'm going to say hi to the boys and girls I met in the hallway. It's nice to see you up in the gallery as well.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

PLAN TO PROTECT ONTARIO ACT (BUDGET MEASURES), 2025

LOI DE 2025 SUR LE PLAN POUR PROTÉGER L'ONTARIO (MESURES BUDGÉTAIRES)

Resuming the debate adjourned on May 26, 2025, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 24, An Act to implement Budget measures and to enact and amend various statutes / Projet de loi 24, Loi visant à mettre en oeuvre les mesures budgétaires et à édicter et à modifier diverses lois.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Further debate?

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm pleased to be here speaking about the government bill, Bill 24. I'll be using my time to speak

about the budget as well as the schedules within Bill 24 and their related bills.

I want to start off by just talking a little bit about the context. The budget was introduced at a time when Ontario was going through a lot of economic uncertainty because of Donald Trump's trade war, but I think some of the issues that we're seeing in the economy existed before Donald Trump's election in the United States.

When we look at the budget and some of the figures in the budget, we see that unemployment is rising. Unemployment is now at 7.6%. It's high.

We've got an affordability crisis, I think it's safe to say. I'm sure you hear from many residents who are very concerned about the cost of rent, cost of mortgage, the high cost of food when they go to the grocery store. People are having a lot of difficulty making ends meet. We also see that a lot of people are falling through the cracks. We have encampments in nearly every town and city across Ontario, and many of these people are in a situation where they just can't afford housing anymore. It's very concerning.

We also have this budget coming at a time when the amount of debt that Ontario now carries has reached \$500 billion. This brings to mind a statement that the member from Ottawa South regularly makes, which is that never before have we seen a government spend so much and deliver so little. Those words resonate with me, as well, because when I go through the budget and I look at the impact of the budget on the key sectors that Ontario is responsible for—health care, education, housing, post-secondary education—we see some very concerning trends.

What I think people would have liked to have seen with this budget is a commitment to tariff-proof the economy, to get Ontario building, to look after people, and to really focus on sustainability. What we got instead is a pretty classic, mean-spirited Conservative budget. There's a lot in here for big business, but there's really not a lot for hospitals and schools. There's very little here that will help people afford the groceries or pay the rent. If people are looking for this budget to help them in this affordability crisis, I think they're going to find that they're going to be disappointed.

This comes at a time when this government loves to look at the Liberals and say that the Liberals are the reason we have all the troubles that we have in Ontario today. But you've been in power for seven years now. The time to pass the buck has passed.

I think a lot of people are also looking at what this government is spending its money on. Ontarians are watching that pretty closely.

The budget, in some ways, is not just about the numbers; it's also a moral document. It talks about what priorities the government has, who they care about and who they care about less.

I think a lot of people want a budget that cares about Ontario's kids. They want a budget that's going to care about patients who are seeing their family doctor, interacting with the hospital system and needing support. I

think Ontarians want a budget that cares about housing, so people can have an affordable place to live, to rent or to buy.

But what they've seen here with this budget and with this track record of this government over time is that there have been numerous instances now where this government has been spending money on things that people really question.

What comes to mind is the MedsCheck scandal that we heard about recently, with Galen Weston and Shoppers. There was a recent report that showed that Shoppers was actively securing business, conducting, in some cases, unnecessary medical checks, and then billing the Ontario government \$75 for those, in some cases, unnecessary medical checks. In total, Galen Weston and Shoppers have billed the government \$63 million. Of course, many of those medical checks make a lot of sense, but then it does seem that the government has structured a program that allows one individual to take advantage of this program. People have a lot of questions about that. Is our money being spent wisely?

We get a lot of calls from people who look at Ontario Place and wonder why on earth the government is spending \$2 billion in taxpayer-funded money to subsidize an Austrian spa company that has assets of about a million dollars. Why did they get the contract? Why are we transforming Ontario Place into a luxury spa, where it's going to cost money to visit? I have never, in my time at Queen's Park, had a constituent say to me, when I've gone to their door, "We need a luxury spa in downtown Toronto. That's the biggest issue that's facing me today." I've never had that said to me.

I also think about Bill 124. It was the government's move to cap public sector workers' wages at 1% a year. It led to an exodus of staff, especially in the health care sector, because they could earn more money elsewhere, quite frankly. Being a health care worker during the pandemic was incredibly difficult and dangerous. Instead of acknowledging that the government made a mistake, the government decided to take health care workers to court and spend millions of dollars in taxpayer money on a lawsuit that they knew was going to fail. It seems like a waste.

We also hear, lately, about the fantasy tunnel under the 401. We don't, as of yet, have a hard number on how much this fantasy tunnel is going to cost, but I do hear reports in the news that it could be upwards of \$50 billion. I don't think Ontarians want \$50 billion spent on a fantasy tunnel underneath Highway 401 when we have issues with people not being able to access health care and not having a family doctor, or not being able to find a place to rent that they can afford, or having difficulties in the schooling system, where their kid is being ignored in the class because the teacher is completely overworked, and the child is falling behind on the skills that they need to learn to do well in their career and in life. So I think that's very concerning. I recently went to the Empire Club and listened to the finance minister deliver a speech on the budget, and one thing I noticed is that not once during that

speech could the finance minister bring himself to mention the tunnel underneath the 401 that could cost \$50 billion. He didn't mention it in the entire speech. It makes me think that not even the finance minister can get behind this fairly wasteful proposal this government has.

1330

I think there are a lot of concerns that people have raised around, who does this government support and who does this government support less? A lot of concerns are coming up about that.

I want to do a sector-by-sector summary of some of the things that I've seen in the budget, and then I'm going to move to Bill 24, the bill which is twinned with the budget, at the end.

The biggest thing I want to talk about at the start is the issues that are facing our health care sector. It's the biggest expense that the Ontario government has.

What concerns me is that when I look at the numbers for health care, it looks like the health care sector is being forced to do a whole lot more with less. That's what I see. I've listened to the Conservatives talk about what they're looking at doing with health care. I've read the recent government bill that came out that looked at reforming and improving the primary care sector by expanding funding access to primary health teams—very good things. But I also think we need to look at the announcements that the government is making in a broader context, and what I see is that when you look at how much the government spent on health care last year and how much it's projected to spend this year, despite all the good-news stories this government is pumping out, the budget for health care is going to be cut by \$6.4 million, so, essentially, it's stagnant. That small decline is occurring at a time of unprecedented demand for our health care system, which is the point where I start getting really worried. The reason there's unprecedented demand is because Ontario, as a population, is getting older, and when you're older you use the health care system more. And then, Ontario's population is growing. It actually grew by 12% in the last six years. So the demand is increasing rapidly, yet funding for health care is not going up; in fact, we're seeing a small cut.

This issue of increased demand on the health care system is also happening at a time when we all know the health care system is under a crippling amount of pressure and is not able to keep up with demand. I think that's pretty clear.

I recently read the Ontario Medical Association's pre-budget submission. They've got a lot of concerns about the lack of access to family doctors that many Ontarians are facing. They quote that 2.3 million people in Ontario do not have access to a family doctor, and that number is set to double in two years, as doctors retire or move to other medical fields.

I've read the recent announcement that the government made around increasing funding to primary health care teams to attach more people to a doctor. I appreciate that they have chosen to focus on increasing funding in postal codes where there is a high percentage of people who do not have access to a family doctor. That makes a lot of

sense to me. I'm pleased. I've been talking to the health care providers in my riding, asking them if they're going to apply, telling them I'm happy to support them. I looked at the postal codes that are eligible for funding in my riding, and I'm pleased by the choices that were made. But I also know that the need is far greater than what is being provided by this budget and by that recent bill. Once this funding rolls out and the September funding rolls out, there are still going to be well over a million people—I expect more—who do not have access to a family doctor. If you don't have access to a family doctor, it means you're less likely to be screened and you're less likely to get the kind of care that you need in order to stay healthy. So I have a lot of concerns about that.

I remember one interaction I had during the election, when I met an individual who had ongoing cancer, and he did not have access to a family doctor. When I came to the door he said, "I cannot believe I have all these very complicated medical conditions. I'm alive, but I need to have access to the health care system, because I want to stay alive for as long as possible." He did not have access to a family doctor—he didn't have one—and let me tell you, he was looking. It's very concerning. I've got a lot of stories like that—during the election, and also before.

I also took a look at the pre-budget submission of Ontario Council of Hospital Unions. These are the unions that represent the workers in the major hospitals across Ontario, including hospitals in my riding: Toronto Western, Toronto General, Mount Sinai, Princess Margaret. I have a lot of the big hospitals in my riding, so I follow this issue pretty closely. When I read their submission, what struck me is the extent to which our health care system is struggling right now—even before this budget came out. They released some pretty concerning statistics. They talked about how hospital funding per person is lower in Ontario than in any other province. They mentioned that emergency rooms in Ontario temporarily closed more than 200 times in 2023 due to funding and staffing shortages. Can you imagine? When I was younger, I never imagined a time when an emergency room was closed. I couldn't even imagine it. And now it's happening, especially in smaller towns and rural areas, on a far too frequent basis. It's very concerning.

I want to thank the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions for their submission. It's a very fact-based report, and I encourage members on the other side to take a look at it. It's very concerning.

What I also noticed in the budget is that while the government is forcing the health care system to do a whole lot more with less, the Conservatives did find the funding available to allocate an additional \$280 million to for-profit health care clinics, which means the Conservatives are continuing their very dangerous plan to expand for-profit health care in Ontario. It's very concerning.

We have a number of for-profit health care clinics in University–Rosedale. We have Care&. It's a nurse-led clinic in Yorkville. If you cannot get access to a family doctor, you can pay \$75 and see a nurse very quickly there. It's a for-profit entity.

We did a lot of work with Taddle Creek Family Health Team when one of their family doctors left the practice and moved to a for-profit clinic just outside of the riding. The doctor sent an email to all her former patients saying, “I’m leaving.” Many of them thought, “Oh, maybe she’s retired or she’s having another child. We don’t know.” Then they found out that that individual had gone to MDDirect, and if they wanted to remain a patient of hers, they would need to pay \$5,000 a year to access her services. I cannot believe this is happening in Ontario. This is not a one-off. If you go on the TTC now, you see advertisements for online care, for executive care.

Unfortunately, very concerningly, this government is developing a two-tier system where those who can pay or have to pay because they’re in such a dire situation can move to the front of the queue and those who can’t are left with a system that is increasingly being shortchanged and is seeing staff move from the public system to the for-profit system. It’s a two-tier system, and it’s very concerning.

1340 I hear a lot of talk from the Minister of Health. She loves to say, “Well, these clinics will be billing these surgeries under OHIP. It’s all government-funded.” But the reality, when you are a patient accessing many of these for-profit clinics, is that you walk in and you walk out with a bill. That’s the reality of it. You see that with MDDirect—a \$5,000-a-year administrative fee. Somehow that’s legal. It is actually illegal, but somehow this government is turning the other cheek on that one, looking the other way.

We hear talk of people going to cataract clinics and being upsold for services that they don’t necessarily need. They walk out with a bill. This government is okay with that. I have a lot of concerns about it; many people do.

We’re concerned to see in this budget that there is an additional move to provide additional funding to expand this for-profit system. No one benefits with that kind of system.

I want to talk a little bit about education. Education is the second big sector that the Ontario government is responsible for delivering. Similar to the health care system, the Conservatives came out and said, “We’re putting a little bit more money into education.” On the face of it, the government is increasing funding from \$39 billion to almost \$41 billion in this budget. But don’t for a second think that this will mean there will be improvements in the classroom. I’d like to explain why.

First of all, the government is playing a little fast and loose with the numbers. They’ve combined all the child care funding that has come in from the federal government and merged it into the education department. So the education sector has to do a whole lot more with just a little bit more money. Overall, education gets less, because it includes child care.

A genuine question I have for the government, for government members, is: How much of that funding is going to child care, and how much of that funding is going to education? I took a look at this. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives did a deep dive and they looked at

the government’s track record with funding education. They found that when you factor in inflation, the amount of funding per student has dropped by \$1,500 since the Conservatives came to power in 2018. That is a lot of money, and it has impacted the quality of the education that our children receive. There is no doubt about it.

I want to talk a little bit about infrastructure, and then I’m going to talk a little bit about what’s happening in the classroom.

I’m going to start with infrastructure. The government loves to say that they’re spending more money on infrastructure. I do see that there is a 10-year allocation. They’re looking at spending \$30 billion over the next 10 years. It’s definitely an increase. Is it enough to meet the need? No, but it is an increase. I don’t think that it is enough to fully address the infrastructure backlog. The reason this is important is that many schools—especially in Toronto, but in other regions as well—have a long list of urgent and high-priority repairs that are outstanding, because the school boards have not received enough money from the provincial government to ensure that these repairs get done. I want to give you a little taste of how significant this is.

This is a summary of the repairs in a school in my riding—this is pretty typical—that need to be done at Jesse Ketchum Junior and Senior Public School. Their assessment is that they have easily over 45 repairs that need to be completed to get their building up to essentially what’s called a state of good repair, so that it’s functioning as it should. Some of these repairs are pretty significant: electrical work, wiring, issues with doors, issues with washrooms.

Side point: I was just at Central Toronto Academy, and one of the students raised their hand and said, “Are you going to be doing anything about the fact that none of our washrooms have doors and the locks are broken?” It was sad.

Locker renewal, laboratory renewal, vinyl tile renewal, painted ceiling renewal, heating controls issues, exhaust fan renewal, chain-link fence renewal, carpet removal, concrete flooring and basement renewal—these issues, when you look at them, are extensive. It includes the fields. It includes the building. It includes the HVAC. It includes energy efficiency. It’s measures to ensure the building is protected from flooding and extreme rain. What I noticed when I went through this list—it’s all documented—is that a good third of these issues are in the urgent category, but they don’t have funding to do it, and that’s typical.

When I look at what this government is spending on infrastructure, I think about the schools and I think about the actual list of repairs that need to be done, and I see a big difference between the two.

I want to talk a little bit about the Toronto District School Board. The Toronto District School Board is one of 42 school boards that are facing deficits because of this government’s failure to properly fund operations funding and capital funding. What’s on the chopping block is very concerning. I want to read out some of the cuts that this school board is facing. It’s got a \$58-million deficit. They

are looking at closing up to half of the pools in Toronto schools. They are looking at cutting funding from the music instructors program. They are looking at distributing Chromebooks in grade 7 as opposed to grade 5 and then making sure that the students keep the devices for six years. They're looking at cutting funding from outdoor education. They're looking at cutting funding from continuing education. They're looking at increasing class sizes. There are also massive, massive deficits between how much the government gives the school boards to fund special education and how much the school boards actually pay to deliver special education. These are the cuts that are on the chopping block right now, and this is going to have pretty significant impacts on the quality of education that children receive.

I want to spend a little time talking about the impact of these cuts on our most vulnerable children.

We organized a rally on Saturday outside Queen's Park, where we had parents come out to express their concern about the cuts to schools—especially the pools and special education. We had one parent, Jessica Roberts, come out, and she was one of the speakers. Her child has a lot of needs. Her child goes to Beverley School, which is in my riding. It's a school that's a congregate setting. It just has children who have exceptionalities and special needs.

What we have found is that Beverley and McMurrich, schools that deal with children with exceptionalities, are both losing a teacher. They're experiencing the worst of the cuts.

I'd like to read a little bit about what Jessica said in her speech. She said, "I'm here today"—that was at the rally—"not only as a parent, but as an advocate for children with exceptionalities, children who are too often forgotten when budgets get cut. The Conservative government's cuts to education are already having devastating effects. At my daughter's school, Beverley School, a specialized TDSB school for students with complex needs, we're losing a full-time teaching position next year."

This is how these cuts play out. This is how they play out, school by school, hospital by hospital.

I'll go back to Jessica: "Let me be clear. This is not just a staffing issue. This means fewer children will be invited to attend. It means larger class sizes. And in a school where many students are non-mobile, relying on wheelchairs, walkers and beds, this isn't just inconvenient; it's unsafe.

"Before Beverley, my daughter was in a classroom that claimed to be inclusive. But her curriculum wasn't adapted. Her communication needs were ignored. Her potential went unseen. It was exclusion dressed up as inclusion, and it was joyless.

"When she arrived at Beverley, everything changed. She was met by educators who truly understand how children like her learn through adapted materials, communication devices and even sign language. And for the first time, she felt seen, she felt heard and, most importantly, she found joy in learning. She comes home excited. She wants to go to school. She's thriving, and so is our whole family. Her confidence has grown. Her world

has opened up. Her quality of life both in and outside the classroom has been transformed. That change is priceless."

1350

I was so moved when I was listening to Jessica speak because, for me, it struck how transformative education can be and then how limiting it can be at the same time. Here's a parent who has the joys and challenges of raising a special-needs child, who has found a school that cares for her child and is there for them, and now that's under threat.

I'll return to her letter.

"Congregated schools like Beverley are not luxuries. They are lifelines. They're communities where every child is given the chance to thrive in a space built for them, not around them. We should be expanding schools like Beverley. Instead, we're watching them shrink under cuts from a government that claims to care about kids while failing the ones who need them the most.

"Every child deserves an education that recognizes their humanity, nurtures their potential and brings them joy.

"My daughter might be non-verbal, but this mama is not, and I will keep using my voice until every child gets the education they deserve."

There were tears in Jessica's eyes when she read that speech, because she was there for her child. I want to thank Jessica for coming out to that rally and sharing her concerns, because it's not easy.

It's important that parents are standing up and sharing the realities of what it's like for their kids in schools today, especially our most needy children—at-needs kids.

I want to talk about housing. The government, quite frankly—when we look at this budget, I would say that they've thrown in the towel on housing. That would be my assessment of it. The Conservatives have cut funding to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing by \$379 million. That is at a time when we have the worst homelessness crisis I have seen in my lifetime—and probably your lifetimes as well. We have towns and cities across Ontario where there are encampments, tent cities. It's very concerning.

We also have a report that just came out, by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario. It's an excellent report. It did a deep dive into homelessness, and it basically waved the warning flag. It said that if we are moving into an economic downturn, which we are, then homelessness rates could go through the roof—they're at 80,000 now, and it could go up to 300,000 people in Ontario who don't have a home. Can you imagine? That was their warning flag.

I'm not seeing anything in this budget that indicates that this government has a plan to address the homelessness crisis. What I do see is a really futile and expensive and draconian move to bring in an anti-encampment bill, which experts across the board have said is not going to work. If you think someone is suddenly just going to magically find somewhere to live if you threaten them with jail time or say, "We're going to give you a \$10,000

fine,” it’s laughable. It doesn’t even make sense. The problem of homelessness does not go away when you bring in a tough-on-crime approach to address encampments. If you tell someone to move from a park, they’re not going to magically find a home. They’re just going to go to another park.

What we also know is that it is cheaper to provide a supportive home to an individual who maybe needs some assistance dealing with addiction or some of their mental health challenges. It is cheaper to provide a supportive home than it is to put an individual in jail. It costs over \$100,000 a year to put someone in jail. And when an individual comes out of jail, they’re more likely to find themselves in a precarious housing situation than they were when they came in. It’s not a solution. It’s expensive, it’s futile, and it’s cruel.

A better solution, which is what we would have liked to have seen in this budget, is a commitment to build affordable housing and a commitment to build supportive housing. There are municipalities and non-profits and co-ops and housing providers that want to work with this government to build supportive housing and to provide those wraparound supports so we can give people a leg up, help them rebuild their lives and recover—because many people do. It’s not in the budget.

I want to summarize a submission from the Ontario Alliance to End Homelessness. This is a submission that this organization introduced during the pre-budget consultations. They had some really clear recommendations on how this government could come up with a plan. You don’t have a plan to address homelessness. One was to invest in both capital and operations to provide affordable housing. Government is not doing it. Conservatives, you’re not doing it. It’s very clear. Two was to increase social assistance rates so people on Ontario Works or Ontario disability have more income to find a rooming house or a shared house or a place where they can afford the rent and also afford their bills.

The government has frozen social assistance rates in this bill, not doubled them.

The Ontario Alliance to End Homelessness also recommended a renewed and expanded Rent Supplement Program. What this essentially is is that if you’re an individual living in a shelter, the shelter can work with you to provide you with a monthly rent top-up so you can move into a private-market rental—really, to get you out of that shelter. Often, these go to people who have the capacity to spend literally weeks looking for an apartment and a landlord who’s willing to rent to them, which is hard. In many cases, these people have jobs—because it’s a top-up—so they need to provide additional funding as well.

The government has made a move to provide a very small increase in the renewed and expanded Rent Supplement Program. Good. Is it enough? No. But there has been a very small increase.

And then, finally, the Ontario Alliance to End Homelessness recommends transitional supports from provincial institutions. When people are discharged from incarceration or they’re aging out of foster care or they’re

moving out of a hospital, there are very little supports available for them to transition.

Just two days ago, I was on the TTC and there was an individual there with a hospital band on, who was clearly homeless. This individual should not be recovering on a TTC subway chair. It was very concerning.

I think we all have stories like that. We all work with groups that are working very hard to help people who are in really tough situations.

Going by what I’m seeing in this budget, there’s no funding available for those kinds of transitional supports, so I have a lot of concerns about that.

