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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

Monday 30 March 2026

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

Lundi 30 mars 2026

The House met at 0900.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Good morning, everyone.

Prayers.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

PLAN TO PROTECT ONTARIO ACT (BUDGET MEASURES), 2026

LOI DE 2026 SUR LE PLAN POUR PROTÉGER L'ONTARIO (MESURES BUDGÉTAIRES)

Mr. Bethlenfalvy moved second reading of the following bill:

Bill 97, An Act to implement Budget measures, to enact, amend or repeal various statutes and to revoke various regulations / Projet de loi 97, Loi visant à mettre en oeuvre les mesures budgétaires, à édicter, à modifier ou à abroger diverses lois et à abroger divers règlements.

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

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I will be sharing my time with the great Solicitor General and the Associate Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, who will, I'm sure, be here anon.

Madam Speaker, I point out that the world has changed. From global economic and trade tensions to supply chain disruptions and shifting markets, across Canada and the world, we are seeing the effects of economic uncertainty and its impact on the global economy.

Our fellow jurisdictions are announcing record deficits. Some of them are increasing taxes, and of course some are entertaining job cuts in the public sector.

But here in Ontario, we are choosing a different path—one where we not only don't raise taxes, but we indeed cut them; one where we use our strong balance sheet to make life more affordable; one where we support job growth, not stifle it; and one where we continue to deliver record investments to efficiently and sustainably support programs and services that uplift people and uplift families. This is our plan. It is cautious where it must be and ambitious where it should be.

It is proven that Ontario workers, families, businesses and communities continue to be resilient in the face of all odds.

Last year alone, Ontario created 81,000 new jobs in the private sector, and our economy grew by 1.2%, higher

than projected by that same private sector. And despite global headwinds, Ontario's economy showed resilience in 2025 by outperforming many of the key target projections set in last year's budget and fall economic statement. Not only did real GDP grow by 1.2%, higher than the 0.8% forecast in last year's budget, but in fact, Ontario is one of the few reporting provinces with a path to balance and one of the lowest deficits in all of Canada relative to GDP.

For the first time in two decades, Ontario received two credit rating upgrades, maintaining AA ratings across all four major rating agencies. These are clear signs that we've been responsible with taxpayers' money.

Thanks to our responsible fiscal management of our province's finances, we are able to continue putting money back into people's and businesses' pockets in order to boost our economy and invest in the services that matter most.

Protecting Ontario means protecting the economic foundations that make our province strong and investing to generate sustainable returns that compound for future generations. And to do that, our government is going to be accelerating our investments in Canadian-owned and Ontario-owned companies, in the high-growth sectors of most importance to our economic prosperity—sectors like artificial intelligence, defence, advanced manufacturing, life sciences, energy, and of course, many others that boost our economy.

That is why our government is proposing to leverage the \$4-billion Protect Ontario investment fund to further our economy even more. This fund would help identify and execute on a pipeline of new opportunities to advance Ontario's long-term economic and strategic priorities and ultimately help us set the stage for Ontario's continued economic success in a changing world.

The Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus, one of our many fantastic regional partners, had this to say about our new investment fund: The creation of the "\$4-billion Protect Ontario investment fund will help drive investment, support local employers, and position western Ontario for continued growth." I'm sure the member from western Ontario would agree with that. And that's according to Warden Marcus Ryan, chair of the WOWC, the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus.

Mr. Speaker, this is a government that strives for continued growth that can be felt not just in western Ontario, but all of Ontario. That's why we need to diversify and strengthen key sectors and reinforce our competitive advantages, and why we must continue attracting new investment, encourage businesses to choose Ontario by driving competitiveness.

Businesses right across Ontario have spoken, and we have heard them clearly. They need our help to boost competitiveness and reduce the cost of doing business, and we couldn't agree more. That is why our government is providing \$10 billion in cost-saving supports for businesses this year alone. And it's why our government is proposing, through our 2026 budget, to lower the cost of capital investments for a broad range of assets, to provide over \$3.5 billion of income tax relief over four years for Ontario businesses. This is an impactful measure that we know would deliver the strong environment that businesses need to compete and thrive in.

But you know as well as I do, Mr. Speaker, that our government is not stopping there.

That is why, through the 2026 budget, we are also proposing an historic tax cut for small businesses that would see their corporate income tax rate lowered by over 30%, from 3.2% to 2.2%.

Interjection.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I was quite sure the minister of small business would applaud that move.

This would translate to an additional \$1.1 billion in income tax relief for more than 375,000 small businesses right across Ontario for the next three years and help secure the environment for even greater job growth.

Mr. Speaker, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce was one of the many organizations that called for these impactful measures. After hearing the news of our government's actions, this is what they had to say: "We welcome the government's cut to small business taxes and its focus on incentivizing productivity through targeted tax measures, responding directly to the Ontario chamber's call. With cost pressures and uncertainty weighing on business confidence, these measures give businesses" the room to build resilience, the room to reinvest and the room to grow." This is from Daniel Tisch, president and CEO of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce.

We are delivering economic prosperity, and our partners in the private sector see it too. Our government's actions are fostering a more predictable, competitive business environment. We are doing so while not only leading the way to unlock free trade in Canada, but also by speeding up approvals for major projects through the "one project, one process" framework for advanced exploration and mine development and expansion, including the Ring of Fire. We are making it happen, and it all starts with productivity and innovation.

0910

Ontario's long-term prosperity depends on our ability to accelerate the development and adoption of new technologies, attract private investment and commercialize Ontario-made research. This is why we are investing in sectors like life sciences, advanced manufacturing and emerging defence technologies, and it is why we are focused on protecting and commercializing our intellectual property to support future generations of economic prosperity.

The Ontario Bioscience Innovation Organization had this to say about our government's recent action to deliver

on these fronts through this budget and beyond: They are "grateful for the sustained investment in the critical technology initiatives, which is accelerating the commercialization of technologies that will empower the next generation of innovation, drive job growth and ensure Ontario companies remain globally competitive." This is from Maura Campbell, president and CEO of the OBIO.

It has never been more important for us to invest in our homegrown talent and innovation, and that means helping companies stay competitive, scale up and grow. To support that growth, we need the right foundations in place.

Our government's Building Ontario Fund, for example, allows companies to partner with Canadian institutional investors to build critical projects that might not otherwise move forward, from long-term care to student housing, affordable housing and even nuclear energy generation.

As power demand potentially increases up to 90% by 2050, our ability to position ourselves for the future will depend greatly on our ability to power our economy.

That is why we are taking direct action to support clean nuclear energy generation across this great province. From Wesleyville in Bruce county to Darlington and Bruce and, of course Pickering, Ontario's clean nuclear energy generating capacity is set to create—get this—150,000 new job opportunities. That's job opportunities right across the province, including the north, in Timmins, and midwest Ontario and downtown Ontario and, of course, southwest Ontario and just west Ontario and up in Kenora and Thunder Bay and beyond, and—wait for it—eastern Ontario, including Kingston and Belleville and all the great jurisdictions in between. These are jobs that the people right across this great province can count on for long-term growth, with good salaries and strong security—the kind of jobs we want to continue building.

That's why we are taking a comprehensive approach to building Ontario's workforce, from the classroom to the job site and beyond. We've invested in required technology and skilled trade workshops in high school; invested \$6.4 billion more in our colleges and universities, to train our students for in-demand jobs by funding 70,000 more seats in STEM, health care, skilled trades and education; and invested \$1.6 billion in skills and employment training this year to support workers looking to retrain and re-skill. This is the workforce our government wants to build today and for future generations to come, and we know it's the workforce our good friends and partners in the skilled trades want too.

The Carpenters' Regional Council has come out and said, "Budget 2026 demonstrates this government's continued commitment to building the workforce Ontario needs for the future." That's from Tom Cardinal, president of the carpenters' union. He went on to say that our investments to support the training of workers are a recognition of a vital role that unions play in recruiting new workers into the skilled trades, connecting them to good jobs, and providing the industry-driven training and supports to ensure their success.