When we’re looking at the housing crisis, we’ve got the homelessness issue—not doing enough—and then we’ve got the issue of rent. Some 1.4 million Ontarian households are renter households. And what we’ve found, time and time again, is that rent just keeps going up and up and up. When we’re talking about the affordability crisis, in many cases, what we’re talking about is the high price of rent. For a lot of people, that is what the affordability crisis means for them. We can look at recent statistics and say, “Oh, rent prices are going down.” Yes, they’ve gone down a little bit in the last few months. But when you compare rent prices over the last three years, since COVID, they’ve gone up 30%. So it has gone up, and it has gone down a tiny, wee little bit. The reality is that there are far too many people in Ontario who cannot afford the rent.

I printed out a list of the average rent price for an available unit—these are vacant units—and what they’re going for. This is from May. I go through it pretty frequently, actually. I find of the top 20 most expensive cities in Canada to rent, 14 of them are in Ontario.

1400

Ms. Jennifer K. French: Of 20?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes, of 20.

Toronto is number two. To rent a one-bedroom apartment, if you just moved to the city or you’ve just been evicted, you are looking at spending \$2,346. I’m telling you, if you earn minimum wage, if you’re a student, or if you are raising two children and you’re earning \$60,000 a year or thereabouts, that is an astronomical amount of money. For a two-bedroom, it’s \$2,958. Whew, that’s a lot of money.

The government could have used this budget to bring in strong rent control and rent-stabilization measures to make housing more affordable for 1.4 million households, and this government chose not to do it, and the reason why is because the Conservatives have picked a side. They have picked the side of big landlords. They’ve picked the side of financialized landlords, who are making a whole lot of money in this kind of market off renters. It’s one of the main reasons why we have growing inequality in Ontario. We would have liked to have seen a whole lot more on housing affordability.

Then there’s the piece around housing starts. For a long time—a few years—the government talked a good game about how they were going to do everything they could to increase housing starts in Ontario. I don’t know how many

times you answered that in question period—“We’re going to have the private sector solve all our housing woes.” What we found is that this government’s free-market, private-market approach—“Let’s reduce development fees. Let’s just see how it goes. Let the market decide”—hasn’t worked. And the statistics are very clear. They’re telling us that it hasn’t worked. Housing starts are down to 30-year lows. The amount of affordable housing this government is building is minuscule. What is it—1,500 units over six or seven years? That’s minuscule. With 80,000 people homeless, you’ve built a little over a thousand units? That’s crazy.

We have called and we will continue to call for a housing plan that includes big investments in building thousands of affordable and supportive housing homes on public land; having a real plan to address homelessness, mental health and addiction; speeding up the construction of apartments and high-density housing in towns and cities—this should be yours—and having a strong plan to bring in rent-stabilization measures, so that rent can be affordable. That’s what we should have seen in this budget, and we didn’t see it. It’s a missed opportunity. But we will continue to organize on this issue, and thousands of other people will, as well.

I want to talk about post-secondary education. When I took a look at the budget, one of the most concerning things that I saw was the massive \$1.2-billion cut to post-secondary education. This is coming at a time when Ontario is dead last in providing funding to colleges and universities compared to other provinces, and this cut leaves us trailing even further behind. I have noticed that the government has made some moves to increase Learn and Stay grants. I don’t know why you’re not including the University of Toronto. You’re looking at bringing in Learn and Stay grants so individuals can have some of their tuition, maybe all of their tuition, covered if they’re moving into the health care sector, as well as a move to increase funding for teachers, teaching spots, and a move to recruit more people to choose a career in the trades—all good things. But overall, post-secondary education, even when you factor in those measures, is seeing a \$1.2-billion cut.

What I fear with this \$1.2-billion cut is that there is going to be an increasing number of qualified Ontario high school students who will find that they’re not able to attend a college or a university so that they can begin a career of their choosing. I’m very concerned about that because demand for spots, as we know, is going up at a time when the number of positions available is going down.

I think it makes a lot of sense that post-secondary education needs to be funded to the national average. If Alberta can do it, so can we. If BC can do it, so can we.

We know that when we are in times of economic uncertainty, there is a huge amount of value in investing in post-secondary education—because they are our future workforce. We need people skilled and trained in the sectors that are in high demand. Not investing in that is going to create long-term problems.

I want to read out a few submissions that came in during the pre-budget consultation process.

I want to first start off with—actually this came out after the budget. It was from OCUFA, the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations. This came from the president of OCUFA, Nigmendra Narain: “This budget fails to recognize the demographic boom Ontario is experiencing and the urgent need for more post-secondary spaces. It also fails to make much-needed critical investments in chronically underfunded public universities, which are a driver of economic growth against a tariff war which will require cutting-edge research and a well-educated labour force to weather this economic crisis.” This is a compelling argument. OCUFA has consistently warned of these growing crises, but this government continues to ignore the stark reality facing Ontario. It will benefit us economically to invest in our post-secondary sector.

What OCUFA also points out—and I said this earlier—is the increasing demand for post-secondary positions from Ontario students. We’re not talking about international students here. We’re talking about Ontario students, who not only expect to go to university—but if going to university or college, it’s necessary in order to get a job where you can afford to pay the bills and have a decent career.

This is a report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. They estimate that Ontario will need an additional 225,000 funded seats for domestic students over the next 20 years to meet the rapidly increasing demand from young Ontarians wishing to enrol in post-secondary education in Ontario. That’s a concern. What is the long-term plan there?

Many people here have students in middle school, high school. People expect their child to go to college or university, and they expect that if they’re doing well in school, they’ll be able to get in. But it will be a lot harder if there are less spots available. There needs to be a long-term plan there.

I also want to read a little bit about the list of cuts that have already taken place as a result of the funding pressures, partly because of this cut and also partly because of the very dramatic reduction in international students and the fees that they bring. It’s significant.

Algonquin College is cutting 41 programs and closing its Perth campus.

We have got Carleton University facing a \$14.6-million tuition shortfall and looking at reducing their contract instructors in the faculty of arts and social sciences by 50%.

We’ve got Centennial College, which is looking at consolidating campuses and closing the Story Arts Centre in East York. I want to give you a summary of some of the programs they’re suspending: business; financial planning; global business management; international development; marketing, research and analytics; automotive parts and service operations in the school of transportation. These are the kind of programs that we need in a growing province. Hospitality; engineering, environmental tech-

nician—also programs that we need in a growing province.

Conestoga College is—I'm going to move on from Conestoga College.

Fanshawe College is facing a \$35-million deficit, and several programs have already been permanently suspended due to financial challenges.

Fleming College has suspended 29 programs—and possibly up to 42.

Georgian College is projecting a \$45-million deficit.

Lambton College—a \$30-million to \$35-million loss, and it has already suspended 18 programs.

Loyalist College is suspending intake for 30% of its programs indefinitely.

1410

Once again, business, carpentry, chemical engineering, cloud computing, culinary schools, culinary management—did you think that these were the kinds of programs that would be cut with this \$1.2-billion reduction in funding?

This will have significant impacts on our economy, and the impacts of these cuts are being felt right now. I'm very concerned about it.

I want to talk a little bit about what this budget is doing for shoring up our economy and our employment sector. Overall, this budget has allocated some additional funding for businesses and workers, which makes a lot of sense given the threat of Trump's tariffs on many of our trade-exposed sectors, including manufacturing.

I want to talk a little bit about some of the big-ticket items in the Ontario budget, and I have some questions for this government. Maybe these are questions that you're also asking yourselves.

The government is establishing a protect Ontario fund to provide up to \$5 billion in business support. They're also expanding the manufacturing tax credit from 10% to 15% and deferring provincially administered taxes. And this government has allocated \$1 billion more for the Skills Development Fund, to retrain workers. That's a high-level summary of what's in the works for workers and businesses.

Some of these measures the NDP has called for, such as an expansion of the manufacturing tax credit—it makes sense—but others, we think, are raising some huge red flags. The big red flags that we have are around the protect Ontario fund—there's \$5 billion, a massive, massive amount of money. The question that we're asking ourselves, and industries are asking us too, is, who is going to get this money? Is it going to be Ontario businesses? Is it going to be Canadian businesses? Is it going to be foreign companies? They're eligible too. Therme, for instance, is eligible, going by what I'm reading in the budget, for this protect Ontario fund. I think Ontario workers would have a lot of concerns and questions about that. If we are going to be providing support, shouldn't it go to Ontario businesses and Canadian businesses and Ontario workers first? Where is the eligibility criteria for this fund? Are you going to publish who you are going to give the money to and how much they are going to get? It's a lot of money.

The other question we have is around—let's say this government signs an agreement to give a foreign company \$2 billion of Ontario taxpayer money. What do we get in return?

Interjection.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Strings attached—more than strings; I think we need an ironclad agreement. Right now, we are seeing foreign companies that have been given literally billions of dollars in investment moving jobs and manufacturing equipment down south because the going has gotten tough—and we know the going is going to get worse. So what are the ironclad agreements that this government is going to sign with companies to ensure that if they do get funding from this protect Ontario fund, they make some firm commitments to stay here? I would love to see it.

We should talk after. I see you chirping over there.

It's a genuine question. If funding is going to go to a foreign company, where is the ironclad agreement? Right now, there don't seem to be a lot of ironclad agreements.

Also, from what we read in the budget, this government has paid some lip service to buying local and building local. I call it lip service. I want to summarize it: The government wants to recognize the first day of June as Buy Canada Day—woohoo, one day. There's also a move to invest in the Ontario grape program to encourage wine producers to use Ontario-grown grapes. Great. I love how this government seems to be fascinated by alcohol once again. Great. That's good. The challenge that we see is—why so modest?

In our view, every day should be buy-Ontario or buy-Canada day—not one day. We introduced a motion, which this government rejected, that would mandate labelling of Canadian-made food and products so that Ontarians who really want to do their part can walk into a supermarket and know which product is Canadian and which product is not, so they could get to spend on products that will generate Ontario jobs and Canadian jobs. Everyone wants to do this. It was a practical motion. This government shut it down. That's very concerning.

And then we're going back into the Buy Local piece. I really do question why we're just focusing on grapes here, and the reason I question it is because this government has had many stakeholders and industry leaders approach them asking for more.

An example is the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. In their pre-budget submission, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture asked this government to promote a broad spectrum of local agricultural products, not just grapes—meat, dairy, fruit, vegetables. They said, “A new report shows the impressive potential multiplier effect of buying local across Canada. We estimate that if every household in Ontario spent \$10 a week on local food, we would have an additional \$2.4 billion in our local economy at the end of the year and create 10,000 new jobs.” This was their recommendation: “Develop procurement guidelines to prioritize Ontario-grown food in public sector purchases. This initiative can support farmers and strengthen local supply chains.”

The reason I read out that example is because Ontarians want to see a whole lot more than just a buy-Canada day. Our stakeholders, industry, are giving us some really good examples that we can apply and adapt that will keep people employed and help our economy.

I want to give you another one. This is an example that comes from Unifor. Unifor, like many of us, are wondering why the government didn't use this budget to leverage its massive procurement power to contract with Canadian municipalities and companies and public institutions and businesses to provide services and products for Ontarians, to keep our taxpayer dollars in Ontario, essentially, supporting Ontario businesses, or at least Canadian businesses. It makes a lot of sense. I think this government needs to hear this message because this government has continuously signed contracts with multinational companies to deliver Ontario services. For instance, Staples is now the provider of ServiceOntario, and the Ontario Line is being built by a US company. Times have changed.

Unifor had some really good examples in their pre-budget submission. They just looked at one sector, and that sector is public transit. They asked this government—because I know you've made some lip service to this, but I think you could do a whole lot more. They recommended that this government do more to ensure that the procurement contracts we sign to build new transit lines, to build new streetcars and subways and buses, go to Ontario companies and Canadian companies, and you can do that by increasing the Canadian content requirement and the made-in-Ontario content requirement. It makes a lot of sense.

I know the people in Thunder Bay, with the Alstom plant there, would certainly appreciate this government doing more than just writing a letter to the city of Toronto begging for them to sign an agreement to build subway cars in Thunder Bay. They would like to see a whole lot more than that. They'd like to see firm commitments and firm targets. I support that recommendation as well.

1420

I only have a few more minutes left of my time, so I want to briefly touch on two other issues I see in the budget that I have some concerns about. One is the decision by this government to freeze social assistance rates. Ontario Works and Ontario disability support payments remain at a poverty level, despite the rise of inflation and cost of living. Quite frankly, I would call this inhumane. There are about 900,000 people who receive social assistance in Ontario. If you are on Ontario Works, you receive \$733 a month, for a single person; if you are on Ontario disability support payments, you get about \$1,368. The poverty line in Ontario is far higher than both of those figures. These meagre payments are keeping people in poverty.

What I would have liked to have seen in this budget and what I think a lot of people would have liked to have seen in it is a commitment to reducing poverty in Ontario. That approach should include stronger rent control. It should include the construction of affordable housing and supportive housing. It should include addressing the issue of rising prices in grocery stores, an increase to the minimum

wage, and a doubling of social assistance rates. These are practical measures that would address the rising inequality that we're seeing in Ontario today. We know that although raising social assistance rates is expensive, we also know that providing downstream services and support to people living in poverty is very expensive for governments as well.

The final thing I'd like to address is this government's move to not address the climate crisis that we are facing in Ontario today. There wasn't a single mention of climate in the budget. While we did see some investments in public transit and electrical vehicle manufacturing—good things; I support them—I didn't see any commitment to reduce emissions and commit to hard targets for reducing emissions. I didn't see any serious commitments to move to smart urban planning and investing in transit and cycling and walking infrastructure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles. I didn't see any serious commitments to make housing and buildings more energy-efficient, rebates for renovations, improving the building code, retrofitting housing. I saw only minuscule investments in infrastructure, to work with our municipalities to retool our sewerage and water and our electricity and our buildings to withstand extreme weather. There was a lot that wasn't there.

BC and Quebec have recently introduced budgets that have climate change as a feature, and I think we should have done the same.

I'm going to conclude my remarks by saying this is a budget that doesn't tackle the key issues of the day: housing, affordability, health care, education.

People want to see more from this government, and so do I.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Questions?

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you to the member from University-Rosedale for her remarks.

During her remarks, I heard her say that it was necessary for students to go to college or university or post-secondary to get a good-paying job.

On this side of the House, we talk a lot about skilled trades and the opportunity to become an apprentice and obtain a job or become a certified journeyman or a tradesperson, and that that can provide a good-paying job as well. We've made the investments of \$2.5 billion through the Skills Development Fund.

I'm just asking the member if she would please explain—if you actually think that a job in the skilled trades could also be a good-paying career for someone out of high school.

Ms. Jessica Bell: That's a slightly loaded question.

When I was talking about the cuts that are taking place in colleges and universities, many of the examples that I gave were in the trades.

We do have some questions about the Skills Development Fund. Certainly, encouraging people to move into the trades and choose that as a career is a good thing. It's something that we support. But my question to you is, who's getting the funding? What's the criteria to get that

funding? Is it going to big business? Is it going to workers? Is it going to trade schools? I'd love an explanation for that, because it wasn't in the budget.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: It's always wonderful to hear my colleague from University–Rosedale speak—especially the way she so intelligently unpacks this budget bill.

I want to drill down a little bit more about government spending, especially as it relates to education. We've heard this government, on many occasions, tout how no other government in the history of the governments of Ontario have ever spent so much on education. Yet, what we hear from the teachers and the educators and the families is that schools are crumbling, special education supports are not there, and 50% of the pools at the TDSB are about to be closed.

Can you help unpack who is telling the truth and why they are not being so forthcoming?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that question, member for Toronto Centre.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives did a deep dive into the amount of funding that has been going to education over the last seven years and concluded that funding has been cut by \$1,500 per student, when you factor in inflation.

When we look at this budget that has just come out, there is a \$2-billion increase, but that includes all the funding that is going towards affordable child care, and it doesn't factor in that our Ontario population has grown by 12% over the last six years.

So the Conservatives are playing pretty fast and loose with the numbers to explain away what is a pretty significant cut.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I listened with interest to my colleague's comments, across the floor.

Two things that you mentioned were municipality funding and building.

This government has been very aggressive—and I came from the municipal sector—on making sure that we're working with our municipalities for infrastructure funding. We have \$2 billion in infrastructure funding. This budget proposes another \$400 million for water-enabling systems and other critical infrastructure. And over the time that this government has been in office, we've increased funding for municipalities by over 35%. So we are working with municipalities to get these things done. Interestingly, on your side of the floor, you opposed each of these significant investments.

I'd ask the member across the floor, will you be supporting our infrastructure investments in this budget?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that question that raises the issue around the Conservatives and their attitude towards municipalities.

What we have found is that with Bill 23, the Conservatives really hampered municipalities' ability to

raise revenue to pay for infrastructure. They've been given a little bit back, but it's not enough, and it hasn't made up for the shortfall.

I have the Association for Municipalities of Ontario's pre-budget submission right here, and they are very clear that the government is not giving them enough funding to build and provide necessary infrastructure to grow—from sewage to pipes to electricity to daycares to water. This government is clearly not doing enough.

What municipalities are planning on spending, or what they need to spend, is \$250 billion in capital expenditures over the next decade. That's a lot more than \$400 million.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Thank you to my colleague for that really edifying piece.

I had a budget town hall on Monday night, and the wonderful environmental groups in my riding—Parkdale-High Park 4 Climate Action, Seniors for Climate Action Now, the Turtle Protectors, and Green 13, among others—were pretty concerned about what the budget says and, in particular, what little it says about environment. There are no targets for reducing carbon emissions. The phrase “climate change” doesn't appear. In conjunction with legislation like Bill 5, which allows for exempting areas for special economic zone reasons, they were quite concerned about Ontario's climate future and the public spaces, the green spaces.

You mentioned that there was a lot that isn't in the budget for environment, and I wondered if you could elaborate on the solutions that you would have liked to see protecting our environment that also create economic opportunities here in Ontario.

1430

Ms. Jessica Bell: When I read the budget, I was looking for measures that the government was going to take to address our climate crisis—mitigation and adaptation—and I don't see it. I looked at Quebec and BC's budgets and how they made climate change a signature piece of their budgets, and I thought that's the kind of thing we should be doing here.

What I would have liked to have seen in this budget is a commitment to real emissions reductions and hard targets. I would have liked to have seen a commitment to phase out gas-powered plants, instead of doubling down on them. I would have liked to have seen real commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from our transportation sector by bringing in sensible urban planning and investing in cycling and walking and more public transit infrastructure. And I really would have liked to have seen more investments in retrofitting our building stock and our housing stock and working with municipalities to make sure our infrastructure is resilient for this new extreme weather normal that we're now facing.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you to member from University–Rosedale for the breakdown of her views on the budget.

I found it striking that you opened up by saying that this is a mean-spirited budget and closed almost by saying it's inhumane, when it comes to what you described as the freezes of social assistance rates and keeping people in poverty. Each step of the way, as your colleagues acknowledged, you artfully went through each step of the budget.

Are you able to highlight what you find most egregious in this budget and where it fails the most? I know there are lots of questions and concerns we all share—but if you were to get your top three priorities or concerns right now.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you for that question, member for Toronto—St. Paul's.

I think what I'm getting from constituents is about priorities. People are really frustrated when they see Doug Ford talk about how he wants to spend \$50 billion on a fantasy tunnel that no one thinks is a good idea, when the key things that we need to see in our budget—those top three things—are being ignored.

People want their schools to be properly funded so our kids can get a good education. They want a family doctor or a nurse practitioner who can see them when they need to be seen. They want to go to a hospital and know that they're going to get timely and high-quality care and there's going to be a nurse by their bedside. These are the key things that we're hearing about. As a government, I think—you asked for three.

Addressing poverty in Ontario is key. We're a very wealthy province. So why is it that we have so many people who just can't make ends meet?

I would have liked to have seen a budget that addresses the inequality in Ontario, as well.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

Hon. Graham McGregor: I want to thank my colleague for her speech.

At the time that we have, with the cost-of-living challenge that we have, I think Ontarians need to see all parties working together to make their lives better—whether it's a PC, a New Democrat, a Liberal.

I can appreciate that maybe not many residents in my colleague's riding drive cars, but many do in my riding and, I think, in many ridings across Ontario.

One of the things I love about this budget is that we're making the 10-cent-a-litre gas tax cut permanent. Will the member stand up and say that it is the right thing and say that she supports that move and that New Democrats are prepared to vote with the government to make this permanent tax cut a reality?

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Further debate?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: It's an honour to rise today to speak to Bill 24, An Act to implement Budget measures and to enact and amend various statutes.

I will be sharing my time today with my colleagues the MPP from Orléans and the MPP from Don Valley East.

About 11 days ago, this government tabled what they called the "protecting Ontario" budget. But what we actually got wasn't one budget; it was two. Let me explain.

There's the rhetorical budget, the budget with all the words in it—many, many, in fact; the one told in carefully crafted headlines, political slogans and lofty promises. And then there's the real budget—the one with numbers in tables, footnotes and fiscal projections; the one that shows us the actual actions this government plans to take.

What we witnessed with this budget is the favourite trick of this Conservative government's political magician's playbook: With one hand, they distract Ontarians with booze, buds, and the like, while with the other hand, they make your public services disappear.

Last week, the rhetorical budget, with over 100 mentions of booze, grabbed the headlines.

But today, let's talk about the real budget. Let's follow the money. Let's dive into the cold, hard numbers, which, as an accountant, I love to do, because while words can distort the truth, the numbers don't lie. And the numbers tell the real story of this budget.

Speaker, the real budget is not about tariffs. In an election where tariffs were this government's excuse to call an early, expensive, unnecessary election—in the middle of winter, might I add—and during the lead-up to the budget, this government said over and over that they would take bold measures to protect the economy. The words they used to name this budget are "A Plan to Protect Ontario." But their plan is full of sentences—sentences like, "We need to make bold, lasting change that makes Ontario the most competitive economy in the G7 to invest, create jobs and do business. We need to do it now." I actually agree with the government on this. I agree that they do need to do it now, because they failed to do it for seven years.