Mr. Speaker, this is a government that invests in our workforce pipeline from end to end and that leverages

every advantage in every sector we have, and as I've mentioned, including artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, cyber security, shipbuilding, aerospace, and many more. We will continue to strengthen these sectors by attracting investments in Ontario. And we will do so because when you invest in Ontario, you're not just moving money; you're building capability and delivering resilience for generations.

Building for generations is exactly what our \$210-billion infrastructure plan is all about. It's a plan that uses the strength of our credit rating and balance sheet to build the critical infrastructure to keep goods moving and people working—critical infrastructure that includes our growing highway network; the largest public transit expansion in North America; and, yes, dozens of new schools, including those in Whitby; hospitals and long-term-care beds right across the province.

We are building all of this and more, because that is how you stimulate economic growth while creating tens of thousands of good jobs, and help, at the same time, future generations by giving them the tools they need to live, to work and make a difference in the world. Simply put, it's about building communities.

That is why our government is proposing, in partnership with the federal government, to remove the full 13% of HST for eligible buyers of new homes valued up to \$1 million. This would provide up to \$130,000 in relief, and this amount would be maintained for new homes valued up to \$1.5 million, helping more Ontarians achieve the dream of home ownership, and building stronger communities across the province, including Halton Hills.

We would continue our government's long track record of taking decisive measures to cut taxes and put more money back in people's pockets—like removing highway tolls, launching the One Fare program, and, of course, cutting the gas tax.

Mr. Speaker, we are able to take these decisive actions to make life more affordable, thanks to the responsible management of the province's finances. It's the same reason why we are able to continue delivering record investments into public services that our communities depend on—investments that should always be, first and foremost, for the students, the patients and the most vulnerable who depend on them, as well as the teachers, the personal support workers, the health care workers and the social workers who deliver them.

Mr. Speaker, in speaking of our government's proposed budget, the Ontario Hospital Association had this to say about our historic actions: "At a time of unprecedented economic uncertainty, the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA), alongside Ontario's hospitals, thanks the government of Ontario for its continued investment in hospitals, including the 4% increase in funding for patient services announced in the 2026-27 Ontario budget." This is from Anthony Dale, CEO of the Ontario Hospital Association.

We are strengthening the delivery of public services, managing the books responsibly, modernizing our programs, and reducing bureaucracy so resources can be focused where they matter most: delivering efficient, high-

quality, front-line services to the people who need them. We will continue to be there for them.

And we will continue to build communities that they and everyone else can feel safe in; first, by continuing to invest in the continued training of our brave police officers—thank you to the Solicitor General for his leadership in this regard—and secondly, by investing more to keep criminals behind bars, by building more jails and hiring more correctional officers. Once again, thank you to the Solicitor General. We know that these two initiatives are strengthening policing and community safety, something that families right across Ontario deserve.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, our plan is working. As I said before, it is cautious where it needs to be and ambitious where it should be.

As we look to pass this proposed budget, I must ask the opposition—my colleagues from the NDP, the Liberals, the Greens, and the independents: Join us. Join us and support our government's income tax cut to businesses that will save them billions and create more jobs.

0920

Will you support our continued record investments in health care and the \$64 billion to build more hospitals, care for more patients and better equip our caregivers?

Will you support our tax cuts to the HST that will make housing more affordable for families and youth looking to buy a home?

Mr. Speaker, will they support our new record investments in the Ontario Autism Program to help children and youth live a healthy life?

I look forward to seeing what our colleagues decide to do. Right now, they have a choice to make: They can support this government and this historic budget that cares for people today and builds a strong Ontario that will last for generations, or they can vote no and prove to Ontarians once again that they are not interested in being part of the solution; only that they are interested in playing politics and playing with the well-being of people, businesses and communities. Our government will not do that.

Our government is here to tell people, businesses, families and communities that we have a plan. It's a plan that keeps Ontario united as a province.

And much like the rest of Ontario, I hope we see a united Legislature too, where all members from all parties work with our government to build prosperity, build resilience, grow the economy, cut taxes, invest in our growth, break down barriers and deliver better services.

Mr. Speaker, I am extremely proud of the work we have done so far, but I am even more proud of the hard work and resilience of Ontarians.