Under this Conservative government, Ontario has the second-highest unemployment rate in the country. Under this Conservative government, we have the highest debt per capita in the country.

This government has failed so badly on the economy that they spent \$40 million of public taxpayer money on expensive ads during the Super Bowl—the most expensive ads you can buy—to shamelessly promote themselves before their early, expensive, unnecessary election.

Back to the budget and the rhetoric versus the numbers: Before the uncertainty from possible US tariffs, the fall economic statement presented a plan that would see program spending of \$213.3 billion in the next year, in 2026-27.

And then the government sent us to the polls in that early, expensive, unnecessary election—one that the government justified based on tariffs and trade. They told us it was a matter of economic urgency. The government said they'd need to spend tens of billions of dollars to protect the economy from tariffs. The Premier said that was why he needed a new mandate, only two and a half years into his four-year mandate. But guess what? Next year, in 2026-27, the numbers show us that the government is only planning to spend \$3.4 billion more than they had planned to spend before any rumblings about US tariffs. Speaker, \$3.4 billion is far short of tens. Where are those tens of billions of dollars? Only in the rhetoric.

Most of the tariff relief announced in the budget leans toward liquidity measures rather than direct support, and it's conditional, not committed; that is, new government spending in response to tariffs will only be provided after it's shown that it's really, really, really needed. The government's reactive approach will do little to bolster confidence among the business community and the number of workers who are already losing their jobs or fearing that that is to come. Business sentiment is at an all-time low. Conditional financing doesn't help them get their business confidence up.

Most of the immediate relief for tariff-impacted businesses and workers is \$9 billion—the government keeps talking about this number—but it's only a deferral. The tax bill will still come due on October 1.

The new \$5-billion Protecting Ontario Account is also just a liquidity measure, and only about 20% of it, about a billion dollars, will be available for immediate support to backstop Ontario businesses, and only once they exhaust every other available source of funding or financing. To quote the government on this: "This fund will provide immediate liquidity relief as an emergency backstop for Ontario businesses that have exhausted available funding." That will be small comfort to the small businesses that are already being affected by tariffs. Relief could be months away. By that time, they may need to have closed their doors. Bankruptcies for small businesses are already up under this government, and maybe they are prepared to see more fail.

1440

Speaker, let's talk about the manufacturing sector, which is the most reliant on exports to the US. In advance of last year's budget, I echoed the Ontario Chamber of Commerce's call to expand the manufacturing investment tax credit, so I am glad to see the government making progress on that—they've made some movement—even though it is only in place temporarily.

But this government has nothing to brag about when it comes to jobs in the manufacturing sector—jobs in general, actually. Unemployment has gotten far worse under this government. Ontario is dragging down Canada's unemployment rate. Ontario used to be the economic engine of this country and now is dragging down the unemployment rate for Canada, with the second-highest unemployment rate in the country—690,000 people out of work here in Ontario. We have the worst youth unemployment rate in the country.

And while this government talks about attracting jobs to the sector, the numbers, again, don't lie. This government has created 7,000 manufacturing jobs over seven years—7,000: not much to brag about, but that's exactly what they did when they spent that \$40 million of taxpayer money telling Ontarians what a great job they're doing, when the numbers show the exact opposite. I certainly support the member from Ottawa South, who called on the government to return that money—have the Conservative Party pay for it, because it was all about shameless self-promotion, when you look at the real numbers and what's going on here in Ontario.

A detailed read of the budget shows a disquieting truth: The budget's tariff talk is mostly just that, talk.

The Chartered Professional Accountants of Ontario, of which I'm a proud member, said, "Whether the government's plan will be enough to blunt the impact of tariffs on the province's economy, and its finances, only time will tell." It's not exactly a vote of confidence.

Speaker, let's talk about spending. What isn't just talk is the very real and imminent cuts to the services Ontarians rely on. Over the next three years, annual increases in program spending will average just 0.9%. Meanwhile, inflation and the cost of delivering programs will increase by 2.1%, which means real spending is set to decline—real spending in real dollars is set to decline by 1.2%.

This government has actually, in the last seven years, outpaced the rate of inflation in spending by about double. Getting to the overall situation here, in terms of our deficits and our debt, that has led to the situation we're in now, where we've got economic headwinds, and yet the government's failure to reduce the province's debt burden will force it to put the brakes on program spending. Over the next three years, as I say, annual increases will be just 0.9%—far below inflation, which is expected to be about 2%. So, basically, what will happen is everyone will feel like they're getting shortchanged, because they will be.

Post-secondary education will see the largest decline, along with spending on programs for children, social services, even health care. In education, the planned increase of 0.4% will not make a real difference in people's lives. The post-secondary education sector—a cut of 5.3%.

Speaker, we know that education is one of the key drivers of economic success. It is one of the reasons why companies come to Ontario. It is one of the reasons we've been able to attract highly qualified foreign students. When we cut spending on post-secondary education, we are in fact putting our future at risk.

We've got cuts to justice in real dollars—2.5%. So for a government that talks a big game about making communities feel safe, it's going to be challenged to do that when they're actually cutting spending on justice.

Children, community, social services: We know how our kids are still struggling. I hear about it in my constituency office when parents come and talk about the cuts to the staff in schools. Just last week, during Take Your MPP to School Week, I visited four schools in my riding and I heard about, in one school, where today they have one and a half special-needs support teachers; next year they will only have one. That's a 30% cut—one-third cut. So those kids will have less support. Those kids who need that support to advance their education, their learning, will have less of it.

Speaker, again, the health sector is going down by about 0.5%. In per capita terms, there also were declines. What I was talking about was in absolute dollars, the actual money spent on these programs, but when you look at per capita spending, the amount of spending per person, there are going to be annual declines there as well—I have about 1.9% in real program spending.

This year, the government is spending—because they certainly are. As I've said before, never has a government spent so much to deliver so little. They're actually spending a lot of money, and yet we're getting less for it. The government, right now, is spending \$8,106 per person, per capita. That's going to go down to \$7,650 per person. Those are cuts, at the end of the day, and Ontarians will feel those declines. They will see that the government continues to fail to get the basics right. We'll be shortchanging our youth. We'll be shortchanging programs for children and social services.

As we see, domestic post-secondary enrolments are actually expected to grow. A number of think tanks have already been talking about this. In the next few decades, there are expected to be hundreds of thousands more spots needed in our post-secondary education sector based on population growth etc. How can we possibly be prepared to support those students in the fields of their choice, the fields that will create jobs that will exist in the future, if we're not investing in our post-secondary education sector?

Speaker, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, about this, said, "With spending at historic levels"—overall spending—"there's less room to tackle other urgent threats to our competitiveness, such as the crisis in post-secondary education."

We know that the government, through this bill, is giving people a break on booze. I get that a break on taxes might be good for people, but why not give them a middle-income tax cut? The government has been promising that for seven years, and they once again have failed to deliver.

Those per capita declines of about 1.9% will reduce spending to \$7,650 by 2027-28.

It does beg the question: Why all these cuts in this time of economic uncertainty? It's really because of fiscal mismanagement—end of story. The government has failed to reduce the province's debt burden, and that is forcing it to put the brakes on program spending.

Speaker, let's talk about the debt. On government debt, the irony is as rich as the consequences are devastating. The Conservative Party that fiercely criticized previous governments on debt is now barreling towards half a trillion dollars in debt. So just like that broken promise for middle-income tax cuts from seven years ago, while they spend millions on government advertising at the taxpayer's expense and billions on a mega spa that nobody asked for, this government continues to break its promise for a balanced budget.

Let me quote: In 2019, they said they were on "a path to balance" in 2023-24. Well, that year came and went. In 2023, they said that the budget would be balanced by 2024-25. Well, here we are—another deficit. And then they said we'll have a surplus in 2025-26. But then in 2024, they said, "Oh, sorry. Maybe we'll balance the budget by 2026-27."

Speaker, here we are now, where the path to balance for the province of Ontario is deferred, once again, under this Conservative government. Let me just say that again: The party that criticized the Liberal government when On-

tario's debt per capita was \$22,000—per person, so per capita debt—is the party that is now projecting \$30,467 of debt per person within three years. The party that said, "Ontarians are tired of paying \$12 billion a year in servicing that debt" is the party whose cost of servicing the debt will exceed \$17 billion by 2027-28—an increase of 5.4% annually over the next three years.

None other than the Fraser Institute has called out the Conservative government's failure to reduce the province's debt burden. In a recent commentary, it reminded us that in its first fiscal update in 2018, then-finance minister Vic Fedeli described balanced budgets and debt reduction as fiscal and moral imperatives. In outlining the government's track record in reducing the debt-to-GDP ratio, the Fraser Institute said this: "This slight improvement since the Wynne years does not seem to reflect a government that believes debt reduction is a 'moral' imperative."

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Speaker, it seems to me that this Conservative government that said reducing debt is a moral imperative has lost its moral compass. According to the budget, the debt-to-GDP ratio in three years will be 38.6%, not far off where it was when they took over government seven years ago. This government is not about fiscal responsibility. It's a government that is spending more and delivering less. I'm going to say it again: Never has a government spent so much to deliver so little.

The FAO's recent report shows us this. The government spent a record \$206 billion last year, and yet we have crises in health care, education, homelessness and more. Despite spending more per capita on health and education, the Conservative government is delivering worse results and worse service: 2.5 million Ontarians without a family doctor, fewer hospital beds per capita, fewer doctors per capita and less investment in this generation of post-secondary students. We are all worse off for it.

The government's reckless spending on a luxury spa and their decision to spend a billion dollars of taxpayer money just last year alone to get fewer nurses in our hospitals has led to deficit after deficit, and a province whose finances are stretched thin, burdened by growing debt. So, it's clear the government can say they're spending tens of billions, but they're not committing to it.

The numbers show it: \$3.4 billion more in the next few years in increase in spending from the fall economic outlook. Why? Because they know their backs are against the wall. They know that the level of debt they've taken us to is already at its limit. Rising interest costs are squeezing the province's ability to increase spending on government programs. Interest costs are going to increase two times faster than the government's operating revenues over the next three years, and that will divert taxpayer dollars away from the government providing services. And, Speaker, if the economic forecast is worse than the government is planning, all of this will get even worse.

Ontario's debt-to-GDP, as I mentioned, is forecast to climb to nearly 40%. Debt as a share of government revenue is set to rise from 195% to 227%. This puts us at

a higher risk for a credit downgrade. It would make borrowing more expensive, feeding a vicious cycle. When you shake off the rhetoric and look at the numbers, the budget is not a plan to protect Ontario, it's a plan to neglect Ontario. It's an admission that after seven years in power, this government's fiscal mismanagement has come home to roost.

Speaker, recently the finance minister was speaking to the Empire Club—I had the pleasure of being there—and he said that Ontario was at a crossroads. He said we needed a bold plan. I do agree with him, but not because of US tariffs. This government has left Ontario's economy woefully unprepared to face any potential economic headwinds, such as US tariffs. Our unemployment rate is the second highest in the country, business confidence is at record lows, and Ontarians have been struggling with an affordability crisis and the high cost of housing because this government cannot meet its targets around getting houses built. The government has added over \$105 billion in debt and will add another \$18 billion just this year.

So, as Ontario stood at a crossroads, what Ontario needed was a government that would stand at those crossroads and say, "Yes, we do need to take a different direction"—a different direction from what this government has been doing. The people of Ontario are living with the consequences of seven years of the government spending more and getting less, mismanaging our economy so that we have the second-highest unemployment rate in the country.

Speaker, what we should be doing at this crossroads is unleashing the power of Ontario's finances to create jobs and get those 691,000 people who are unemployed back to work where they want. Recently I told the story here in this House of a construction worker who came into my office and said, "I have never been out of work. Please, can you help me find a job? I don't want to go on welfare."

We need to utilize the spending power of this province to put people back to work now. Clearing the infrastructure backlog of \$50 billion, the school repair backlog of \$20 billion; procuring provincial goods through Ontario-based companies and organizations that help them keep their doors open and grow their business and become even stronger competitors in the global economy: That's what we should be doing. Spending that money on infrastructure would get people back to work in communities across our province instead of having the dubious distinction of the second-highest unemployment rate in the country. Instead of getting bogged down in scandal after scandal, from the \$8.3-billion greenbelt one to the giving away of Ontario Place to a foreign-owned spa with a 95-year lease to the devastating and deceitful closure of the Ontario Science Centre and the reversal of their promise to assess the Dresden dump, this government should be focused on people, getting the basics right, not helping their insider friends.

In 2018, the Conservative Party stood before Ontarians and said they were the party of fiscal responsibility. It's almost laughable. They said they would balance budgets; they haven't. They have broken their promise, Speaker.

They ran up deficits that would make their predecessors blush. And now, with this budget, they're asking Ontario people to pay the price of their broken promises with more cuts to the services that we rely on, the services that actually do make our economy strong and make Ontario a place to grow. They are asking businesses and workers to go it alone against the threat of US tariffs. They're saying, "Maybe we'll help, maybe we won't. Let's wait and see. Let's wait and see what the federal government does. Just like they bailed us out of COVID, let's see if they'll bail us out of this."

I don't believe it's because Conservatives don't care—of course they do, every MPP here cares about their community and wants to do best for the people of Ontario—but it is because of seven years of reckless spending, bad decisions and political gimmicks that have finally caught up with this government. They could have helped people with a middle-income tax cut. They could have helped small businesses keep their doors open with a small business tax cut. Those are the kind of things we should have stood at the crossroads and done. You won't find that admission of failure in the rhetoric of the budget, but you do find it in the story the budget numbers tell.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): I recognize the member from Don Valley East.

Mr. Adil Shamji: I'd like to begin my remarks by acknowledging the frankly superior analysis offered by my colleague the member from Don Valley West. She brings a level of expertise and understanding to the analysis of the budget that everyone in this House would do well to learn from, and so, I do want to acknowledge that. We must also acknowledge that the people of Ontario are facing unbelievably hard times. Families are stretched thin. Services are buckling. Communities are being asked to do more with less.

In that climate, what Ontario needed was a budget that met the moment, a budget that would fix our crumbling schools, a plan to address rampant emergency department closures, a serious effort to accelerate housing construction and affordability. It should have been something that was visionary, hopeful—something worthy of the people that we serve. Regrettably, that is not what we got. What we received was a budget that fails to address the challenges of today and completely ignores the crises of tomorrow, a budget that misses the mark on affordability, on public services and on economic security. Instead of hope, it offers gimmicks. Instead of leadership, Ontarians get mismanagement.

Let's be clear. If this budget tells us anything, it is that this Premier is kicking Ontario while it's down. We start by staring down a projected \$14.6-billion deficit—the worst deficit in all of Canada—and total debt is now set at \$460 billion by the end of this year. That's nearly half a trillion dollars in debt. What do we have to show for it? No meaningful help with housing, no real investments in health care, no relief for overcrowded classrooms—just billions poured into political vanity.

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This year's total budget spending will be \$232.6 billion, an increase of \$4.9 billion over last year's. But ask any

parent, any nurse, any renter, any commuter—any Ontarian—where that money is going and whether they're actually seeing any of it. Well, unless they are a friend of the Premier or a corporate giant, they're probably not seeing any of it: \$400 million in foregone revenue from LCBO markdowns; \$2.2 billion for Therme's private luxury spa on public land; over a billion dollars wasted to bring beer into convenience stores one year ahead of schedule; \$1.4 billion to relocate the Ontario Science Centre, without public consultation and with pressuring the engineering firm to modify the report three times before getting a version that the Premier was satisfied with—a report that was reverse-engineered. That's \$4.6 billion in waste just there—money that could have gone to real tax relief, to infrastructure or to services, but instead, it has gone to backroom deals, insider favours and boondoggles.

Madam Speaker, I will repeat the words of my excellent colleague from Don Valley West, because they were so prescient when she mentioned them and remain more relevant today than ever before: Never has a government spent so much to achieve so little. In my following remarks, I'll focus on just a few areas where this is more true than ever before.

For example, the state of the economy: As I mentioned, we will run a \$14.6-billion deficit this year. Despite what the minister says about prudence, the government has no credible path back to balance until 2027-28, and even that forecast shows a razor-thin surplus of just \$200 million, a mere rounding error in a budget of this size. In fact, every budget this government presents promises a path back to balance, and every subsequent budget kicks that date of the balanced budget further and further down the road. It's like a thirsty person in the desert looking off into the distance and seeing water. It's that mirage effect. The closer they get, the farther and farther it goes away. Or if you've driven to your cottage up north and it's a hot day, you see the mirage of water on the road, and the further down the road you go, the further away it gets from you. That's what this budget is in its promises of a path to balance.

In the meantime, we are spending \$16.2 billion on interest payments alone, which is more than we spend on the entire justice sector and the fourth-largest line item in the entire budget. That's money that could be going to classrooms and hospital beds but is instead being paid to creditors because this government refuses to lead responsibly.

While the Premier may congratulate himself on credit ratings, Ontarians are not seeing that benefit, because they're just falling behind. We lost 30,000 jobs in construction and manufacturing last year, good-paying jobs in critical sectors. Youth unemployment sits at 16.4%, the highest in our country. When the government had the opportunity to intervene, to invest in new sectors, to support workers, to drive innovation, it has handed out corporate subsidies with no strings attached.

Take the so-called Protecting Ontario Account, a \$5-billion fund that supposedly helps businesses deal with

trade uncertainty. But there's no requirement that these businesses retain jobs, no requirement to pay fair wages, no transparency on who receives the money. It's a blank cheque—a blank cheque that leaves workers behind. Meanwhile, inflation and interest rates are eroding household purchasing power. Consumer debt is rising. Against that backdrop, what does this government do? Make it cheaper to buy vodka. That's not economic leadership; that's a sideshow.

Madam Speaker, Ontario needed a budget that safeguarded families and empowered workers. Instead, it got one that props up insiders and lets the rest fend for themselves.

Now, if our economy is struggling, our health care system is on life support. In the budget speech, it took nearly 40 minutes for the Minister of Finance to even mention health care in his speech, and when he did, the details were thin, the commitments vague and the timelines glacial.

Let me remind this House: Alcohol and related terms appear 135 times in this budget. In contrast, health care is mentioned just 85 times. That could not be a stronger symbol of this government's misplaced priorities. Today, 2.5 million Ontarians—one in six of us—do not have access to a family doctor. Emergency rooms are closing from Kingston to Kenora, and seniors are waiting hours in hallways or being treated in storage rooms.

What does this budget do? It reiterates the same promise that we've heard before, that everyone will have access to primary care by 2029. But even the government's own map shows that at the current pace, and with the current promise under the primary care action team, the rate at which they are proposing to connect Ontarians to family doctors is about 50% too slow, meaning it will take at least two more years beyond 2029 to achieve the target, assuming that this happens at all.

When it comes to home care, a proven way to reduce hospital admissions, there's nothing to fix the fiasco in Ontario Health atHome. Public health—frozen. This amidst the worst measles outbreak in a generation in Ontario. Local health units are being asked to do more with stagnant budgets, putting lives at risk.

And health care workers? Well, we know for every 10 nurses we hire, six are leaving. Retention isn't a footnote; it is the crisis. But this budget does nothing to address compensation parity, working conditions or mental health supports for front-line providers. This can't just be about hospitals, and certainly this budget doesn't really offer anything for them. This budget ignores mental health, addictions treatment and supports for seniors and newcomers, with entire communities being left behind.

Madam Speaker, health care is in crisis and this budget ensures that it will stay that way. What is most remarkable to me is that there are a series of promises in the budget that, for example, say a few extra hundred million dollars will be spent towards primary care. I noted that with interest and, frankly, enthusiasm. But take a step back. Look at the total amount of money that is being invested in health care in this budget, and it's the same. In fact, I

believe it goes down by \$6 million. And so, for all the flashy announcements and the promises of more money going towards primary care, that money is being taken from other places in the health care budget. It is not an increase.

I remain disappointed, not just in this government's management of the economy and health care, but in its housing plan—a defining issue for this generation. Ontario is expected to hit 78,000 housing starts this year. That's not an opposition forecast; that is this government's own number. It had once promised that it would hit 1.5 million homes by 2031, and therefore this government should have been hitting 150,000 homes this year. Instead, the budget says that they will hit 78,000.

Yet data released by the CMHC just last week shows that even that number is wrong, and that the government will in fact build fewer than 50,000 homes by the end of this year, far below even this government's inadequate targets. In fact, it shows that the budget does such a bad job in projecting for this year that it's out of date even before we've even voted on it.

This budget commits just \$50 million over five years to modular housing, a drop in the bucket in a market where demand far outstrips supply. Worse, the government has actively fought modular housing developments, such as the supportive housing project at 175 Cummer Avenue. How can you claim to tackle homelessness and then block shovel-ready projects for years?

There's nothing in this budget for renters, no action on rent control, no strategy for maintaining affordable housing, no meaningful effort to reduce the crushing development charges that municipalities are passing on to developers, and therefore to new buyers.

1510

Meanwhile, tenants face astronomical rent hikes, seniors are being renovicted, young people can't move out and families are spending 40% to 50% of their income or higher just to keep a roof over their heads. In fact, in my riding of Don Valley East, there are at least a dozen buildings in which my constituents are facing renovictions and demovictions en masse, and this budget gives no hope for them.

This government had options. They could have cut land transfer taxes for first-time homebuyers. They could have scaled up co-operative housing. They could have delivered real solutions for homelessness, instead of choosing to criminalize it. A real housing strategy is not about ribbon cuttings; it's about meeting people's most basic need: a safe, affordable place to live. This budget fails to deliver on that promise.

Next, I want to touch on education. Ontario's children are paying the price for this government's neglect. Our schools in many areas are quite literally falling apart. There is a school repair backlog across this province in the tens of billions of dollars, yet this budget offers no detailed timeline or transparency on how or when these repairs will be made.

Class sizes continue to grow, special education resources are increasingly scarce and students with excep-

tional needs are being left behind, because there simply aren't enough educational assistants in classrooms. Teachers are burning out, morale is low and still the government chooses to underfund the very foundation of our future. We should be investing in smaller classroom sizes, in more mental health professionals, in culturally responsive curricula and safe schools.

I will point out that in my riding of Don Valley East, the Toronto District School Board selected a school, a new school at Don Mills and Eglinton, as its number-one capital priority project, and this government said no. This budget shows no ambition. It is content to let the cracks in our education system widen.

Madam Speaker, this budget could have been a turning point. It could have restored dignity to our health care system. It could have jump-started a home-building revolution. It could have made our classrooms safer and our students stronger. It could have put workers first, reduced the tax burden for families and stabilized our finances. It could have, but it didn't. Instead, it charts a path of mediocrity and missed opportunities. It prioritizes vanity projects over vital services. It delivers backroom deals instead of better schools, and it offers tax gimmicks and LCBO markdowns while our emergency departments go dark.

This government could have eliminated HST on home heating and electricity; cut income taxes for middle-class Ontarians; removed land transfer tax barriers for first-time homebuyers and non-profits; funded real public health, not frozen it; and built schools that stand strong, not ones that are patched together. Instead, what we got was a billion-dollar booze plan, a \$2.2-billion luxury spa, and a \$1.4-billion science centre relocation that nobody asked for and engineers actually warned against. This is not fiscal stewardship; it is fiscal showmanship. It is short-term politics at the expense of long-term prosperity.

Madam Speaker, Ontario deserves better. We deserve a government that governs for people, not for headlines; for health care, not for handouts to friends; for classrooms, not for corporate buddies; for homes, not for hyperbole. This is why the budget does not meet the moment and is not one that Ontarians deserve.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): I recognize the member for Orléans.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is an honour to speak to the budget this year and to follow my esteemed colleagues.

Budgets are meant to tell the truth about the government's priorities, but this one doesn't. It tells a story, a tale of two budgets: There's the surface version, with slogans, sound bites and recycled promises, and then there's the real version, the version that Ontarians will feel in the emergency room, at their child's school and in their wallets.

The government calls its budget A Plan to Protect Ontario, but to protect who and from what? It's not protecting the senior who can't find a family doctor. It's not protecting the young person training for the 21st-century economy. It's not protecting parents who are

driving their kids to a school full of portables in traffic that gets worse every week. What this budget protects is power—centralized in Toronto and disconnected from reality. And while the real problems pile up, this government clings to distractions.

Across Ontario, the story is the same: Grocery prices are up. Rents are up. Insurance is up. Mortgage payments are eating into paycheques. And hydro bills keep climbing—climbing higher than they’ve ever been before, Madam Speaker, even when people are using less. Families are doing everything right, and still, they’re falling further and further behind. It used to be true that many families had money left over at the end of the month. Now, too many families have month left over at the end of the money. They need relief, but this budget offers them nothing.

This budget has no income tax cut, no HST relief on home heating or electricity, no support for kids’ sports and activities. Instead, Madam Speaker, residents of Ontario are getting empty slogans and another round of press releases. The people of Ontario aren’t asking for miracles: They’re asking for fairness. They’re asking for a government that understands how hard it is to keep up, let alone to try to get ahead. They’re asking for a plan that makes life just a little bit easier.

This government promised an income tax cut seven years ago. It’s delivered seven budgets since, and still no cut. And while families stretch every dollar, this budget pours billions into political pet projects and backroom slush funds. It’s not that the government can’t afford to help, Madam Speaker, it’s that this government chooses not to.

But Ontario Liberals would choose differently. We’ve proposed a real plan to make life more affordable for families: a middle-class income tax cut to let working families keep more of their own money; to remove the HST from home heating and electricity bills—because heating your home in the winter and cooling it in the summer are not luxuries. We’ve proposed cutting small business taxes in half, to give our local job creators room to grow, to hire and to survive. We’ve proposed tax credits for families who put their kids in extracurricular activities—because our kids should and can expand their horizons through sports and the arts. These aren’t radical ideas. They’re common-sense steps to help people through the crunch, because you can’t build a strong economy on the backs of households that are barely staying afloat. You can’t drive growth by draining people’s wallets.

Unfortunately, this government treats affordability like a slogan, but it’s a responsibility, and it’s a responsibility that this government is failing at, badly.

The Conservative budget mentions “alcohol” more than it mentions “affordability.” It includes a boost for booze, but flatlines funding for hospitals and classrooms. Madam Speaker, you can’t toast your way out of a health care crisis, but unfortunately, this government seems to be drunk on distractions, while the system is starving for support. That’s not a metaphor, Madam Speaker, it’s arithmetic. “Alcohol” appears in the budget over 130

times; “affordability,” barely 20, and most of those times are about the affordability of alcohol, not housing, not groceries and not rent.

Le budget conservateur parle de l’alcool plus qu’il parle de l’abordabilité. Il prévoit une augmentation pour l’alcool, mais les financements pour les hôpitaux et les salles de classe stagnent. On ne peut pas porter un toast pour sortir d’une crise dans notre système de santé. Ce gouvernement est ivre de distractions pendant que le système meurt de faim avec une faute de soutien.

1520

Ce n’est pas une métaphore; c’est de l’arithmétique. Le mot « alcool » apparaît plus de 130 fois dans le budget; « abordabilité », 20 fois, et la plupart de ces mentions concernent l’alcool—pas le logement, pas l’épicerie, pas le loyer.

If this budget can barely mention affordability, it’s no surprise at what else it fails to deliver, because when you ignore what people can’t afford, you end up ignoring what they can’t live without, and that’s access to a doctor. Ontario is short more than 2.5 million doctors, emergency rooms are closing overnight and primary care teams are underfunded and overstretched, but this budget does nothing to change that: no new residency spaces, no incentives to retain family doctors, no plan to expand primary care where it’s needed the most.

Nowhere is that clearer than in Orléans, where I live, where the Aline-Chrétien Health Hub is built, ready and waiting—a beautiful new community facility without any family doctors or emergency walk-in services. If you want to know what happens when budgets ignore real needs, look no further than the health hub in Orléans. We built the hub, and now is the time to ensure Orléans residents can access primary care in their community, because you can’t build a stronger province by abandoning the front lines of health care.

We often also hear the Premier talk about building Ontario, that he wants to build Ontario into an economic superpower, but he never seems to mention the basics. Public education is the foundation of every strong economy around the world, and this budget is letting it sink. Per student funding is flat. The school repair backlog has passed \$22 billion. There’s no plan for smaller class sizes, no support for mental health in the classroom and no serious help for students with special needs.

The only thing expanding in our health care system is the number of portables at our schools. Let’s not kid ourselves: When costs rise and funding doesn’t, that’s a cut, and it’s our students who are paying the price.

The situation only gets worse when we look at post-secondary education. Colleges and universities already receive the lowest per student funding in the country, and this budget cuts them even further, by more than 5% over three years. We’ve seen colleges already cancel programs, including Algonquin College in Ottawa, which is cutting 41 programs. That includes English-as-a-second-language instruction at a time when newcomers are arriving in record numbers.

Let me ask: With a growing population and a growing labour shortage, why are we gutting the very institutions

that train the people we need? Employers are begging for skilled trades, tech firms need coders, hospitals need nurses, and this budget tells them all that they're on their own.

Meanwhile, AI is already shaping the economy—not in 10 years, but right now—and this government is asleep at the switch. AI isn't on the horizon; it's already on the job site.

While other jurisdictions are racing to retrain, Ontario is cutting funding to the very institutions that power our workforce. You don't win the future by pulling the plug on the people building it. The young people building the next generation of Ontario are being left behind before they even graduate.

L'intelligence artificielle n'est pas à l'horizon; elle est déjà sur le lieu de travail. Alors que d'autres juridictions se dépêchent pour former à nouveau leurs employés, l'Ontario réduit le financement des institutions mêmes qui forment notre main-d'oeuvre. On ne gagne pas l'avenir en négligeant les personnes qui le construisent.

We're already seeing the consequences. Ontario lost 47,000 full-time jobs in April. Youth unemployment is rising. Job growth is forecast to slow for the next three years. And what's the government's answer? Nothing. No training expansion, no apprenticeship surge, no action to address labour market disruption. The Premier loves to say we're open for business, but you can't be open if there's no one trained to do the work. We need, urgently, a workforce strategy, and this budget doesn't even include a blueprint.

Madam Speaker, it's not just workers that are being left behind; it's the communities that they live in. Ontario is growing, and as we grow, the services that are needed to support that growth are falling behind. Again, in Orléans—one of the fastest-growing parts of Ottawa—the homes are going up but the schools, the fire halls, the rec centres and the roads, they're not keeping pace. Parents are registering their kids for rec programs that are booked solid. Seniors are stuck in traffic just trying to reach a medical appointment. Our local transit system is trapped in a death spiral of service cuts, fare hikes and plummeting ridership.

Now, this budget uses the phrase “building faster,” but what good is building faster if you're building in the wrong direction?

As I mentioned, in Orléans, we're growing, but the government isn't showing up. The roads are jammed. The services are maxed out. The Premier's bromance with the mayor doesn't mean much if the infrastructure is missing, Madam Speaker. You can't build a community without the basics, and this budget skips them entirely.

Let's talk about something that I know the government will be very interested in. Let's talk about something that this government doesn't want to admit: This year alone, the province is borrowing another \$27 billion. By 2027, Ontario's debt will hit half a trillion dollars. That's like \$30,000 for everyone in Ontario. I think it's \$80,000 per Ontario household.

This is the most debt ever added by any government in Ontario's history. Let me repeat that: the most debt ever added by any government in Ontario's history. Yet still no family doctor, still overcrowded classrooms, still infrastructure that's decades behind. It's not just the spending; it's what we're not getting for the spending that is truly staggering.

As was mentioned earlier, this government said that debt was a moral issue. Now they've racked up more debt than any government in history. Ontario is drowning in red ink, yet schools are broken, ERs are packed and families are on the brink. That's not investment; that's mismanagement on a historic scale.

Ce gouvernement a dit que la dette était un problème moral. Maintenant, il en a accumulé plus que tout autre gouvernement dans l'histoire de l'Ontario. L'Ontario se noie dans l'encre rouge, et pourtant, les écoles sont détruites, les salles d'urgence sont surchargées et les familles sont désespérées. Ce n'est pas de l'investissement. C'est de la mauvaise gestion à une échelle historique, madame la Présidente.

That kind of recklessness doesn't just affect today's services; it threatens tomorrow's stability. Because here's what else the budget reveals: Ontario's debt-to-revenue ratio is projected to rise past 227%, well beyond the red zone for credit agencies. That means that this government isn't just racking up historic levels of irresponsible debt; we're putting Ontario at risk of a credit downgrade, which would make borrowing even more expensive and crowd out funding for essential services.

1530

Madam Speaker, this government has maxed out the credit card, but the bill is about to come due. Interest payments alone on the debt will top \$17 billion a year by 2027. That's more than this government spends on post-secondary education. Think about that for a second: As the economy is changing drastically, the government is spending more on interest payments on the debt than they are on post-secondary education. That means this budget isn't preparing us for a downturn, Madam Speaker; it's baking one in. It's baking a downturn in.

This government proposed—and they promised—protection, but what they delivered was distraction: no workforce plan, no affordability relief, no credible infrastructure investments: just ballooning debt, the centralization of power and slogans in the place of substance.

This budget doesn't fix the crisis. It doesn't protect us from anyone. It simply formalizes the crisis. I'm sure you'll be surprised by this, Madam Speaker: Those are amongst the many, many, many reasons why we will be voting against Bill 24, because Ontario deserves better, and Ontario Liberals are ready to deliver better.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Questions?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I will direct my question to the member from Don Valley West. While I appreciated all of the presentations, she was first and so she gets the question.

Regarding the tariff funding, I thought it was very interesting that she highlighted that the money the government is actually talking about is for liquidity measures, not direct support, and reactive support that is not proactive. As someone who represents a community with a lot invested in manufacturing and a lot on the line when it comes to jobs, we are up for the fight and we want to be proactive. I've said it in this House: We don't want to wait for the rug to be pulled out from under us and have to be supporting workers after they've already lost their jobs.

I would ask for the member to expand on what she was talking about, ways to support the manufacturing sectors, what could that proactive support have looked like in this budget, and maybe she'd like to hazard a guess as to why it's not there.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you to the member for Oshawa for the question.

Yes, when you think about the kinds of investments that would be helping the manufacturing sector—look, Ontario Liberals bailed out the auto sector a number of years ago, and the Conservatives who are still here voted against it. So we absolutely are in support of supporting the auto workers and the manufacturing sector.

Manufacturers have been looking beyond our borders for a number of years. There was a story recently about a medical manufacturer who, because of our messy procurement here in Ontario health care, turned to the US, and now they are struggling to get financing and about to go bankrupt. This is a leading-edge technology company, a manufacturer of technology for the health care sector—equipment for the health care sector—that is struggling because of a lack of investment purchasing by this government. As I mentioned, turning the power of this province's purchasing to be able to direct those contracts, that work, to Ontario companies, would be the kind of example that would really both support our manufacturers and jobs here as well as prepare us for the economic headwinds to come.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

Mr. Stephen Blais: I would like to ask my colleague from Don Valley West about the historic, staggering levels of debt that this government has accumulated and continues to accumulate throughout the introduction of this budget, and if she could expand upon her view on how irresponsible half a trillion dollars of debt looks to most Ontarians.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you to my colleague from Orléans for the question.

Yes, half a trillion dollars in debt from a government that criticized previous governments and continues to do that—continues to look in the rear-view mirror and blame a previous government for debt, when in the next three years they will have added \$178 billion in debt, more than any government, Liberal or otherwise, in Ontario history. In fact, that level of debt will be 40% of all of the debt added in the last 40 years. In the seven years on record of this government's poor fiscal management, they will have

added 40% of all debt on the government books right now. That is not a record to be proud of.

As the members have mentioned, the interest cost alone—interest expense is the fourth-highest line item in our government spending today. And interest rates are higher now than they were during the pandemic.

We don't know what will happen as a potential recession unfolds, but we know that level of debt is actually unsustainable, and we certainly are at risk—as he said—of a credit downgrade.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): I recognize the member for Essex.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: One of the speakers offered us a quote from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, and that was a fair thing to do.

In addition to that, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce has added this: “This budget helps protect Ontario's job creators and jobs at a time of grave risk, and invests boldly in the economy and opportunities of the future. ... We're encouraged to see action on many of the Ontario chamber's recommendations to boost competitiveness, scale high-potential businesses, and build essential infrastructure.” That quote comes from Daniel Tisch, president and CEO of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce. I felt that was important—particularly the part where he talked about opportunities of the future. I've noticed that some young people have walked in and are watching us from the gallery today. I'm sure they're concerned about their opportunities for the future as well. So I offer that quote to members of the party who just spoke, and I invite any one of them to comment on that quote from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, which talks about investing boldly in the economy and opportunities of the future, especially for young people.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you to the member from Essex for the question.

You always have to give a little bit of sugar with medicine, right? So I appreciate the remarks, both positive and constructive, from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, as I always do.

The Ontario chamber also supported my small business tax cut bill, which this government declined to pass last legislative session. They also declined to put it in the budget this time.

As I mentioned, and as I think other people have said as well, there are some positive things in the budget, but overall this budget is not meeting the moment. It is basically adding debt when we are in need of services, and it is continuing the trend of irresponsible spending on things like tunnels under the 401 and a mega spa that nobody asked for.

I certainly appreciate the Ontario chamber's recommendations, and I wish the government had taken the one to deliver the small business tax cut, as well.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to also place my question to the member from Don Valley West, who is quite popular in this debate, it seems.

When this government first took power, they ripped out fully implemented charging stations from GO Transit locations. And in Bill 24, we see the removal or reconfiguration—whatever they'd like to call it—of bike lanes.

How is removing active transit options from Ontarians meeting the moment? Would the member like to comment on that?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you to the member from London North Centre for the question.

As this government tends to do, they are ignoring the experts. Experts around the world talk about how bike lanes actually improve the environment, can improve traffic flow.

As my colleague here, who bikes to work regularly—and I do when I can, as well. One more bike on the road can be one less car on the road.

I'm certainly concerned about safety for cyclists, and I'm concerned about the overreach of this government into municipal affairs. I think this government has criticized the federal government when they've tried to do the same, and likewise I think this government should let municipalities run their business, and certainly, the voters will send a message to those municipalities.

1540

So, again, this budget is another example of municipal overreach, and it's hard to support.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I wanted to answer that previous question, but I'm not allowed. So I'll just ask a question—and this can be to any one of my colleagues.

I'm sure you've heard from many stakeholders and Ontarians—but also residents in Orléans, in Don Valley West and in Don Valley East—about concerns with this budget.

I'm wondering if you feel that this budget actually meets the needs of Ontarians and helps provide better quality of life for them overall.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Certainly, I've heard from many residents in Orléans, across Ottawa and, really, across the province on how the budget isn't meeting the moment.

We were told that the budget was going to be designed to protect Ontario against foreign threats. We were told that the budget would build Ontario and invest in those things that matter most to families. We were told that the government would recognize the financial pressure that the Americans might be putting on Ontario families. And yet, they have not included a tax cut. They have not included a reduction in the cost of hydro or natural gas. They have not provided small business tax relief so that entrepreneurs can stay afloat or hire more of our friends and neighbours in those businesses. And they haven't met the moment to invest in health care and education, to ensure that critical social services are there for our families.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Further debate?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: It's a pleasure to rise today to join this debate, because I feel when it comes to Bill 24, after listening to the members opposite, we need to do a level set.

First things first, though: I want to give a shout-out to somebody who's watching right now, receiving amazing, good-quality health care in rural Ontario, and that's a member of the Ministry of Rural Affairs team, Chris Dopking. He sent me a note just moments ago, and I know he's watching.

We are so impressed with your recovery. We wish you the very best and can't wait for you to come back.

Interjections.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Thank you.

Another thing I would like to do, in the spirit of level setting, is share a couple of posts that we have received as a result of sharing a budget that brings an equitable approach to bring Ontario together in the spirit of protecting and building in rural and urban Ontario.

The Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus "welcomes the Ontario government's 2025 budget and its continued investments in infrastructure, housing and health care. These ... commitments are" key "to building livable, connected communities and driving inclusive ... growth across western Ontario."

In addition to the western wardens' caucus, the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus also commented. They shared that they welcome "the investments that align with" eastern Ontario's "strategic priorities, including economic resilience, infrastructure, housing, and health care.

"From increased funding for municipal infrastructure and housing-enabling water systems, to new commitments in primary care and workforce development, this budget takes important steps to support small-urban and rural communities across eastern Ontario."

Speaker, despite what we've heard over the last 20, 40 minutes or so, I have to tell you that it's an honour to rise today and share my perspective on the 2025 budget—a budget that holds promise for all Ontarians, especially in rural communities like I have in my riding of Huron—Bruce.

For decades, rural communities have faced unique challenges. For instance, it wasn't so long ago that there was a Liberal government that felt anything north of Highway 7 was no man's land, and that was totally unacceptable in my perspective, and I would dare say all of rural Ontario's.

I can also tell you with confidence that it is Premier Ford and our government that feels and recognizes that rural Ontario plays a vital role and has distinct realities that we face, but we're moving forward to address them in an equitable fashion in tandem with meeting the needs in both rural and urban Ontario at the same time. And for the first time in a very long time, rural Ontario is being seen, heard and invested in.

Rural Ontario is actually the backbone of this province, and it is the place where our food is grown, where our natural resources are managed responsibly and where small businesses and manufacturers create good jobs that

sustain families and communities. That is why this budget is so important. This is a budget that recognizes the strength, resilience and potential of rural communities and commits real investments to support our future.

At the core of rural prosperity lies infrastructure, the unseen but essential foundation that makes growth and opportunity possible. We know that water and waste water systems, roads, reliable Internet and cellular connectivity and adequate housing are not luxuries but necessities. Without them, rural communities can neither grow nor attract the families—the people who choose to enjoy the quality of life that rural Ontario offers—as well as businesses that want to call rural Ontario home.

The Minister of Infrastructure is focused, as I mentioned before, in managing both rural and urban priorities in tandem. That is under the leadership of Premier Ford, and we're so fortunate for that. And we're fortunate that this year's budget sees 400 million additional investment dollars in the Municipal Housing Infrastructure Program and the Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund, which is so critical for all of us to move forward together.

Our government is helping rural municipalities get over hurdles, such as outdated or insufficient water and waste water capacity. I'm thinking of the town of Goderich. It's one of the prettiest towns in Canada and, right now, it's going through the big dig. It's replacing infrastructure that, in some cases, is 100 years old. It has to happen, and our province is standing with them.

We're also making new housing developments possible, enabling families and workers and businesses with the opportunity to realize the potential that we have not only in rural Ontario but right across this province. By funding these infrastructure upgrades, this government is investing in helping rural communities break through growth barriers. This investment is a testament that rural Ontario has been listened to, and we're going to ensure, through our government's commitment, that rural Ontario is open for business and ready to grow. I've heard this directly from mayors and council members across the province.