This proposed budget and the measures contained within it are our government's reaffirmation of our commitment to protect Ontario in today's changing world. We will continue to lead by example, and we will continue to build a better and brighter place for today and for tomorrow.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): I recognize the Solicitor General.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: It's a privilege to follow my colleague, our incredible Minister of Finance, and to speak in support of Bill 97, Plan to Protect Ontario Act.

This budget reflects the leadership of one particular person who has led by example since June 2018, and that's our Premier, the Honourable Doug Ford.

Mr. Speaker, please let me share my own enthusiasm and love for our province, and let me share with those in the Legislature today some remarks I gave just a few weeks ago, when I had the privilege of watching almost 525 incredible individuals graduate their basic constable training at the Ontario Police College in Aylmer, Ontario. That day was a special day. I challenged the class to go back to the anthem that we proudly heard sung at the march past—which, by the way, is both commonplace and miraculous at the same time. It's commonplace—as the member from Chatham-Kent-Leamington knows, because he graduated there—to see the formality of the marches and the bands and the pipes. But it's miraculous to witness something incredible: people coming forward to help protect Ontario. That day, I said to the class, “Go back to the anthem that many of us take for granted.” It was only a week ago, this one week back, when we heard the singer in this chamber sing O Canada—and it's in its second stanza, those words, “true patriot love in all of us command.” I said to the class that day, “What are we asked to be commanded to do? What is the command? I think the command is to love our province and our country that much more.”

Today, as we talk about Bill 97, an important bill that addresses that the times that we are in are not historically something that we are used to in my generation—and I know some of us were born the very same year: the member from Timiskaming-Cochrane, my friend from Haliburton, and a few others who might be more anonymous. We were part of the generation that grew up as young kids in 1967, and we remember the theme song that Premier John Robarts, the legendary Premier of Ontario, had written—Ontario is a place to stand, and it's a place to grow. It invoked optimism. It invoked unleashing a spirit of pride. I have to say that, through the years from 1967 perhaps almost to the present, our pride waxed and waned and we did not pay as much attention as we should to things that are important around us. I think, in part, where the times find us today and the dramatic implications of changes to our historic relationship with trading with our US partner—I call our US friends “kin,” which is another word for family. It means that we've taken for granted—not only through my generation, but through my parents' and their parents'—that the US and Canada have always been the closest of friends. And do you know what? We are today, as well.

But the trade implications of changing the ground rules and the tariffs that had been imposed on Canada have caused us to look back, inwards. It has caused us to imagine in Canada and in Ontario that we can be much more self-reliant on ourselves. It has asked us to be innovative. It has asked us to bring the best entrepreneurial spirit forward. It has asked us to make critical investments

in our province, in infrastructure never before imagined, on a scale that we are now seeing in hospitals, in roads, in bridges—making investments in our public safety, making investments in our health care and in our education, and at the same time staying true to what Premier Ford said: that this government, under his leadership, will never raise a tax, because we believe—

Interjections.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: Thank you.

We believe that governments have a role to play, but it's not taking your money every year, incrementally, over and over again; it's understanding that when people work hard, whatever they do—as tradesmen, as doctors, as lawyers, as academics—the money that people make is their money, and they should see it to make sure that their kids and their grandkids are taken care of.

Mr. Speaker, this bill, for me, says a few things that I want to touch on. It talks about our resilience. It talks about that we're never giving up or giving in. It talks about protecting Ontario, also, from a lens of public safety, something that I am passionate about; again, I'll tell you why.

In the almost four years that I have had the highest honour of my life, to be in the position of Solicitor General, I have witnessed over 6,000 people graduate the Ontario Police College. I've witnessed thousands of people join fire services and seen them as they've received their helmets. I've seen our newest correctional officers, probation and parole officers come forward. I've seen people who want to be animal welfare inspectors. I've seen people who have joined the coroner's office and the Centre of Forensic Sciences, who have made a unilateral decision: “I want to protect Ontario.” And for that and many more reasons, I felt my role was to be the Premier's ambassador, to travel as extensively as I have and to send a message of confidence that we appreciate people coming forward to keep us safe.