I just quoted the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus as well as the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus. They recognize that the ability to build housing is the difference between a community that grows and one that slows and withers away. That's not going to happen on our watch.

This budget sends a clear message that Premier Ford and our government get it. We understand and value rural Ontario, and we stand with these communities right across this province in their efforts to build a sustainable future.

Now I'm going to talk about health care—and it's a health care system, under the very apt leadership of Minister Jones, that demonstrates a respect not only for distance but for community as well.

The reality for all of us who choose and call rural Ontario home is that we do have to travel to a hospital, and we need to travel even further, in some cases, to access specialists. But the good news is that we have a minister, Minister Jones, who also represents a rural riding—she understands.

This budget reflects a commitment of our government of \$56 billion over the next decade to health care infrastructure and over \$43 billion in capital grants, which will support more than 50 hospital projects, of which many serve rural and northern communities. Among these, investments in new and replacement hospitals, like the one planned for Campbellford and the Lake of the Woods District Hospital in Kenora, are lifelines for rural residents. And I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about the additional hospitals over and above that 50 that are in various phases of redevelopment, like the hospital in Kincardine, in Bruce county. These projects reflect an understanding that access to modern, well-equipped health facilities is essential for communities far from urban centres.

1550

Furthermore, funding directed at expanding integrated community health service centres is critical in terms of services that we are bringing closer to home. MRIs, CT scans, endoscopies, orthopedic surgeries will no longer require long and costly trips to distant cities.

The allocation of \$235 million to establish and expand 80 new primary care teams is equally vital. It will connect 300,000 more Ontarians with family doctors and nurse practitioners, helping to increase access to health care no matter where you call home.

We'd be remiss if we didn't touch on the fact that we also have a minister who recognizes expertise, and we need to celebrate the expanded scope of practice not only for nurse practitioners but also for local pharmacists. That has been a game-changer.

This budget reflects a government committed to local, accessible and person-centred rural health care, because rural families deserve nothing less. We look forward to the outcomes that Minister Jones, together with Dr. Philpott, will realize for all of us throughout Ontario.

I'd also like to recognize something that's near and dear to my heart: the rural setting that deserves investment and the rural communities throughout this province that have so much potential. In saying that, rural Ontario's economy is vast, it's diverse, it's powerful, contributing \$113 billion to the provincial GDP and employing more than 1.2 million Ontarians. Agriculture, forestry, advanced manufacturing, tourism and more are just not sectors; they are the lifeblood of rural communities. These businesses create jobs, drive innovation and support families.

Our government's renewed rural economic development strategy announced at ROMA in January this past year was incredibly well-received, and it focuses on three pillars. It landed well. Why? We crossed the province twice over last fall. We listened, we asked questions, and we took time to understand. As a result, the strategy has hit the mark. The three pillars that I referenced are: safe and strong rural communities—where we'll see a multi-ministry approach to investing in housing, infrastructure, broadband and community assets. The second pillar is business development and attraction—leveraging historic investments to grow jobs and our local economies. And of course, something that's very, very important, no matter

where you call home in Ontario: growing the workforce—and in this case, specifically in rural Ontario, our strategy addresses labour shortages through training, retention and recruitment.

A key part of this commitment is the modernization of the Rural Ontario Development Program, doubling the funding—and I'll repeat that: We're doubling the funding of this particular program to \$10 million annually over the next two years. Watch us grow. I want to share with you that since 2019, this program has supported 473 projects, with more than \$27 million invested directly into rural communities, helping small businesses, municipalities, Indigenous communities and not-for-profit organizations overcome barriers to growth and also create local jobs. Behind every one of these projects funded lies a story—a municipality enhancing local infrastructure to attract new opportunities; a community building a cultural centre that strengthens identity; a community building a new health clinic to attract health care professionals to their community; or local leaders and not-for-profits working together to increase capacity and promote economic diversification and growth. These investments empower rural communities to innovate, adapt and create vibrant places where people want to live and businesses want to invest.

With the expanded Rural Ontario Development Program funding, we are empowering rural Ontario to write its own future, building on its strengths and innovation to meet the needs today and tomorrow. Financial assistance is very important, and there's so much we can do together.

Speaker, I want to touch on education right now, but before I do, I'd be remiss in this House today—those of you who know me well know I wear my heart on my sleeve, but I want to take a moment and hit the pause button.

This past Friday was incredibly difficult for the municipality of Brockton and the communities around it, and we've seen the Walkerton District Secondary School community come together and be one in support that's needed for five incredible families. There were five Walkerton Riverhawks who took flight way too soon, far too soon: Danica Baker, Kaydance Ford, Rowan McLeod, Olivia Rourke and Matthew Eckert.

I would like to share to anyone watching today that I am confident that this entire assembly joins me in sharing our deepest and sincerest condolences to everyone involved: the families, friends and the WDSC community. Our hearts are with you. We know that you will be resilient. We know you will celebrate your Riverhawks and embrace them. May those five Riverhawks soar peacefully in your hearts, and in doing so, they'll never be forgotten. Thank you.

Applause.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Our government is really committed to making sure that the right dollars go into education and are invested in our young people, and this budget commits more than \$30 billion over the next decade to new and redeveloped schools and child care projects, with nearly \$2 billion alone allocated in the 2025-26 school year for repairs and maintenance.

We've just spent a week in our constituencies, and I hope everyone, as they drive around, recognizes those blue signs that touch on the redevelopment of our schools. I saw it at St. Anthony's in Kincardine, I saw it at Hillcrest in Teeswater and I saw it at F.E. Madill Secondary School in Wingham. The dollars are making a difference, and they're appreciated. These investments ensure rural children learn in safe, healthy and accessible environments, and again, that's happening right across this province.

Beyond schools, the government recognizes the critical role of rural and northern colleges and universities in training skilled workers who actually stay in the region, and that's why an additional \$10 million will be provided in 2025-26 to support institutions in offering relevant programs, upgrading facilities and partnering with local industries to prepare students for good jobs, close to home. I truly want to thank the institutions who invest in satellite campuses in small-town rural Ontario, like Fanshawe has in Clinton.

Equally important, this budget dedicates significant new investments to skills development across Ontario, with a sharp focus on rural communities. An additional \$1 billion over the next three years will be invested in the Skills Development Funds' capital and training streams, bringing total funding to \$2.5 billion. This will support organizations delivering better training programs and help build and upgrade training centres across the province, including those in rural areas where access to training is limited.

Through the Better Jobs Ontario program, the government is investing an additional \$50 million in 2025-26 to provide financial assistance, covering tuition, transportation and child care to eligible job seekers pursuing vocational and skills training. This program will help rural residents overcome barriers to accessing training and entering in-demand fields.

The budget will also commit \$20 million in 2025-26 to mobilize new training and support centres, providing immediate transition supports for laid-off workers, including those impacted by external factors such as US tariffs. These centres will have a crucial role in rural regions where job losses can have outsized community impacts.

1600

Finally, the creation of the Trade-Impacted Communities Program—with up to \$40 million in grants starting this next fiscal year, 2025-26—will offer flexible, tailored funding to communities and industries facing trade disruptions. This will help rural businesses grow, find new markets, diversify supply chains and drive local economic transformation.

You know, Speaker, we are doing so much for so many, and all the while, we're making sure that we haven't left anyone aside.

I want to make sure that people understand that there has been a very thoughtful approach taken in this budget. I applaud Minister Bethlenfalvy and his team. It has hit the mark, and we're able to invest more. Why is that? Because of his prudent financial expertise and management that he is bringing to the province of Ontario.

This budget answers the call with meaningful investments that address the unique challenges rural communities face, from housing shortages and health care access to workforce development and infrastructure renewal.

But beyond dollars and programs, this budget reflects respect—respect for the hard work, resilience and commitment of people throughout this province. It's about standing with them as true partners, listening carefully and investing deeply, because their future matters.

As Minister of Rural Affairs, I am proud that this budget builds on our government's promise to make rural Ontario and the entire province the best place to work, live and raise a family because, Speaker, I respectfully suggest that when rural communities thrive, all of Ontario thrives. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Questions?

MPP Catherine McKenney: To the minister, just to begin: My condolences on the loss in your community. We are feeling it across the province.

You are likely aware that Ottawa has a very large rural area. We're very proud of it. We know that we can fit something like five cities across the country into the geography of our city, and that is due to the very large expanse of our rural communities.

When I think about our rural communities and what they're faced today with—emergency room closures; they have long ways to travel to access a primary care provider, if they are fortunate to even have one; and we don't see any funding here for new beds in hospitals—I just wonder if the minister could just provide some guidance. What can we tell our rural residents? When should they be able to expect to see something different, to experience a difference in how they're able to access both primary care and hospital care today?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Very good. I appreciate the question. First things first, I want to go back to February when we had an overwhelming endorsement from all of Ontario by returning for a third, historic mandate—an opportunity to continue to invest in Ontario. During that election, we heard about an investment in hospitals in Ottawa.

Moreover, I want to share with you that—I'm probably scooping myself, but—I'll say it this way: I invite you to watch an announcement that I'll be facilitating later in June. It's going to be an announcement that shares more details about the Rural Ontario Development Program.

One of the very first meetings on my crossover of the province last fall—I did meet with councillors, the rural councillors from the city of Ottawa. An example of success that we've had in that area is the election of the MPP from Carleton. He was a city councillor at that time, and he had very distinct priorities that he shared with me during that meeting. I will share with you that he was listened to, as were his fellow councillors, and that's going to be demonstrated during our announcement later in June about the Rural Ontario Development Program.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank my friend for her comments and, as well, condolences on the terrible loss to that community.

I was very interested listening to the debate this afternoon and comments from the other side, particularly the third party, about capital projects and infrastructure growth. My understanding is that during their 15 years in office, they cut over 1,500 nursing positions and cut over 50 medical seats in this province as well. This government is moving forward with two new medical schools but also has committed \$50 billion to medical hospital redevelopments. I know in my riding, I have two—they're not yet at shovels in the ground—and I understand there's a list of 17 hospitals across this province that are undergoing physical construction as we speak.

I'm wondering if you could speak to the capital investments that this government is making, not only in the hospitals, but also making sure that we're building new medical schools and graduating more nurses to make sure that we get the pipeline full.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I very much appreciate that question from the member from Simcoe–Grey because there has been advocacy for as long as I've represented Huron–Bruce in this amazing chamber to see a new hospital realized in Collingwood. I congratulate him and his community on making that a reality.

But it's not just the capital dollars going into the brand new builds. Honest to goodness, we're celebrating at home in my riding the investment in the redevelopment of the Kincardine hospital, which is the closest hospital to the largest nuclear generation station in the world, which is Bruce Power. It doesn't always have to be brand new: The redevelopment is going to be purposeful, and it's going to be valued incredibly well.

The other thing I want to share with you: When I hear that question from Simcoe–Grey, I can't help but think about the Learn and Stay program that has been implemented across Ontario to encourage people to take up the proud profession of nursing. We're seeing positive impacts now. At Georgian College, we are seeing the effect of that Learn and Stay nursing program right in my home riding of Huron–Bruce and beyond. There's so much more I can talk about, but our investments are definitely driving dividends, which are valued ROIs, across this province.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

Mr. Guy Bourgoin: My condolences also to the minister on your community.

When I was listening to the budget and also this bill—when I saw the Highway Traffic Act, I was a bit disappointed because when you think about rural affairs, highways for northern affairs are very important. Especially when you go from Thunder Bay—or Nipigon, because the wide highways will start to eventually get to Nipigon; it's almost there—but from Nipigon all the way to North Bay, if you take Highway 11, it's very problematic.

We've seen road closures. We're now seeing more and more road closures in the wintertime. I know in the budget

you mentioned the 2+1, which is great. But northern Ontario doesn't stop in Timiskaming or in New Liskeard. It goes a lot longer than that. Municipalities have been asking for the 2+1 because it will make a difference, because there will be more passing lanes—they keep changing every 10 kilometres. And it will avoid accidents: people taking risks, passing on two solid lines, and the list goes on and on. We're seeing accidents, people dying, and then road closure after road closure after road closure. Now, they're even closing because of the weather: You see a snowstorm coming and they shut it down for precautionary measures. Do you know how much money we're losing as a province—and not only as a province, as a country? Why is your government not doing the 2+1 right across northern Ontario? Not only stop in New Liskeard—haven't started it; we heard it for two budgets, hasn't been started—but why not do it right across, all the way on Highway 11 all the way to Nipigon?

1610

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: I appreciate the question coming from a good representative from northern Ontario.

It's interesting, the very first week in January, I travelled from Sudbury to Sault Ste. Marie, and I heard about the importance of road maintenance and expansion to facilitate good transportation, and—fun fact—they said to me in Sudbury, “What are you doing, coming up here on January 6?” And I showed them some pictures, and it's like, “To get away from the snow in Bruce county.” But nevertheless, I digress.

In all seriousness, I know how important safe roads are and I do appreciate the need to move goods in a timely fashion as well. For a number of years, prior to coming to Queen's Park and having the honour of representing Huron-Bruce, I was general manager of a dairy goat co-operative, and we made trips on a weekly basis to New Liskeard and beyond. And I heard directly from the team at the dairy goat co-operative about how important the roads are.

Your point is not lost about going beyond New Liskeard, going beyond Timmins. And a point that our government gets that is that we're investing in a brand new port in James Bay. The infrastructure dollars are coming to northern Ontario.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): A very quick question?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Looking through the budget—and, first off, actually, my condolences to the member and the community there. I know, in Ajax and across the province, we're all thinking of those who were lost.

When I look at the budget—and I appreciate the remarks—I think about our health care workers and I think about our education workers and I think about the struggles that they're going through right now in the classroom or in their workplace. Retention is something that is a very big challenge, so I'm wondering what your thoughts are on the need for retention in these areas.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Making sure there's equitable workforce, no matter what sector, throughout all of Ontario based on the realities of the jobs and the sectors

that are represented by every community is really, really important.

And when it comes to health care, I was alluding to it—very quickly—I am over the moon, seeing the results of our Learn and Stay program for nurses across this province.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Further debate?

MPP Lisa Gretzky: I have an injured foot and ankle, so I don't know how long I'm going to be able to stand, so I will be sharing my time with my colleague from Niagara Falls.

I just listened to the government side, the Minister of Rural Affairs, talk about health care spending and how they're spending record amounts in health care. Meanwhile, towns and cities across Ontario are grappling with closed hospitals, closed emergency departments, closed urgent care centres. There was nothing in this budget for communities like South Bruce Grey. There was nothing for the Niagara region for the urgent care—my colleague may talk about that. In fact, we have the lowest per capita health care spending in all of Canada, thanks to this government. That is their record.

This budget has \$6.4 million in cuts to health care. Meanwhile, they are funnelling \$280 million over two years into private, for-profit shareholders' pockets. That's where the money's going while people are waiting for health care, while they're waiting for CTs and MRIs—surgery. Wait times are ballooning out of control, and this government is funnelling money from our publicly funded, publicly delivered, not-for-profit health care system into staffing agencies who are poaching nurses from the public system and funnelling taxpayer dollars, again, into private entities—one of them, I believe, is owned by the stepmother of one of the government members—and that's what we're seeing.

They are systemically and intentionally starving the publicly funded, publicly delivered, not-for-profit health care system to try and create the narrative that they need to privatize in order for people to get care, and that is false. That is false.

The other thing I'd like to talk about when it comes to health care is public health. We have seen public health—their funding has dramatically declined since they have formed government. We have seen communities all around this province, when it comes to public health, have to scale back programs that are offered: maternal newborn care; in school where they go in and they screen kids to see if they have dental issues that need to be addressed; vision care; vaccinations.

We have measles outbreaks that are shutting schools in this province. This government has done nothing, especially in this budget, to not only shore up public health and the work that they do but to run an educational campaign to ensure that kids in this province—and some adults, as well—are getting vaccinated against preventable diseases that get spread and can kill if they are not vaccinated. This government? Nothing in this budget. Silence when it comes to public health, but especially for vaccination programs.

Windsor's unemployment rate hit double digits in April, went up to 10.7%—the second highest in the country, according to StatsCan. We have, across this province, a record: historic numbers of people experiencing homelessness. We're not just talking about people with mental health or addiction struggles, although the government wants to criminalize those folks. We're talking about seniors, we're talking about working people, we're talking about children in record numbers—historic numbers—accessing food banks, and the government has nothing to address that in this budget.

They did bring forward a bill to criminalize people who are experiencing homelessness, though. They did bring forward a bill that says that if you're living rough, if you're in an encampment, rather than building affordable housing, we're going to move you along and potentially fine you \$10,000 or put you in jail. How in the world does that make sense? How is somebody living on the streets going to afford to pay a \$10,000 fine when they can't afford a place to live and they can't afford food? How is that going to happen? Well, I know. We're going to throw them in jail.

It is not only, in my opinion, the morally right thing to do to put housing first and ensure people are housed, but it is actually more expensive when people are entering into the corrections system. It's more expensive than if you were building affordable housing or supportive housing, if you made sure they had an income they could live off of—like if people with ODSP and OW actually had an income they can live off of, where they could put a roof over their head and food on the table. That is not only the morally right thing to do, it is also the fiscally responsible thing to do.

Yet in the budget, there is no relief for people with disability living on ODSP. There is nothing for people on Ontario Works, many of whom—the vast majority of whom—have disabilities and are waiting for approval for ODSP, and yet this government has set up a system to consistently deny people ODSP, deny that they have a disability.

Instead, what we've heard from government members, over and over again, from the Premier himself: that they're lazy. I'm quoting the Premier by saying they should just “get off their A-S-S” and get a job. That's their answer for people with disabilities, whether that's a physical disability, whether that's a mental health issue, or whether that is someone who is struggling with an addiction.

Addiction can touch any one of us in this place, whether it's us personally or someone we care about. Having lost a brother to an addiction, I cannot tell you how personally offensive it is, some of the language and the messaging that I hear coming from the government side when it comes to people with addiction—the dehumanizing and the stigmatizing. Yet they want to tell people—oh, my gosh, they post about Bell Let's Talk Day and this crisis line and that crisis line, and then go out there and they want to criminalize these people and fine them or throw them in jail, rather than getting the housing they need or access to the health care that they need.

1620

Speaker, you may have recently seen that children's aids across this province are facing deficits. They're laying people off, and not just front-line workers. I want to be fair to many of the CASs; they're laying off management too. The caseloads are doubling, and tripling in some cases. We have children as young as two who are living in hotel rooms because they cannot find placements and housing for them. CAS is in crisis, and this government, like they do with anybody, points the finger and says, “You're the problem. You're the bad guys.” They never point the finger back at themselves and say, “Jeez, wait a minute. The funding is not enough to keep up with the need.”

We have parents who are surrendering their children who have intellectual disabilities, because they can't access community supports, because this government has created a system where there are tens of thousands of children on a wait-list for autism services. Those families end up surrendering their children to CAS because they think if they surrender their parental rights and they give their children to CAS, those children are going to get the supports and services they need. CAS has no more access to those community supports than the average person in the public.

We've been raising the alarm bells about the situation with CAS and the kids living in hotel rooms. You probably saw the story recently about the crisis in group homes for adults and children within developmental services. And yet we see nothing in this budget to even remotely adequately address the needs. What we do see an awful lot of is government members standing up in this place and out in public, patting themselves on the back and saying, “We're doing great. We're doing wonderful,” and that is not the case. That is absolutely not the case in the province of Ontario. So many people are struggling to get by.

And it is not that the members on this side of the house are trying to talk down the province; it's that the people on this side of the House believe in the potential of the province and the people in this province. We believe in the potential of what can be and that better is possible. That is why we stand here as the official opposition and call out the government side on their failings when it comes to providing the supports and services that people need in this province.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): I recognize the member for Niagara Falls.

MPP Wayne Gates: I want to start by saying that I do believe in unity. In the face of Trump's tariffs and his threats, we have to do everything we can to protect our province and our country. We also have to protect ourselves from Premier Ford and Bill 5, which is nothing different than what's going on.

But I wanted to start by talking about the budget itself. The reason why I'm starting like this is that in my election in Niagara Falls—I don't know if you came, Speaker, but a lot of the ministers on that side of the House came to Niagara Falls during the election, trying to defeat—well, I guess, they were trying to defeat me in my riding.

But what they did is—and this is what I believe is dishonest and, quite frankly, disgraceful when we talk

about the budget, because there isn't one budget—and maybe the Conservatives who are listening to me can answer that—in Ontario that the Conservatives have ever supported. Whether it was the NDP when they were in power or whether it was the Liberals in power—we haven't had the Greens in power—they've never supported a budget. So to go around and say, "That member didn't support this. That member doesn't support this," every day here in the House is dishonest. Quite frankly, it's lying to people, because we know there are good things in every budget, but every party puts stuff in a budget that you can't support.

And when they came to my riding, do you know what they were saying on the front page in the paper? "Gates voted against the wine bill." "Gates voted against the wine industry." "Gates voted against the GO train." It was all inaccurate.

Interesting about the wine bill, the 6.1% wine bill—I know my colleague from just down the road from me is here listening—I wrote the bill. We wrote the bill, and we fought for it for six or seven years. To the credit of the Conservative government, they said, "You know what? This isn't a bad idea," after five or six years and they decided to put it in the budget.

That's what they do; they use the budget as a weapon, a weapon to try to defeat other people, when they know, even when they're in official opposition—but, by the way, nobody talks about it. The Liberals don't talk about it either. They were in official opposition for the 15 years that you guys were in power, and they never voted for one of your budgets, by the way, because they didn't like what was in the budget. And I understand that, but that doesn't mean that everything that's in that budget you don't agree with. There are some good things. There are some good things in this budget, by the way, again for the wine industry.

I think supporting the wine industry and the tourist sector is great idea. How many here—I know this side will probably answer. How many have been to Niagara and drank the wine down there? It's the best wine in the world. Why wouldn't we want to promote VQA wines? Why wouldn't we want to support it? Why wouldn't we want to have interprovincial trading between provinces? Why wouldn't we want that? That's stuff that we've been fighting for on this side of the House for 10, 11 years, since I got here.

So I just wanted to say, on the budget, stop using it as a weapon, because you're misleading people. You're not telling the truth when it comes to that. I wanted to get that out before I started to talk.

Then I listened to my colleague over here talk about health care. I'm from Niagara—proud of it. Niagara Falls riding, as it's called, has Fort Erie in it, Niagara Falls in it, Niagara-on-the-Lake. Do you know on that side of the House, during their term, they closed Niagara-on-the-Lake hospital, shut it down. So there's now no hospital in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

And now in Fort Erie, I have an urgent care centre—an urgent care centre that used to run 24/7, seven days a week. Some of the reason for that was that that particular

community, 50% of everybody is over 55 years old. A lot of seniors live there. A lot of seniors don't drive. A lot of seniors don't like to drive at night, by the way. A lot of seniors don't like to drive during the middle of a snowstorm. So what did the government do? They cut the hours at the urgent care centre in Fort Erie from 24/7 down to 10 hours a day, seven days a week, and they're threatening, by the way, to even shut it down more. In the budget—it doesn't say anything in the budget. "We're going to put more dollars into that Fort Erie urgent care centre because we know that people need that urgent care centre 24/7." It's not in the budget. I've looked; it's nowhere in the budget. That's a mistake.

When people say, "How do you know it's a mistake?" Because nobody wants to listen to Wayne Gates all the time, but they may want to listen to the AG. We have a crisis in our emergency rooms in St. Catharines and Niagara Falls. The AG said, "You want to fix the problem in your emergency rooms"—and this goes right across the province, by the way. It's not just Fort Erie that's the only hospital that has got this problem. It's happening right across the province of Ontario. You talk to people in Minden, Durham—all those areas have had this problem with health care.

What the AG said was very clear, and I wish my colleagues would listen. They said, "If you want to correct the problem in our ERs and our wait times at 10 hours, 12 hours, 14 hours, hallway medicine, all that stuff, invest in urgent care centres." Because in my riding, in Fort Erie, which I represent, 11,000 people—think about this—out of 36,000 people living in Fort Erie don't have a family doctor. So after 7 o'clock at night, they're going to go to the emergency room. But if that urgent care centre is open 24/7, they don't go to the emergency room. They don't tie up the doctor, they're not tying up the beds, they're not in the hallway medicine.

So when you stand up and say that you're investing in health care, then invest what the AG is saying—not what I'm saying, invest what the AG is saying. Invest in urgent care centres right across the province of Ontario to help with your problem in your emergency rooms and your hallway medicine, which was bad under the Liberals, but I can tell you it's worse under the Conservative government. So I wanted a say about that. That's one thing that you can do. It's not in the budget and it should be.

1630

Tourism where I come from—this is important—tourism is in trouble. I've talked to the Minister of Finance; I've talked to the Minister of Tourism. What I did, because when I went to talk to them, I told them we need a staycation this year because of what's going on in the States with Trump. The Americans aren't coming across the border. They're not coming. People are hurting. They can't afford their rent and their housing—all those things. People can't go away like they used to, but if you give them a staycation, that would give them a credit so they can come and spend it in the tourist sector.

In my riding, in Niagara-on-the-Lake—I'll mention Niagara-on-the-Lake; I know Ernie's smiling over there because he's been to Niagara-on-the-Lake. I've seen him

there, down on Queen Street—tourism is what we have. So what we need to do is have a staycation so people are going to come. I talked to the hoteliers; they're down 10%, 11% and 12%. This weekend was supposed to be one of their biggest weekends of the year—Memorial Day vacation. The place wasn't empty, but it certainly wasn't nowhere near full where it should be. What I'm saying is, do the staycation.

Again, I want to say, this government will come and say whatever they want, but when I raised this two years ago—the staycation—the government voted the motion down. We all stood up on this side, including the Liberals, the Greens—they all stood up and said, "That's a great idea." They supported the bill. Who didn't support it? The Conservatives. But guess what happened in the budget? They took my idea, my motion, and put it in their budget and said, "We're going to do a staycation," and I said, "That's great." It's not about getting credit; it's not about who gets the motion or the bill. It's about doing the right thing for the Ontario population.

We're doing the right thing for tourism so we're not losing the 40,000 jobs like we did under COVID. Because you know what? During COVID, overnight, we lost 40,000 jobs like that. And I'm scared this year, quite frankly, in the tourist sector, including the wine industry—which is very important, as my colleague will know across the road; he knows how important it is to have that wine industry: Gretzky's and all the places that go there—the Shaw Festival. I was down at the Shaw Festival on Saturday night and watched a wonderful play—incredible young talent. All those things are going to happen, but we need a staycation this year, and I'm asking the government to put it into the bill, put it into the budget.

And I can't finish—tomorrow—it's tomorrow; yes, today's Monday—tomorrow night, unfortunately, I've got House duty, because we didn't call the House back for two months, and now we've got to have House duty till midnight. It doesn't bother me—I worked steady midnights for 30 years—but tomorrow is the opening of the Fort Erie racetrack, it's their first day, and they need some financial help—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Thank you.

Interjection.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Thank you.

Questions?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: To my member from Niagara Falls, I always love listening to your scintillating speeches. And I am with you 100%—200%—on the staycation idea.

You mentioned the wineries in Niagara Falls, and I think this government would be keen on it because alcohol was mentioned so many times in the budget versus affordability.

What are your top three places you would go to for a staycation in our beautiful province?

MPP Wayne Gates: That's a very interesting question. I'd go to Toronto if the Maple Leafs were still playing in the Stanley Cup.

There are so many beautiful places in the province of Ontario. In Niagara Falls, we have lots of wineries. As you know, we've got the Shaw theatre. We've got a wonderful, wonderful casino. I love Ottawa. I've been to Ottawa a number of times. I love Ottawa, I think that's a nice place. And quite frankly, right here in Toronto, there is lots to do in Toronto. Especially if you're a sports nut like me—although I wish my Jays were better and I wish the Leafs were still playing. But sports-wise, you can't beat this place. They have some of the best theatre. I have been to the aquarium a number of times—more than once I've gone there. All those types of things are great.

I just think that today, with the way the environment is with finances, we need a staycation to make sure that the tourist sector in the province of Ontario, whether that's in Niagara Falls, Ottawa, whether it's in London, some place named Windsor—any of those places continue to thrive during this tough time. It's going to be a very tough year for tourism in the province of Ontario, and I'm hoping that the government sees it.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

Hon. Sam Oosterhoff: I so appreciate the opportunity this afternoon to stand and respond to the member for Niagara Falls, and appreciate the member's passion, of course, in sharing his take on the budget.

I know he talked about a number of the really amazing investments that are happening in Niagara as a result of this government. I know for a long time that it felt like the world ended at the Burlington Skyway for people, but that is no longer the case. This is a government that is listening to those needs in Niagara and making investments.

I know he mentioned at one point—he said there are good things in every budget, and so I'm wondering if the member opposite could list some of the good things in this budget.

MPP Lisa Gretzky: I always love it, personally, when the government side completely ignores any type of insights, suggestions, criticism—if you will say—about what's missing from a particular piece of legislation, what isn't happening in a budget, the number of people that are suffering as a result of what is not in the budget, and instead says, "Give me some good stuff. Give me some good stuff."

Well, private investors in private health care agencies, they think you're great. They love the budget. So there you go: There's something positive. It's not something we agree with, but when you're talking about privatization of health care, those corporations absolutely think this is a bang-up budget.

Speaker, I just want to take another opportunity to mention that we have had an increase of, I think, 16% or 17% this year in Windsor alone of intimate partner violence, and it's happening all across the province. This government has not put anything in this bill to address IPV or gender-based violence, and they still have not made the declaration. Women and girls around this province are dying as they wait for you to make the declaration and take action.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to thank my friends from Windsor West and Niagara Falls for an excellent presentation. My question will be for the member from Niagara Falls.

It is really surprising when this government listens, but it's really telling in what they listen to. I want to congratulate the member for seeing his advocacy for reducing the tax on wine being brought in. Myself, I brought forward—the punishing tax, the 61.5% tax that small craft distilleries have been facing. So it's good but surprising to see that in this budget.

In particular, though, I wanted to ask the member if there is any funding within this budget for waste water treatment and what their thoughts are about that.

MPP Wayne Gates: I certainly do appreciate the opportunity to answer my colleague's question.

I will say that the wine industry is extremely, extremely thankful that people are now seeing how important that industry is to the overall tourism, but jobs—it creates 18,000 jobs right here in the province of Ontario.

As far as the waste water goes, I asked that question today. In Niagara, we are having and have had for a number of years—and I'm clocking all of Niagara, even though the waste water treatment plant is in Niagara Falls. We've been having what they call—I don't know if I can say it here, but shit in the river, really, is what we're having in Niagara Falls. What we're saying is they put money into the waste water budget, but not enough to cover what's going on in the province of Ontario. In Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, Thorold, today, if we don't get a new waste water treatment plant, the housing that they're putting, saying that we've got to build 1.3 million homes in Ontario—we can't build more homes unless we get a new waste water treatment plant. So what we're saying and I'm saying to the government, and I said it this morning, although I didn't get the answer I was hoping for—the mayors are saying it; it's not Wayne Gates saying this as an MPP. All the mayors, all the communities are saying we need a waste water treatment plant to be built in Niagara Falls and we needed it yesterday. So I really appreciate that question so I get a chance up here to say to the government that we've got to get that done.

By the way, let me just—a lot of the mayors are Conservatives in Niagara, because they supported them in the election. It didn't help them, but they did support them.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Question?

Mr. Adil Shamji: I know in my riding of Don Valley East we face pretty unprecedented health care challenges: more people than ever before without a family doctor; longer wait-times than ever before; people are struggling, if they make into a hospital, getting care in unconventional spaces in ways that we've never seen before. But I also recognize that I represent a riding in Toronto where many of our health care resources are concentrated.

1640

To either of my friends from Niagara Falls or Windsor West, how do you feel this budget meets the health care needs of your constituents?

MPP Lisa Gretzky: Thank you to my colleague for that question. I shared a story in this House not too long ago about my 84-year-old mother who was taken to emerg and was treated in the hallway. She was considered to be admitted but was in a bed in the hallway of the ER.

There was a doorway that went into kind of a storage area, then there was the door to a staff room. And then there was the family grief room right across the hall. The hallway was maybe six feet wide, and she could hear as families were being brought in and told unbearable news about losing a loved one. It was to the point she was in there for days—admitted, but in the hallway of the emergency department for days. It got to the point where she called and was literally crying and begged to come home before she should have been discharged.

I would say that when you look at this budget, it really does nothing to address the increase. Under this government, under their time, the increase in hallway medicine that they promised to end has actually become worse.

I do want to add that this was no fault of the staff there. My mom said they were all wonderful. The nurse that discharged her was in tears because she felt terrible about my mom being in that hallway. There is nothing in this budget to support the patients that go in or the people who actually work in our health care system.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Quick question?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: This is a quick question for my colleague from Windsor West, who mentioned the impact on our communities of kids not getting access to autism therapy and the thousands of children who are on the wait-list, which, of course, has a big impact on our schools and the needs of our children with disabilities and learning exceptionalities in our schools. This budget does nothing to close the gap—the huge deficit that our school boards are running in special education. What would the member like to have seen to provide the supports that our kids actually need?

MPP Lisa Gretzky: Thank you, and I appreciate that question. Yes, so I'll point out there was no new funding for special education in this budget. In fact, there is a \$1,500 per student cut from this government.

These students with special needs are not easily able to access supports and services in the community. Many of those community agencies are grossly underfunded and supported by this government. So these students go into the schools where we are having also a staffing crisis in our education system, and they're not able to get the supports and services—

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Thank you.

Further debate? I recognize the Minister of Agriculture, Food and—

Interjection.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Pardon me. I recognize the member for Scarborough—

MPP Andrea Hazell: Guildwood.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Scarborough—Guildwood—my apologies.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am sharing my time with the member from Beaches—East York.

Today, I stand before you with a heavy heart for the people who call Ontario home. After hearing the presentation of the 2025-26 budget, I had high hopes for a budget that would provide real hope for the families of Ontario. But instead, I am left feeling incredibly disappointed, but somehow not at all surprised by this failing government.

Madam Speaker, I want to be very clear: Budgets can either uplift people or let them down. Regrettably, this budget lets Ontario down. This bill is entitled the Plan to Protect Ontario Act, yet this budget fails to protect the very people it claims to serve, particularly when it comes to affordability, education and support for working families in Ontario.

This budget, totalling \$232 billion, is projected to have a \$14.6-billion deficit.

Let me share some statistics with you. This government has spent \$2.2 billion on the Therme spa, \$1 billion on bringing booze to convenience stores a year earlier, and \$1.4 billion to relocate the Ontario Science Centre, which we know did not have to be relocated. That is a total of \$4.6 billion that could have gone to tax cuts and to put money back into the pockets of hard-working people in Ontario.

Madam Speaker, I want to focus on the affordability crisis and what that means for the people of Scarborough—Guildwood and in Ontario. Ontario is in the midst of an affordability crisis. Since this government took office in 2018, the families who call Ontario their home have been seeing a decrease in their quality of life year over year under this government. Families across Scarborough are struggling to afford rising costs for rent, food, medication and child care. And there is a lack of well-paying and stable jobs in Scarborough, because we are not attracting new businesses to invest in Scarborough because of our transport connectivity crisis.

The Daily Bread Food Bank reports, in 2024, Toronto food banks served 3.49 million clients, which is a historic high, with a 38% increase year over year. Hunger Report 2024 shows that nearly 40% of food banks are being forced to reduce the amount of food they can provide during a visit, to meet rising demand. This is an alarming trend that speaks to the instability and weakness of this province.

Madam Speaker, do you know what the average income in Scarborough is? The median annual income in Scarborough is \$35,600—significantly lower than the Toronto median and far from what is required to afford rent in 2025. In many neighbourhoods, rent has skyrocketed by over 25% over the last two years, while vacancy rates remain critically low. There are 78,000

people in Scarborough who are renting, and over 33% of those people are paying over 30% of their income in rent.

How are renters supposed to pay for their food, medication and child care and still hope to have money saved for their children's education?

There are over 50,000 young people between the ages of 24 and 35 who have left Ontario for better rent and better jobs. There is no future in Ontario for young people.

I've got three kids myself, and I'm telling you right now that I'm also worried about their future, living in Ontario, if they decide to stay in Ontario. I heard from thousands of parents at the doors who had some concerns. Young people are living in their parents' basements and are worried that they will never find jobs or become financially independent living in Ontario. This is the same Ontario that is supposed to be the economic engine of Canada.

Madam Speaker, instead of offering targeted relief for Ontarian families, this budget provides alcohol tax relief. The Liquor Tax Act cuts taxes on microbrewery beer and spirits. For example, spirits taxes are halved, from 61.5% to 30.75%. And this budget reduces the LCBO markup rate. For example, the basic markup rate applied by the LCBO to cider would be reduced from 60.6% to 32.0%.

So let's break down this government's priorities. Alcohol-related terms are mentioned 132 times in the budget—

Interjection.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): Order, please. Order.

MPP Andrea Hazell: —whereas low-income households have only been mentioned twice, unemployment was only mentioned four times, and affordability was mentioned seven times.

To the member across: I'm telling you what's in your government's budget.

People across Ontario and Scarborough—Guildwood need good-paying jobs.

Under this government, Ontario has the second-worst unemployment rate across the country, standing at 7.8%, which is a 0.3% increase from March. If this rate continues, Ontario is projected to face an unemployment rate exceeding 10% by the end of the year.

Families are choosing between paying for medication or buying groceries. I heard from a mother who is skipping lunch every day just so she can make sure her kids have something to eat for dinner. A senior told me she's even splitting her pills in half so they can last longer, because she cannot afford her prescriptions month after month. I also met a father who works three jobs just so he can make sure that he can provide breakfast for his kids before they go to school.

What people truly need are good-paying and stable jobs.

1650

I want to address the education deficits in my riding of Scarborough—Guildwood. The government claims to invest in students, but the budget does not reflect this. It fails to recognize the underfunding of schools across

Ontario. The budget allocates \$2 billion towards school repairs, yet we currently face a staggering backlog of \$6.5 billion that by 2033 is projected to hit \$22.1 billion. Some 1,813 schools are below a state of good repair.

Teachers in my riding of Scarborough–Guildwood have been forced to purchase pencils and notebooks, out of their own pockets, to assist their students, while this budget is spending on the wrong priorities.

Madam Speaker, what message are we sending to our children, who are the future leaders of tomorrow? We are telling them that we are putting alcohol above their education and well-being. Young people are not only our future; they are our present. They seek education, safety and growth, and this budget offers them none of that.

In conclusion, this budget presented before us is a missed opportunity for real change and support for the people of Ontario. Instead of focusing on the immediate needs of families struggling to make ends meet, this budget neglects the essential services that our communities rely on.

We cannot stand by while middle- and low-income households face unprecedented challenges without any meaningful assistance from this government.

Madam Speaker, let this be on record: This budget fails to address the critical need for better transportation infrastructure and increased job opportunities for our young people.

Investing in fast, safe and reliable public transit and creating pathways to meaningful employment is essential for fostering economic growth and ensuring that our young people have the tools they need to succeed.

It is our duty to advocate for a budget that reflects the values and needs of all Ontarians. We need a budget that invests in education, food security and affordable housing, showing that every Ontarian has the opportunity to thrive.

I will continue to be the voice for the people of Scarborough–Guildwood and the people of Scarborough.

The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos): I recognize the member from Beaches–East York.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you to my colleague for getting everyone stirred up with your words.

I'm here to talk about Bill 24, the budget measures act, which is the budget implementation bill.

I am proud to represent beautiful Beaches–East York always in this chamber, as well as the rest of Ontario.

This bill targets 19 statutes through various enactments and amendments. It authorizes \$27 billion in new borrowing, with a projected \$14.6-billion deficit. It flatlines funding for health care, education, municipal affairs and housing, children, community and social services. College and university students have the lowest per-student funding in Canada. That is not something to be proud of. What does that say to our youth? There's no income tax cut, there's no small business tax cut, and the budget mentions alcohol more times than it mentions affordability. And those are the good things.

Now we'll talk about my favourite topic of all time, bike lanes, or rather, keeping people alive on our streets. Laid out in schedule 9, the Highway Traffic Act, this

government explicitly awards itself the powers to remove bike lanes, whole or in part, and any related infrastructure, including the lanes on Bloor Street, University Avenue, Avenue Road, inclusive of Queen's Park East and West—basically, Queen's Park Circle—and Yonge Street. It's interesting that this includes the western section of Bloor, which is the Premier's commute—no correlation there.

This government is going to great lengths to spend hard-earned taxpayer dollars on interfering in municipal matters to remove already existing infrastructure that cost millions of dollars to install and is reported to cost close to \$50 million to remove. What a waste of Ontarians' hard-earned tax dollars.

I actually don't think any MPP who came here to work as a member of provincial Parliament—that their goal was to come here and meddle in municipal affairs. Many of us already had that role, and now we're here at the provincial level. News flash: You're not councillors or mayors.

This government's obsession with removing municipal bike lanes is no small feat. This bill will be footed by provincial taxpayers. I don't know about you, but I'd rather my tax dollars be spent on health care, education, transit. The government might say that this is to help reduce the gridlock that Ontarians from outside of Toronto have to suffer when coming into the city and therefore is beneficial to all Ontarians, but do not be fooled. Studies largely indicate that bike lanes do not cause or increase traffic; in fact, they are proven to ease congestion, and they increase business for local shops and safety. People shop; cars do not. They add to vibrant and lively streets, and it's proven time and time again, all over the world.

Actually, we had a group from Germany here last week, and they could not believe we were ripping out bike lanes. They were gasping—“Why?” All I could say was, “There are dinosaurs in charge right now.”

I choose to bike here, and that is my prerogative. I do my part for the health of the planet, for my own health, and for the health care system. By me biking here, that is one less car on the road. So you're welcome, all of you. You can thank a cyclist for that. But if you do remove those bike lanes, I will guarantee you, I will take that lane—I will take that lane, as is my right, and then we'll see how it goes with traffic. Every other cyclist will do the same.

Now we'll move on to education. Secord public school, an amazing school in my riding, was skipped over yet again for capital funding despite being ranked fourth on the list in 2024-25. We also had St. Margaret Catholic School in Scarborough–Guildwood and the First Nations school in Toronto–Danforth looking for renovations and rebuilds. Instead, last budget, this government picked a school that was last on the list and in a Conservative-held riding. That's interesting. Secord public school has the largest and oldest portable system in the TDSB and is set to see an influx of tens of thousands of new residents without the space to welcome them. There's no transparency in this process. The Main and Danforth corridor is a major mobility hub. It's a transit-oriented community. We need investment in the school there. We need investment in all schools. But, in fact, no TDSB

school is on the list this year for a rebuild or a renovation. Wow. It's the largest school board in Canada, and it is completely out of luck. Nice message you're sending for education there.