At the end of the day, the fundamental rights that we have, each universal, are to make sure that we can see our kids off to school in the morning safely, that we can go to work and shop, that we can play in the park, that we can worship, that we can go about our lives safely. This inherent right is something that is sacred to me and something that I uphold every single day, in supporting those people who keep us safe.

For me and the Premier, protecting Ontario, as I've said many times, doesn't just mean anything—it actually means everything.

0930

This budget that was tabled last week is a fiscal plan that also pays specific attention to our public safety. It's a plan that makes sure that the generational investments that we are making will strengthen the network of our public safety.

It will say that Operation Deterrence, as an example—something that this government brought in in recognition that the federal government, unfortunately, when it comes to border safety, can't do it alone. We have some of the most amazing OPP, First Nations and municipal police

services that have helped strengthen our border safety, reduce the amount of fentanyl and other illegal and illicit drugs coming into our country. That's something that has been very personal. I said last week, as a matter of fact, in this chamber—I gave examples of how much fentanyl and other illicit drugs were taken off the street as a result of Operation Deterrence. This budget will build on the success of Operation Deterrence, with an additional \$32.5 million. That's why we call it Operation Deterrence 2.0. This includes a new border security grant for drones and marine units and new surveillance technology.

I had the privilege again, over the past year, to understand and see for myself just how large our border is with our American counterparts. You have to go from Cornwall all the way out to Fort Frances; it's over 2,000 kilometres. While I didn't stop at every stop point that existed, I did stop at many. I stopped in Cornwall and Kingston. I stopped in Niagara. I stopped in Windsor. I stopped out in the Soo. I stopped in Pigeon River, just outside beautiful Thunder Bay. Along the way, it dawned on me that we have taken for granted this large, unprotected border with the US. The US has taken border safety incredibly seriously, and I want to acknowledge that. What we have to do, from a Canadian standpoint but from also an Ontario standpoint, is to mirror what they are doing, to make sure that our borders remain safe. This means stronger intelligence and better coordination and expanded policing capacity.

So by doubling down on Operation Deterrence, we're sending a message that public safety matters.

I have to say, as I walk through my incredible community of York Centre, which is diverse and representative of many languages and representative of people who have settled here and are proud of our community, who champion our diversity, we look at the fact that public safety means everything.

That's why our government, led by the Premier, has been incredibly unapologetic when it comes to standing up for a person's right to defend themselves in their own home and to understand that our streets must be safe—and that means all across Ontario.

That's why we led by example the conversation on bail reform. We want to always hold offenders to account. This means that the additional monies in this year's budget of \$8.3 million into the Bail Compliance and Warrant Apprehension Grant fund will send a further message: that wherever you are in Ontario, if you are compelled to commit a crime, if you are compelled not to join the virtual everyone who can live lawfully, firstly, we're going to find you, and secondly, I've got a place for you in our jails.

That brings me to the next point: This budget specifically addresses a continuation of funding—more money in our correctional system.

I might add, it was actually quite surprising for me—I'm a person who is supported by an incredible ministerial office team. I want to thank them for the job they do every day. It's a labour of love to work together. Also, on the constituency office side, I am led by what I call my chief of staff in my constituency, Marlene, who I call the

enforcer there because she enforces my discipline and my diligence to help serve my constituents as hard as I do.

When we talk about the investments we need to keep our communities safe, we go back to the investments we have made in corrections. It's not just the thousands of people who have become correctional officers, and it's not just the half a billion dollars that we know are being spent, that we have intentionally decided to spend in our jails to make them more modern—it's not that alone; it's understanding what the Ontario Liberals did for 15 years. We are still confronting their story of neglect. It's the seven jails that they closed—by the way, I'm very close to announcing very soon that we will be reopening one in beautiful Brantford, Ontario, a jail that was not only closed by the Liberals, but they decided to renovate it right after they closed it. I'm going to make sure that jail is reopened. Under the leadership of Premier Ford, we will go down the line. The next one on our list is the Walkerton jail, in Minister Thompson's riding. I'm going to work hard to see if that can happen.

The investments that we're making should also be transparent. When I said to Ontarians exactly where I would open up new spaces and build new jails and I gave the timeline to which we would do it—we've never before had any precedent that the government would give exact details to the extent that we have.

Just a few weeks ago, before we returned, I was with our government House leader and the Premier in beautiful Brockville to make another announcement: that we are going to be re-expanding the jail in Brockville.

When you add the beds that we brought on in London at the RIC, which is the regional intermittent centre, and the TIC, the Toronto Intermittent Centre, which will be opening back up in a few weeks; when we go to the modular builds that were completed; when we go to the new jail in Thunder Bay that will be opened—just as we said we would, substantial completion later this year, beds to open to follow—we have been specific in every regard. And do you know what? Ontarians appreciate it. They appreciate honesty, they appreciate transparency, and they appreciate when Premier Ford will stand up to say, "We will, as a government, protect Ontario."

The 700 new hires in the correctional system, over and above everything else, which represents a tremendous investment in this budget, is another example of how we are leaving no stone unturned.

At the end of the day, I do believe that virtually everyone in Ontario wants to live lawfully. They want to respect their neighbours. They want to understand that Canada and the province of Ontario is a special place. And they have to always understand there is somebody there who will have their backs.

I believe if we want to have the backs of everyone who keeps us safe, we have to make sure that the places that they are trained in are state-of-the-art.

The billion-dollar commitment to reimagine the Ontario Police College—the member from Chatham-Kent-Leamington was there many years ago. It has to be reimaged for a future generation.

And our incredible people who are trained at the Ontario Provincial Police Academy in beautiful Orillia, Ontario, have to also envision a fully modern, renovated, innovative, imaginative place to be trained. We're excited about that.

At the end of the day, I want to circle back to where I started. All of us, on all sides of this House, have a common thread. It doesn't matter what party we're from. It doesn't matter who in our family may have served in this chamber before, because the stories I still hear—yourself, who's sitting in the chair—it's a remarkable love for our province.

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If not now, with the greatest of urgency, please tell me: When would be a better time to stand up for the love we have for our province? Sometimes I look at our flags and I say we can't just look at the flag as being a flag. This is our flag.

Monsieur le Président, tous nos drapeaux—le canadien, l'ontarien et le franco-ontarien—ont de la signification. Ils représentent la fierté, la valeur de notre diversité et tout ce qu'il y a de bien en nous. Notre province, monsieur le Président, et notre pays ont déjà fait face à de graves défis. Chaque fois, nous en sommes sortis plus forts et plus unis. Et surtout maintenant, nous ne devons pas sous-estimer la puissance de notre fierté en notre province et en nous-mêmes.

It means that we have to take pride in our flag, in our identity, in everything that's special in our province. This budget gives us an opportunity to say to young and old—to say to my parents, to my own dad, Max, who will be 95 later this year, and my mom, who's closing in just a few years behind—that everything they worked for, everything their parents gave to them, everything that is being passed to me, everything I will pass to my children will be based on a common thread of love and respect for our province. Nothing should come in the way, especially now, of standing up to protect Ontario on the common thread that we all share.

It has been a privilege to speak to this bill today.

I yield the floor to my friend from Parry Sound—Muskoka.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): I recognize the Associate Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Hon. Graydon Smith: It's great to be back here in the chamber after a weekend back in the riding, where I was able to talk to people about our 2026 budget, A Plan to Protect Ontario.

I just want to take a moment to thank the Minister of Finance, to thank the Premier of Ontario, to thank Minister Kerzner for his words.

But back to the finance minister and the Premier, for their steadfast dedication to Ontario—to prepare a budget that meets the moment, meets the times that we are in. It takes a look not only at the circumstances that we are dealing with today, which we all know are uncertain geopolitical and economic times—it takes all that into consideration and asks a fundamental question: How can we

be the very best Ontario we can be? I think that is explained through the many, many pages of the budget.

Speaker, when I was at home, I also had the opportunity to speak with people this weekend about their impressions of the budget, and their impressions, to me, were that we're making the investments in the places where we need to, making sure that we're protecting workers, making sure that we're giving people an opportunity to take the next steps in their lives—again, all shrouded in this uncertainty and uncertain times that we are in.