Health care is next. Michael Garron Hospital, a fabulous facility in beautiful Beaches–East York, is skipped over yet again for capital funding. It serves 20 distinct neighbourhoods and over 400,000 people—second-highest growth rate amongst hospital emergency departments in the greater Toronto region. It's designed to only see 60,000 patients, but the emergency department sees over 100,000 and operates in surge capacity for three quarters of the year—and the figure is set to get worse. It has a fabulous reputation as being a leader and incredibly innovative in delivering health care, including being a role model for vaccine delivery province-wide, but this government cannot even sign off on their phase 2 renovation plan, a vital project for all of Ontario. What are you waiting for? Just sign the darn thing.

1700

The environment—I'm going to have to take a yoga breath right now over this one. I know you're allergic to the words “climate change,” “climate emergency”—you break out in hives, and we don't have defibrillators readily available for you. Emergency preparedness was mentioned only once. And very little mention of climate-resilient infrastructure, despite wildfire and flood statistics; despite you killing my Bill 56—which was flooding awareness, emergency preparedness—which could have helped your constituents.

The Financial Accountability Officer has warned us repeatedly of the high cost of inaction. The FAO projects that in the absence of adaptation to climate emergency, these changing climate hazards will add over \$4 billion per year over the century. And what are you doing about it? Nothing.

Environment, conservation and parks—a spending increase, but no mention of species at risk, specific conservation efforts, and no expansion on green planning initiatives. A lack of meaningful and intentional programs outlined in the budget, plus the introduction of Bill 5—whew, can't even go there—and Bill 17 compounds to support belief that this government is moving towards a watered-down version of environmental protections.

I guess I'll end on the arts because I'm running out of time, but there's so much to discuss about this disastrous budget. We know, from the Ontario Arts Council, for every dollar invested in the arts, an average of \$25 in other revenue streams is generated. You guys claim to be fiscally responsible. Does that not twig in your head that maybe you should invest in the arts? You have the Bentway—a fabulous group—and you are uploading the Gardiner. You'd think you might worry about the Bentway? The Canada Ireland Foundation is doing phenomenal work on the waterfront. They have money from the feds, from the city of Toronto, from the government of Ireland, and what from the province of Ontario? Zero. I encourage you to get down there and check out the phenomenal work they're doing.

All in all, I just have to say Ontarians lose out with this budget. They're relying on you to help make their lives better—double ODSP, deal with the landlord-tenant tribunal, deal with the backlog with autism programs. Instead, this budget is a big, fat disappointment.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): I'll remind the members to make their comments through the Speaker, both in question and submissions and in answer.

Questions?

Hon. Sam Oosterhoff: I appreciate the member for her contributions to the debate this afternoon, and I want to especially direct my question to the member for Beaches–East York. I appreciated her passion as well. I know she talked about her perception that by adding more bike lanes, you actually somehow reduce congestion, so I'm asking two questions.

The first question would be, under that logic, would she support adding bike lanes onto the QEW—number one—if it's going to reduce congestion.

Number two, she talked about the arts, and she said there's nothing in here for the arts. Of course, I think she forgot to read about the \$50 million for the McMichael museum, the \$35 million for the Shaw centre, the \$60 million for the Ontario arts centre. So I'm wondering if she thinks that \$140 million there is nothing.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I would like to thank the member across the way for his heckling and talking throughout my speech.

So where should we start?

Sorry, I forgot to mention the investment in film and media. Thank you for that.

I'm not sure if that member has ever been on a bicycle, but, basically, when I bike, I'm not driving. If that's not logical to you, that I am taking a car off the road—and you say when you're sitting there in your car that you're stuck in traffic. You are traffic. You're one person in one vehicle.

I don't know about you, but I want Ontarians to get home safely to their families. Bike lanes help me get home safely.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

MPP Catherine McKenney: Thank you to the two members for the debate.

To the member from Beaches–East York: I also choose to cycle probably about 99% of the time that I move around my neighbourhood. I also have a car. It's quite a large car, as a matter of fact. I kind of like it, but it stays shiny in the garage because I keep it off of the road. I take transit, I walk, and I cycle.

Do you know of any other modern jurisdiction that is removing bike lanes from either their city or their province, anywhere?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much to the member from Ottawa Centre.

Since you're new, you probably weren't here when, last term—last Parliament—I asked a question: Stegosaurus, triceratops, raptors, and this Conservative government—what do they all have in common? That is that they're

dinosaurs—and that is their mentality of removing bike lanes in 2025.

No, I do not know of any other place on this entire planet that would be that backwards in their thinking, to remove bike lanes, and that would not want their constituents to get home safely.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: The member from Scarborough–Guildwood’s remarks tell you a lot about affordability and the struggles that people in her community are going through and people in my community are going through and, I’m sure, in many communities across the province, whether we’re in an urban or a rural riding.

Would something like taking the HST off of home heating and hydro, for example, do something to help her constituents?

Would something like a middle-income tax cut help her constituents, or even small business owners who are really struggling to get by?

Would a cut to the small business tax help the member from Scarborough–Guildwood and her constituents?

MPP Andrea Hazell: Thank you to the member from Ajax for that amazing question.

Of course, representing the people of Scarborough–Guildwood—as I said earlier, we were looking for support and help in this budget. We were looking for actually keeping monies in our pocket to get us through the affordability crisis.

For our Ontario Liberal Party—we know that we were supporting a tax cut for families, saving them \$1,150 per year. That’s real money that families can save for their children’s education, and also even save for their retirement, and so can afford not just groceries but quality food that they can provide for their children.

We brought forward a bill to cut the taxes and give the small businesses back \$18,000 per year.

This government, in this budget, gives zero tax cuts—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

Hon. Sam Oosterhoff: I appreciate again the opportunity to ask another question. Back to the member for Beaches–East York—and I appreciate that the member is a biker and I respect that. The member’s logic about bike lanes was that, if we add more bike lanes, we actually reduce congestion. I think you specifically said that. So my question is, very simply, do you believe we should add bike lanes to the Gardiner or the QEW? Yes or no?

1710

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Definitely not. I would not bike on a highway like that. I would like to bike on arterial roads within cities, like everyone else in world-class cities around the world does.

This whole fallacy on, “Well, we’re just going to move the cyclists to residential streets.” Well, those are not direct routes. Why should I move to, on my bike, be a second-class citizen and move to a residential street when you’re just sitting there in your car moseying along and

you get the direct route and I’ve got to hoof it when I’m there?

We can all share the road together. Just accept it. And cargo bikes with kids are out there—tons of them.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: My question: I was listening, but we heard in the budget—and any of you can answer—that the government is cutting \$42 million in firefighting. We remember the year that people in Toronto were complaining about the smoke, and we talked about that last budget. They had cut already in the budget. And now in this budget, another \$42 million.

They say, “Well, we’ve got emergency funds.” But this \$42 million comes out of base budget. That is cutting on boots on the ground for forest fires, on teams for forest fires. I’d like to hear your perspective on this—how this could affect forestry for that matter.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much for caring about our front-line workers. One of my older brothers is a deputy fire chief, and so I hear from him first-hand about the risks that they take—especially for forest fires. We need to be investing more in our forest fire workers.

But in order to do that, you would have to believe that we’re in a climate emergency, and you would have to read and listen to the stats and facts about how forest fires are growing every year, all over the province, all over the country, and pay attention to the price tag of inaction, and start preventatively—which this government doesn’t believe in doing anything preventatively. They just want to clean up their mess and any mess afterwards.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Further debate?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: It’s always an honour to rise to speak in this House today on the government’s budget bill. This budget talks a lot about highways, fantasy tunnels and booze, but it doesn’t actually talk about investing in people.

Where that is most profound is in the housing portion of this budget, where you’re seeing historic lows in housing starts, record highs in housing costs. The government’s doing nothing to bring in zoning changes so we can build homes people can afford in the communities they know and love where we already have infrastructure—nothing in this budget to reverse the 30-year underinvestment in non-profit and co-op housing.

Secondly, you see it in health care. We have a province right now—2.5 million people without access to a family doctor or nurse practitioner. We have rural hospitals experiencing unprecedented closures. And yet Ontario, with this budget, remains dead last in per capita funding for health care. As a matter of fact, it would take an additional \$13 billion just to get Ontario up to the Canadian average when it comes to health care.

We see it in lack of investments in our students. The government still hasn’t reversed the \$1,500-per-student cut to education that we’ve experienced in Ontario since

they were elected in 2018. That means higher classroom sizes and less supports for students with special needs.

We see it in post-secondary education, where the budget is actually cut an additional billion dollars for colleges and universities; where, again, Ontario is dead last in per capita funding for post-secondary education even though it's so vital to our economic success. It would take an additional \$7.2 billion just to get Ontario up to the national average at a time when we know our competitive advantage is investing in our young people, our workers.

If you're a person with disability, in this budget, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services—cut, \$200 million. People on disability support are being forced to live on \$1,300 a month when the average rent in this province is almost \$2,000. That math does not add up.

Climate: It's bad enough that the government is leading the country in increasing in climate pollution and our grid is 10% dirtier, but now they're actually going to cut wildland firefighters at a time—right now, when we're speaking, in northwestern Ontario and eastern Manitoba, we have fires that are leading to the evacuation of communities.

I'm just going to close as somebody who drives to Queen's Park in my electric vehicle every day. When I drive here and I see those cyclists whizzing by me, I say, "Thank you cyclists for choosing affordable transportation that makes my life easier as a car driver."

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

Mr. Dave Smith: To the member opposite: Since he brought up the fact that he drives an electric car, can the member support the measures that we have in the budget to make it easier to get those critical minerals out of the north so that we can increase the number of electric vehicles that he drives or does he think that we should do that mining in other jurisdictions that aren't as ethical as Ontario is?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I appreciate the question from my friend from Peterborough any day of the week. Absolutely, I support critical mineral mining. What I don't support is trampling on Indigenous rights and the constitutional duty to consult. What I don't support is not having environmental protections in place in the peatlands. What I don't support are special economic zones that eliminate labour laws, environmental protections and other laws that protect the people and places we love in this province.

We can be a global leader, Speaker, in environmentally responsible mining that partners with Indigenous communities but only if we respect those communities.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

MPP Wayne Gates: Thank you, I appreciate that. Maybe the member from Peterborough won't ask a question like that again. Just a suggestion.

A question, member: The AG report was very clear. They said that we should be investing in urgent care centres instead of closing them. In my riding, they're closing them down; they used to go 24/7, now they're less.

Our emergency rooms have 12 to 19 to 20 hours—hallway medicine.

Do you think that the AG is correct in investing in urgent care centres, or do you think the Conservatives are correct in shutting them down?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I always appreciate answering questions from my friend from Niagara. Obviously, the AG is right—not even just right in terms of improving health care but improving the fiscal performance of our health care system. It is far cheaper to have urgent care centres available to the public than it is to force people to go to emergency departments. So, we can improve care and lower costs at the same time so then we can take those cost savings and actually ensure that the 2.5 million people that don't have access to a family doctor or a nurse practitioner have one, so we don't have to close emergency departments in rural hospitals. Let's make smart, fiscally responsible choices to put people and patients first.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I thank the member from Guelph for his comments talking about housing because that is one of the biggest challenges that I think we're facing still as a province and as a country. We don't have enough housing supply right now. So I'm curious, from the member for Guelph, what he would have liked to see in the budget—because it really wasn't in the budget—on housing and how we get shovels in the ground now, not three, four, five, six years later.

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I think it's my first time answering a question from the member from Ajax, so thank you for that.

First of all, I'd like to see housing start numbers in the budget that actually even show that the government has any hope in heck of meeting our housing targets. We need to average 150,000 housing starts a year in Ontario. The budget projects 72,000 for this year, half of where we need to be—actually, less than half of where we need to be.

1720

I have put forward legislation that would legalize housing, removing the red tape for gentle density in mid-rise housing so we can increase housing supply of homes people can afford in the communities they know and love, where we already have infrastructure in place. That is the cheapest and fastest way to increase housing supply.

Second, 30 years of us not investing in non-profit and co-op housing, 30 years of under-investment, and this budget fails to even move us in that direction.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Further debate?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: It's about time that we unleash this patriotism that we all have within us on how proud we are to be part of Ontario. What this budget does for me and for our government is say that we are proud to be Ontarians, and that's why we have built strategies to combat the tariffs that have been threatening our jobs, that we have support plans to make sure that our workers know that we're there for them. What the other members fail to

realize is that without a strong economy, we have absolutely nothing.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): For the minister: That was your debate time. That wasn't a question.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Yes, that was a question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Okay, no, I asked for further debate, Minister. I asked for further debate and you rose, and now I'm going to ask for questions on your discussion.

Questions?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Speaker, point of order.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Member from Essex.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: The member has a point of order.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Point of order?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Mr. Speaker, at the time, there were 55 seconds on the clock. I was formulating a question, which was still part of the question-and-answer period for the member from Guelph.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Minister, I had called further debate as there was under one minute on the clock, and that's in my discretion, so I had called for further debate.

I will go to the member from Essex for a question.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I'll put a question to the minister. I know that the minister will have a lot to say, because there's a lot in the budget with regard to his ministry.

With regard to the ministry with which the minister has responsibility, the Ministry of the Solicitor General, I know that there are important investments in this budget, the budget 2025, which advances the goals and the purposes of this government. I know that the ministry has made important investments in the budget 2025, which will advance the goals of this government.

I'm primarily personally interested in the goals which involve enforcement, law enforcement, and particularly the ROPE program, but I will simply ask an open-ended question to the minister and ask him to comment with regard to the budget 2025 and with regard to his ministry. What does he feel is one of the most important advancements in his ministry and what does he feel in this budget are good investments for the purposes of his ministry?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: To my colleague from Essex, one of the things that we've said in this budget that we want to do is to support, as an example, the purchase of helicopters for the Windsor Police Service and for the Niagara Regional Police Service. This just goes to the commitment of our government that we will not stop when it comes to public safety.

When others told us to stop, like across the way, we didn't stop. That's why we've continued to make investments. This is why we take public safety seriously. This is why we're coming forward to help Niagara regional police and Windsor Police Service. This is why

we've helped other services across Ontario. This budget recognizes public safety as a priority.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

The member from—

Mr. John Vanthof: Timiskaming–Cochrane.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Thank you very much. You can go ahead.

Mr. John Vanthof: You're welcome.

I hope he takes this the right way, but that's one of the best speeches I've ever heard from the Solicitor General, but I realize that he was vastly cut short in time. So please take a moment and expand on what you really wanted to say. Thank you.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I want to thank my friend from Timiskaming–Cochrane. Again, he is a great supporter of public safety, especially for OPP Cochrane. I know that because I visited with him.

What I want to say is simple: The budget has to provide a framework to build Ontario, and that's exactly what this budget does. We're not going to stop in making sure that we do everything we can to combat the threat of tariffs, a threat that has never been more serious in the life of Canada and the province of Ontario.

I'm proud to serve under a government led by Premier Ford that would recognize and does recognize that when we have a strong economy, we have absolutely everything. That's why I will be supporting this budget.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Question?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I'd like to thank the Solicitor General for his brief remarks.

For the record, I did think it was a question, so now this is a good note for me as a new member in the chamber when further debate is called.

In my community, something that is important to residents is the issue of auto thefts. It's something that I heard a lot about during the campaign.

I'm wondering from the Solicitor General: In the budget, does the Solicitor General think that there is enough in order to combat auto theft in its current form? Because it is something that I'm hearing from my constituents quite frequently.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you to my friend from Ajax. The \$51-million investment that the government came forward with was a commitment that we will fight auto theft hard.

I went to Ottawa over a year ago to attend the national auto theft summit that the federal government put on. Ontario has led across the country, across our other provinces and territories, with a strategy and, I might add, a seriousness in setting a tone and expectation that the status quo will not fly. I've said this before: If anyone feels the need to steal a car, we have room for you in our jail. Just don't do it. We will do everything we can to protect Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Further debate?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm honoured to rise today to speak on behalf of the residents of Ottawa West–Nepean on this government's budget. I have to say, Speaker, this was a moment that called for urgency, but the government really didn't deliver. We have people who are challenged to afford life in Ontario right now, people who cannot afford a home, who do not have a family doctor, who are waiting far too long at the hospital, who are worried about their jobs moving to the US, and this government just did not meet the moment with this budget.

Health care is actually a great example of this. Not having a family doctor is the number one issue that I hear about from constituents. The Queensway Carleton Hospital is not the right size to serve our population.

We moved a motion and had debate in this House two weeks ago calling on the government to invest in health care infrastructure so that people would get the health care they deserved. The government voted against that, and in this new budget, the only new health care funding in it was for private clinics, which means we're going to see more of our money diverted to private profit rather than care.

The government did not invest in the expansion of the Queensway Carleton Hospital, so I guess they don't care about the wait times for access to health care in Ottawa, but I'm going to keep fighting until that money is there.

But I want to spend most of my time today talking about education because this budget is terrible for education. Our education system, both K to 12 and post-secondary in this province, are very shaky thanks to years of cuts from this government.

We know that it's incredibly important. It's important anyway to invest in our young people, to invest in their future, but it's even more important now, when we are facing this trade war. We need to have workers who are skilled enough to be competitive in a global environment, and unfortunately, this government is choosing to lean into cuts instead of actually investing in the education that would provide our students with those world-class skills.

That is certainly the case in post-secondary education, where the government had a \$1.2-billion funding cut to post-secondary education, and that's at a moment when colleges and universities are cutting programs. They're not sure they're going to be able to keep the lights on. And instead of maintaining funding, at least, so that we could stay in this precarious position, they're cutting funding.

1730

Algonquin College, in my riding of Ottawa West–Nepean, is already trying to eliminate a \$60-million deficit for this coming year. They're cutting 41 programs.

Remember, colleges provide students with direct-to-job-market kinds of skills. They work closely with local industry. And yet, this government is allowing these programs to be lost.

Algonquin College is closing the Perth campus because of the deficit that they're facing. When the Ontario home builders were here a couple of weeks ago, they were saying to me that that's a big loss because students in that part of eastern Ontario—they need graduates. They need people who have skills to work in the home construction

industry. This government claims to support that industry, and yet they're allowing that campus to close without providing any additional funding for post-secondary education.

Algonquin is having to close the academic upgrading program, which helps students to get credits so that they can enter post-secondary. You would think we would want more students, now more than ever, in post-secondary, and yet they have to close this program which actually helps bridge students into post-secondary and helps them succeed once they're there. Students who take this program are 10% more likely to finish their post-secondary studies. This is exactly the sort of thing you would think we would want to be investing in.

Algonquin is having to close the Academic Assistance for Adults with Developmental Disabilities program, which supports students who have developmental disabilities and is often the direct track into the labour force for these young people who might not otherwise have a way of getting into the labour force. I've heard from many families that this was incredibly important for their child. Now no new student in Ottawa is going to have that opportunity. Once again, we're seeing this government's cuts to education funding harm the most vulnerable people in our province the most.

And because of these cuts, Algonquin is also losing approximately 100 jobs.

You would think a government that is interested in protecting jobs right now would also be interested in protecting public sector jobs that are going towards developing our workforce in Ontario. Yet they're allowing these cuts to happen. And that is based on the existing funding. That's not even taking into account the \$1.2 billion in funding cuts for next year.

So we'll see how much more Algonquin and other post-secondary institutions have to cut next year, thanks to this government.

We're seeing very significant challenges in our K-12 system as well. Over the course that they have been in power, this government has cut funding to our elementary and secondary students by \$1,500 per student. The Minister of Finance was congratulating himself this morning that, for once in their term, funding is keeping pace with inflation. That's just not good enough. One year out of eight years doesn't make a difference when you have taken \$6.35 billion out of our school system since 2018. This year alone, there is \$561.7 million less than there was in 2018, once you account for inflation and enrolment. Just imagine how many teachers and education workers, paper, textbooks, pencils, and special education classes we could pay for if that \$561.7 million was just there. Make no mistake, our schools are in dire straits under this government. Our kids do not have the resources that they need. They're in larger class sizes. They do not have qualified teachers and education workers because we have a shortage. They are not in safe and healthy schools. The schools are crumbling. Yet this government couldn't even find it in themselves to close that funding gap.

Instead, what we've seen is the new education minister—the fourth in the space of a year—attacking school

boards. We have 40% of school boards in the province that are running deficits. The minister has been attacking three of them, in particular: the Toronto District School Board, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, and the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. In fact, he has ordered an investigation into them. Even though one of them has just had a report by Deloitte that the ministry has refused to release to the school board, they have still hired Deloitte to do another investigation into the board. I'm sure that there is nothing in the first report that says funding doesn't match expenses—and that's why they won't release it. But we'll see what the new investigations report. When you look at what kind of funding these boards have lost since this government came to power—it is massive.

The Toronto District School Board has lost \$918.7 million since 2018, and next year alone, they will be short \$127.1 million compared to 2018. They're looking at cuts of up to \$80 million, to balance their budget next year. If they had that difference in funding, if they still had that 2018 funding, they wouldn't be looking at cuts. There would be \$40 million more that could be invested into new programs and services.

The Toronto Catholic District School Board has lost \$273.2 million under this government, and next year they'll be \$22.3 million short compared to 2018. They're looking at cuts of \$65 million. They wouldn't be in that position if the government had just maintained funding since 2018—not even increased it, just maintained it.

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board has lost \$337.4 million since 2018, and they're short \$41.8 million next year compared to 2018. Last year, the OCDSB had to move \$9 million from their reserves to balance the budget, which shouldn't be happening, because reserves are meant for rainy days. You shouldn't need to rely on your reserves to balance the budget. But the OCDSB made that decision to save programs by moving that money from reserves to balance the budget. They still ended up in deficit because this government, which passed an unconstitutional Bill 124, owed remedies to the workers who had lost out on pay because of that. You would think, then, that the government would put forward the funding to actually provide those remedies, but what they did was provide that funding based on a formula, not based on the number of actual staff who had been working in the schools these school boards owed the remedies to. So the OCDSB ended up in deficit, after all, because of this government's failure to respect constitutional rights and then failure to make it right to the workers themselves. The OCDSB has already made significant cuts for next year, including closing the alternative program in the future entirely. But they have to cut an additional \$4 million from their budget, and that would be more than looked after—in fact, we would be able to reopen programs—with that \$41.8 million that they would have if funding had just kept pace this year with 2018. They would be able to invest over \$37 million in new programs.

So when the minister makes threats that these school boards have to eliminate the deficit, but they cannot touch

a single resource going into classrooms—that's a joke, when you're not restoring the funding. It is the government that has forced the deficits on these school boards, and there is no way for the school boards to eliminate the deficits until that gap is fixed.

But this government's blame game is—I mean, they bring game. It's like a giant game of Twister. The former, former, former minister blamed the teachers and education workers for everything he didn't like in education. Then we had a minister who wasn't around long enough to actually blame anybody. Then we had another minister who blamed teachers and school boards. Now the new, new, new minister is blaming school boards. It's like there's just a giant pile of arms and legs, as they're all trying to point in different directions.

Let's talk about what this actually means for our kids, in terms of what supports and resources they have. First of all, it means that our children are in much larger class sizes. We've lost 5,000 educators under this government, and this budget, by not closing the gap, is not going to restore those positions. So our kids are in larger and larger class sizes, which means they're not getting the attention they need, even as they've lost learning over the course of the pandemic.

We also have a teacher shortage, so we do not have enough qualified teachers to fill the positions in our schools that we need. The budget did put money towards 2,600 new teachers who will not be in our system for another two years, because they did nothing to shorten teachers' college. But 2,600 is a drop in the bucket, when we have 46,000 teachers in the province who are certified with the Ontario teachers' college but not working in our system because of the conditions that this government has created. So they would be much better off addressing the conditions that are driving teachers out of our system than to wait two years to add a tiny proportion of teachers back into the system.

There's nothing at all to address the shortage of education workers; we also have a big shortage of qualified education workers. And there's nothing to address the shortage of mental health professionals in our schools either. Our children are really struggling, Speaker: 90% of principals in the province say they need more help in providing mental health supports to our students, and yet there is only 22.9 cents per student per day in this budget for mental health. That is not going to add any mental health professionals to our schools, even though only one in 10 schools has regularly scheduled access to a mental health professional. That's just not going to cut it, Speaker. When a child is brave enough to ask for help, that help should be there. That's not going to happen under this budget.

1740

We also urgently need action on violence. The Auditor General reported in December that reports of violent incidents are up 114% across the province since 2017, and that doesn't even include all violent incidents because we know that many of them do not get reported. When we listen to our teachers and education workers, 77% of

ETFO members have said they have personally experienced or witnessed violence in our schools, and yet funding is a mere 15.4 cents per student per day in the midst of an emergency. That's just not going to cut it. The government needs to actually act with the urgency that this situation really requires.

On special education, our school boards are running a massive deficit. They are spending so much more money than what they are taking in from the government. In this current school year, they have spent \$582 million more than what they've gotten from the Conservative government, and that's for a system in which families are reporting that their child is not safe, that their child is not allowed to be at school. One third of children with disabilities have been sent home or told to stay at home. Half of families say that they are always or usually worried about their child's safety, and 80% say they're worried about their child's safety at least some of the time.

Thanks to our advocacy efforts and the efforts of parents, we have seen an increase that's greater than inflation here, but the increase in new special education funding falls short of closing the deficit by \$442 million. So we're not even close to eliminating the deficit, let alone making up the gap to ensure that our students with disabilities and special needs are actually receiving the safe, secure education that they deserve in the province of Ontario.

Student transportation is another area where we have successfully pushed this government to take some action. We're seeing more of an increase than inflation in funding this year, and yet, two years ago this government cut funding for student transportation to the OCDSB by \$6 million, and this new funding only provides \$2.8 million in new funding to the OCDSB. So we're not even talking about half of the gap that this government created.

For the French Catholic school boards in the province, this year they ran a deficit of \$11.7 million, but the new funding provided to these same boards next year is only \$8.9 million, so again, it's not eliminating the deficit that this government themselves created. And we know what the outcome of these deficits are, because when Renfrew county did not have school buses running for eight full weeks of the school year this year, the Ministry of Education sat down with the school boards and made them cut resources from the classroom. So the government knows perfectly well that this is taking teachers and resources out of the classroom when they do not properly fund student transportation, and yet they're not taking action.

We have a massive repair backlog for schools. We know it was \$17 billion five years ago; the government has stopped telling us what that number is now, which you know means that it's going up, not down, because they love to brag about marginal victories. And yet, over the past few years, they've only put \$1.4 billion towards repairs, and this year again—surprise—\$1.4 billion. So that number hasn't gone up.

What they have done is put \$575 million towards addressing the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, but that wasn't included in the \$17-billion backlog, because

until last year, the government wouldn't acknowledge it was a problem. But now, they have to justify that they closed the science centre because of this, so suddenly it becomes a problem in our schools so that they can explain why they had to close the science centre. So this is not actually reducing that school repair backlog at all, and they're still not addressing the fact that half of our schools have failed a lead test for drinking water in the past five years. There's no new funding for that.

Et je dois mentionner, Président, qu'il n'y a rien du tout dans ce budget pour l'éducation francophone en Ontario. Le sous-financement, le manque d'attention de la part de ce gouvernement sont pour eux un problème existentiel. Les Franco-Ontariens ont droit à une éducation égale en qualité à celle de la majorité, mais ce droit est en péril sous ce gouvernement.

La pénurie d'enseignants et enseignantes est plus extrême dans le système francophone, mais rien dans le budget ne reconnaît ce problème, et encore moins ne le résout. Le nombre d'enseignants avec permissions intérimaires dans le système francophone a augmenté de 317 % depuis 2014, mais le gouvernement ne promet pas qu'un pourcentage des nouveaux fonds pour la formation des enseignants sera pour les Franco-Ontariens.

Le gouvernement a annoncé un plan, il y a quatre ans maintenant, pour éliminer l'écart dans la formation des enseignants et enseignantes francophones, mais selon leurs propres données, ils n'ont pas atteint la cible par plus de 1 000 enseignants pendant les trois premières années du plan. Et maintenant, on annonce 2 600 enseignants de plus pour toute la province, pour les quatre conseils, mais seulement dans deux ans. Ça ne démontre pas l'urgence d'agir, Président.

Il faut que ce gouvernement commence à prendre au sérieux les droits des Franco-Ontariens et les différences entre le système francophone et le système anglophone, et de combler la pénurie d'enseignants et enseignantes est un bon point de départ.

I'm going to conclude by talking about our provincial schools. As I mentioned, it is so often our students who are the most vulnerable who pay the biggest price for this government's cuts, and our students in provincial schools, which are under the direct authority of the Minister of Education. There is no elected school board; it is the Provincial Schools Authority, which is appointed by the minister, and yet these schools are in dire shape.

The schools are crumbling. We have children who depend on their hands to communicate who are learning in a bathroom because it's the only place in the school that's warm enough for them to be able to use their hands. There's a massive teacher shortage, so many of these students are spending time in the library, being looked after by somebody who is not qualified to provide them with an education.

There are students who have fallen so significantly behind where they should be in learning that their parents are considering filing a lawsuit. We know that the province has already paid out \$23 million for class action suits, and yet there are at least three suits that are currently filed or pending that I'm aware of.

I don't think anybody would argue that this system, under the leadership of this government, is a success story. Yet do you know what the increase in funding for the provincial schools is this year, Speaker? It is zero. There is no increase at all.

This government is taking a system that is broken and failing these children, and they are not providing it with a penny of money more, and that is wrong. They should do better. Thank you.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I appreciated the submissions from the member with regard to the budget. I see that she concentrated exclusively on education issues. This is a very wide-ranging budget and I had questions related to other issues, but since she concentrated exclusively on education issues, I'll ask her an education question.

I know that Ontario schools are saddled with a massive repair backlog left behind by the Liberals, and we knew that was a fact—it's an absolute fact repeated not only by ourselves in the PC Party but also by members of the NDP. We recognize that there was a massive backlog left behind by the Liberals, especially in my riding of Essex. We know that we have built three brand new schools in my riding of Essex, and I think those are good investments and investments that the provincial government should make.

My question to the member is, does she support the rebuilding and opening of new schools such as the new schools in LaSalle, Amherstburg and Kingsville?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, a miracle has happened because we finally found something that the member for Essex and I agree on, which is that it is very shameful that the Liberals grew the repair backlog to \$15 billion while they were in power.

But what I would say is equally shameful is the fact that the Conservatives have grown it since then. We know they grew it by at least \$2 billion, but because they've refused to actually tell parents how much it's grown by over the past five years, we don't actually know how much you grew it by. You could tell us and then claim credit for the growth—just a suggestion.

The Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario has said if this government doesn't increase funding from what it's at now, then a decade from now, three quarters of schools in the province of Ontario will not be in a state of good repair. So it's not enough to build new schools if you're not going to maintain them. You wouldn't buy a house and then let it fall into complete disrepair.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

MPP Catherine McKenney: Thank you to my colleague for outlining what really should concern every single person in this province: how our education has deteriorated over the past eight previous years. I know I counted on her and leaned on her expertise during a recent review in Ottawa that saw cuts made in our school board, especially affecting kids with disabilities, special needs.

1750

I do want to ask though, maybe if you could—and I'm sure you've heard the stories as well—just recount also

some of what you're hearing from teachers, how they actually have to use their own money to fill the gaps that are left behind by this government.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thanks to my colleague from Ottawa Centre for that great question. A few teachers have shared a really powerful set of images with me, which is a picture of their classroom before they put in any of the resources that they paid for out of their own pocket and a picture of the classroom after they brought in all their own resources. The reality is that before they bring in their own resources, that classroom is bare. We're talking about tables and chairs, and that's it. Everything else in the classroom—the books, the resources that students are using—is all paid for by the teacher out of pocket.

I've spoken with a number of people who say it used to be that parents weren't asked to provide anything for their students; everything was provided at school. Now I know, as a parent, every year we get the list of, "Here are the things that you must send to school with your child." Then the teacher sends out a wish list during the school year saying, "I hope that we can find parents who will provide these things." It's like a wedding registry except it's for your kid's classroom. It really shouldn't be happening. Our children's access to books and to Kleenex in the classroom shouldn't depend on the goodwill of teachers and parents to buy those things for them.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Question?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I appreciate the member from Ottawa West-Nepean's remarks on education. In our classrooms, teachers, EAs and ECEs are going through quite a lot. They're going through burnout and they're dealing with issues of violence in the classroom, and primarily that is because of the lack of funding in our public education system. Students with special education needs aren't getting the support that they need. I'm wondering about your perspective on that, and what you would have liked to see in this budget that could help address that.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you to the member from Ajax for that fantastic question. We are really seeing teachers and education workers burning out. I already mentioned the 46,000 who are certified with the college but not teaching in our system, but what we're also seeing is that one in five new teachers is leaving within the first five years of teaching, and it's 30% of new teachers within the French-language system. So we really need to take action to make sure that we are retaining our qualified teachers and education workers and finding ways to bring them back. A big part of that is just properly investing in our system so that teachers and education workers are able to do what they do best, which is provide each child with the targeted support that they need to learn, instead of spending all their time running from crisis to crisis and going home at the end of the day knowing that they failed some of their students because, despite their best efforts, there was absolutely no way to get to every child who needed them that day.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): The member for Peterborough-Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you, Speaker. I appreciate that. You mentioned something—you said that there was a reduction in funding. In 2023-24, the education budget was \$37.1 billion; this year, it's \$41 billion. It's a \$3.9-billion increase in two years. That's 10.5%. Inflation was about 4.5%. How do you describe a 10.5% increase in the budget as a cut?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: It's a funny thing because this government brought in financial literacy classes for our students, which I don't disagree with, but they could use some financial literacy courses of their own. I think it should probably be mandatory for them, at least a course on what inflation is. We could probably add in population growth as well because of course that's an important driver of cost. If you do not keep your funding paced with inflation and population growth, then that is a cut. What the government has cut this year alone, compared to 2018, is \$561.7 million—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): I call the House to order. If I can't hear the answer, I might have to name some names. My apologies to the member from Nepean.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): The member for Ottawa West–Nepean, did you have your answer finished?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I was just offering to provide the member with a math class afterwards, Speaker, but really, I'm done my answer.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Question?

M. Guy Bourgouin : J'apprécie ton discours, députée d'Ottawa-Ouest–Nepean, puis de parler des enjeux franco-ontariens. Je pense que le gouvernement semble oublier que, quand tu es en minorité, ça coûte beaucoup plus cher. Puis, ils ne prennent jamais ça en considération. Ils ont tout le temps, tu sais, une approche qui répond à tout, mais tu ne peux pas prendre cette approche-là quand tu es en minorité. Je sais que, très souvent, ce qu'on voit dans l'éducation franco-ontarienne est qu'on est sous-financé.

J'aimerais vous entendre là-dessus parce que la communauté franco-ontarienne a beaucoup de difficulté. On prend du recul. On perd nos profs. S'il y a un problème dans le système en anglais, comment est-ce que le problème est encore plus gros dans notre système francophone? J'aimerais vous entendre là-dessus, s'il vous plaît.

M^{me} Chandra Pasma : Merci beaucoup pour la question. Oui, c'est tout à fait correct : les coûts pour les conseils scolaires francophones sont plus grands parce qu'ils sont moins nombreux, mais aussi, il y a plus de

distance entre les écoles. Les conseils scolaires sont plus petits, mais ils servent un territoire qui est beaucoup plus grand. Et souvent, il y a des problèmes qui sont uniques au système francophone, comme la difficulté de trouver les professionnels, la main-d'oeuvre francophone, et ils sont dans des bâtiments qui sont plus vieux et plus usés. Donc, il faut absolument investir plus pour avoir une éducation qui est équivalente en qualité à celle de la majorité, mais ce gouvernement oublie toujours que le système franco-ontarien existe, et si on ne donne pas une lentille francophone sur toutes les décisions, on va toujours nuire au système francophone, même si ce n'est pas le but, juste parce que le financement—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Further debate? The member for Etobicoke–Lakeshore.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you, Speaker, for the opportunity to speak to Bill 24, which is the Plan to Protect Ontario Act, and it includes the measures and changes required to support the implementation of budget 2024.

Touted as a response to US tariffs and economic uncertainty, the bill claims to protect Ontario through tax changes, infrastructure investments and economic stimulus. However, it's also left too many Ontarians unprotected, and it includes significant regulatory rollbacks, misaligned spending priorities and limited accountability.

As I sat listening to the budget, I was astonished at the time it took to get to some of the foundations that are really so important to supporting our well-being and our economic prosperity. For example, it took until minute 29 to get to any real mention of health care. Education came even later, and I was trying to remember after if I even recalled hearing the word “school” in the budget speech itself. I guess, given the proportion of spending the government is accountable for, as a provincial government, tied to health care, education, post-secondary education—it's about 68%—it was surprising to hear about them in such a small way.

I understand the reason why we wanted to consider investments that were going to help to stimulate the economy, and I actually support some of what needs to be done in that regard. But that was where I came away feeling a little bit disappointed that we don't see these things as absolutely essential to supporting—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): It is now 6 p.m., which is the start of today's evening meeting. Bill 24 was considered both this morning and this afternoon. In accordance with standing order 84(c), the House cannot consider Bill 24 again this evening unless there is unanimous consent to do so. The debate is therefore deemed adjourned.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

Report continues in volume B.

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McMahon, Mary-Margaret (LIB)	Beaches—East York	
Mulroney, Hon. / L'hon. Caroline (PC)	York—Simcoe	President of the Treasury Board / Présidente du Conseil du Trésor
Oosterhoff, Hon. / L'hon. Sam (PC)	Niagara West / Niagara-Ouest	Minister of Francophone Affairs / Ministre des Affaires francophones Associate Minister of Energy-Intensive Industries / Ministre associé des Industries à forte consommation d'énergie
Pang, Billy (PC)	Markham—Unionville	
Parsa, Hon. / L'hon. Michael (PC)	Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill	Minister of Children, Community and Social Services / Ministre des Services à l'enfance et des Services sociaux et communautaires
Pasma, Chandra (NDP)	Ottawa West—Nepean / Ottawa-Ouest—Nepean	Deputy House Leader / Leader parlementaire adjointe de l'opposition officielle
Piccini, Hon. / L'hon. David (PC)	Northumberland—Peterborough South / Northumberland—Peterborough-Sud	Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development / Ministre du Travail, de l'Immigration, de la Formation et du Développement des compétences
Pierre, Natalie (PC)	Burlington	
Pinsonneault, Steve (PC)	Lambton—Kent—Middlesex	
Pirie, Hon. / L'hon. George (PC)	Timmins	Minister of Northern Economic Development and Growth / Ministre du Développement et de la croissance économique du Nord
Quinn, Hon. / L'hon. Nolan (PC)	Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry	Minister of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security / Ministre des Collèges et Universités, de l'Excellence en recherche et de la Sécurité
Racinsky, Joseph (PC)	Wellington—Halton Hills	
Rae, Matthew (PC)	Perth—Wellington	
Rakocevic, Tom (NDP)	Humber River—Black Creek	
Rickford, Hon. / L'hon. Greg (PC)	Kenora—Rainy River	Minister of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation / Ministre des Affaires autochtones et de la Réconciliation économique avec les Premières Nations Minister Responsible for Ring of Fire Economic and Community Partnerships / Ministre responsable des Partenariats économiques et communautaires pour le développement du Cercle de feu
Riddell, Brian (PC)	Cambridge	
Rosenberg, Bill (PC)	Algoma—Manitoulin	
Sabawy, Sheref (PC)	Mississauga—Erin Mills	
Sandhu, Amarjot (PC)	Brampton West / Brampton-Ouest	
Sarkaria, Hon. / L'hon. Prabmeet Singh (PC)	Brampton South / Brampton-Sud	Minister of Transportation / Ministre des Transports
Sarrazin, Stéphane (PC)	Glengarry—Prescott—Russell	
Sattler, Peggy (NDP)	London West / London-Ouest	
Saunderson, Brian (PC)	Simcoe—Grey	
Schreiner, Mike (GRN)	Guelph	
Scott, Chris (PC)	Sault Ste. Marie	
Scott, Laurie (PC)	Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock	
Shamji, Adil (LIB)	Don Valley East / Don Valley-Est	
Shaw, Sandy (NDP)	Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas / Hamilton-Ouest—Ancaster—Dundas	
Skelly, Hon. / L'hon. Donna (PC)	Flamborough—Glanbrook	Speaker / Présidente de l'Assemblée législative
Smith, Dave (PC)	Peterborough—Kawartha	
Smith, David (PC)	Scarborough Centre / Scarborough-Centre	
Smith, Hon. / L'hon. Graydon (PC)	Parry Sound—Muskoka	Associate Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing / Ministre associé des Affaires municipales et du Logement
Smith, Laura (PC)	Thornhill	
Smyth, Stephanie (LIB)	Toronto—St. Paul's	
Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie) (NDP)	St. Catharines	
Stiles, Marit (NDP)	Davenport	Leader, Official Opposition / Chef de l'opposition officielle Leader, New Democratic Party of Ontario / Chef du Nouveau Parti démocratique de l'Ontario
Surma, Hon. / L'hon. Kinga (PC)	Etobicoke Centre / Etobicoke-Centre	Minister of Infrastructure / Ministre de l'Infrastructure
Tabuns, Peter (NDP)	Toronto—Danforth	
Tangri, Hon. / L'hon. Nina (PC)	Mississauga—Streetsville	Associate Minister of Small Business / Ministre associée des Petites Entreprises

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
Thanigasalam, Hon. / L'hon. Vijay (PC)	Scarborough—Rouge Park	Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions / Ministre associé délégué à la Santé mentale et à la Lutte contre les dépendances
Thompson, Hon. / L'hon. Lisa M. (PC)	Huron—Bruce	Minister of Rural Affairs / Ministre des Affaires rurales
Tibollo, Hon. / L'hon. Michael A. (PC)	Vaughan—Woodbridge	Associate Attorney General / Procureur général associé
Triantafilopoulos, Effie J. (PC)	Oakville North—Burlington / Oakville-Nord—Burlington	Deputy Speaker / Vice-Présidente Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Présidente du Comité plénier de l'Assemblée législative
Tsao, Jonathan (LIB)	Don Valley North / Don Valley-Nord	
Vanthof, John (NDP)	Timiskaming—Cochrane	Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire de l'opposition officielle
Vaugeois, Lise (NDP)	Thunder Bay—Superior North / Thunder Bay—Supérieur-Nord	
Vickers, Paul (PC)	Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound	
Wai, Daisy (PC)	Richmond Hill	
Watt, Tyler (LIB)	Nepean	
West, Jamie (NDP)	Sudbury	
Williams, Hon. / L'hon. Charmaine A. (PC)	Brampton Centre / Brampton-Centre	Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity / Ministre associée des Perspectives sociales et économiques pour les femmes
Wong-Tam, Kristyn (NDP)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	