I would not relish, honestly, being the Minister of Finance right now. There are a lot of different inputs and things that go into fashioning a budget during the best and easiest of times, if there is such a thing in the financial world, but during uncertain times that work becomes that much more difficult. So, again, thanks to him.

Speaker, you'll know—and I've talked about it many times, when I've spoken in this chamber before—that I have a history not only as an MPP for Parry Sound—Muskoka but also as a former municipal politician representing the town of Bracebridge and the district of Muskoka. I cut my teeth on those town budgets and on those district budgets many years ago. The plan that was within every one of them was always to ask the question, “What do we need to do today, and what do we need to prepare for in the coming years? What does the next 10 years look like? What does the next 20 years look like?” Those almost two decades I spent in municipal government, I think, were certainly very valuable for me, to try to gain that eye when we look at a circumstance—not only to ask the questions about the immediacy, but about the future. I was pleased to do that work, to serve on the boards of Ontario Small Urban Municipalities and as the president of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario. Of course, when you serve in those positions, you gain an even more unique perspective on public policy. I was the person who used to come in and lead making the asks. Now I play a role as Associate Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and people come to me and make those asks. So I have a great deal of empathy and understanding for what it takes to keep municipalities solid; to make sure that they, as one of the foundational governments of our system here in Ontario, are getting what they need to do the job that they do every day.

That's why, again, I'm proud of this budget. Things that allow municipalities to be able to look forward and plan are very important.

I remember taking a car ride with the Minister of Finance; he very graciously came and visited the riding not too, too long ago. As we drove around visiting businesses and talking about what the landscape of Parry Sound—Muskoka looked like economically, we also talked about municipalities in the time that I referenced earlier, and that importance of stability and predictability.

I'll talk a little bit more about the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund later, but I would highlight that it's things like that—we lay out that financial path for municipalities, to tell them, “This is the way that we are going to support you, and we're going to raise that money

that we use to support you, with unrestricted funds, for you to deploy best in your community.” And municipalities can take that and plan around it, and make sure that the stability that they need gets reflected in their budget documents.

The other thing, of course, that I want to talk about today, in my role as Associate Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, is the provincial portion of the HST that is being cut for new home builds in Ontario. We’ll reflect back to last fall, when we made a historic step to remove that portion of the HST, in concert with the federal government, for first-time homebuyers. We know that we want people to be able to take that first step, to be able to get into a home, to live the dream of home ownership that so many have grown up with, that so many have expected. You could certainly argue that we have an implicit understanding amongst generations here in Ontario and Canada that if you work hard and do the right things—save some money—you’ll be able to achieve that home. We also know that under the last several years of odd and different circumstances, beginning with the pandemic and extending into the geopolitical and economic issues I talked about earlier, that dream of home ownership has become more difficult for many. Again, that’s why that step was so important to take at the time—to signal, especially to those young families out there, that that dream shouldn’t be too far away from you; that we want to work together with you to help achieve that.

We also know that there are cost pressures for everyone in the sector, and that when we look at the number of new homes that have been built in Ontario in recent times, it has struggled to keep up with the demand. So it was so refreshing, and it was such a great moment to be with the Premier, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the mayor of Mississauga, myself and the MPP for the local area, to announce that that HST portion would be removed for all new home builds in Ontario. That opens the door—

Interjection.

Hon. Graydon Smith: Yes, I like that clapping. I think that’s a good clap.

Anyone else want to chime in on the clapping?

Interjections.

Hon. Graydon Smith: There we go. We need the applause sign up for everyone. It’s a Monday morning. Everyone hasn’t had that first coffee yet.

By extending that HST cut to all new homes that are being purchased in Ontario, it really takes the window that was open a bit and throws it right open for everybody and lets a lot of fresh air in through that window. It’s something that we have been obviously talking with the federal government about, too. I think the real multiplier effect of this is that the federal government is participating as well. So when you look at the fact that you can save 13% on the purchase price of a new home build—everyone can in Ontario, going forward—that is a huge amount of money.

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If you were going to buy that home anyway and pay that HST, chances are you would be amortizing that over

the term of your mortgage and financing that, and not only paying \$130,000 but the interest on that, and that grows and grows and gains every year. Ultimately, it might cost you \$500 or \$600 a month. That’s \$500 or \$600 a month that’s now not leaving the pocket of people who need it during challenging and unpredictable economic times. So it’s good for the purchaser. It doesn’t matter if it’s that first-time home buyer. It doesn’t matter if it’s that family who’s moving from the first small home they had to the next larger home that they need as their family grows. It extends to a senior who may be looking to leave the larger home that they had for a generation or two and step down to the next home that suits their current lifestyle. It fits everybody. It benefits everybody. And it benefits a sector that has been asking for this and telling us that they needed it—a building sector that has been focused on getting homes built all throughout Ontario as fast as possible and as quickly as possible to meet demand until that demand starts to shrink. When that happens, of course, our workforce is in jeopardy too.

So this is important for a variety of reasons—again, not just because it’s getting people into a new home, not just because it will be an obvious and direct stimulus to building new homes in Ontario, but it also preserves the thing that we need to build those homes: the workers, the skilled trades who go to that job site everyday and work with pride to get that site ready, to put that foundation in, to build those walls, build that roof and ultimately create a home for people. There were plenty of them at the announcement the other day too, and they were just as excited—maybe even more excited than everybody else who was there. We all took time to have a conversation with the heavy machinery operators and some of the other trades who were on site. And what was their message to us? “Absolutely, this is the right thing to do. Thank you for taking this step. Thank you for having the foresight to take this step so that we can keep working, so that we can keep providing for our families, so that we can take that paycheque and put some money aside and be the ones to buy the home that we’re building.” What a delightful circle that is.

Speaker, this budget is focusing on things that matter for Ontarians, and having a home is one of the things that matters the very most for Ontarians. As I talked about the municipal sphere before, the benefit this has for municipalities that will see more homes built, will see continued growth for municipalities—we’ll continue to support them with the dollars that they need to help their communities grow, but they also benefit from the assessment growth. They benefit from every new home that is built to collect the dollars to provide the services that are important to the people in those municipalities. It doesn’t matter if you’re in Kenora or Cornwall or Toronto or Chatham; it works the same way everywhere.

Communities need to grow. The way to do that is to attract people. You attract people when you have homes. You attract people when you have businesses. If there’s a business and they want to bring new employees to a community, the first thing they ask is, “How’s the housing

supply? How's the cost of the market? And what can we do to work together to make sure that the people I want to put in my little widget factory are going to be able to buy a home and settle here?"

So if we're in a box-ticking exercise, it's win, win, win, win, win, win, win, win, win. There are no losers in this, just winners.

And municipalities, again, continue to win because they're seeing people come to their community. They're seeing the economies of their community grow and stabilize. They're seeing the young people in their community realize, "That price point is now in a place where I can buy that home, where I can settle here, where I can have a stable life, where I can live that life that I always dreamed that I would be able to live, maybe in the town that I grew up in."

When we look at the small communities represented so well throughout this chamber, most of us are rural communities, and most of us have the same hope for our kids and our grandkids as they grow up: that should they choose to live in that community, they'll have an opportunity to do so. If they choose to go somewhere else, that's fine—but it was a choice that took them to their future, not a circumstance that drove them from where they grew up.

Again, this HST removal on new home builds is so vitally important for municipalities too, for the people who are going to buy those homes.

When I look at my riding again, and as we all look at our ridings, they're chockablock full of small businesses. What do we see in this budget? A tax cut that is going to impact small business—30% less tax.

I have a particular affinity for small business owners; I was one for two different businesses. My parents were small business owners. That's how they provided for their family—for my brother, my sister and me. We lived on top of a gas station and a restaurant, and they worked super hard every single day, just like so many small business owners do in this province, to make ends meet, to provide a good living for their family. The more that they can keep in their pocket, the more they can provide that good living for their family—they did, my grandfather before my father did, my brother did, and my brother-in-law did. So I come by the love of small business honestly and with the greatest amount of respect.

I think, through this budget, we're respecting small business owners and saying, "Thank you for your hard work. Thank you for being the heartbeat of so many communities. Thank you for being that business that gave so many people their first job."

In fact, when my parents had their business, because it was a gas station and a restaurant, back in the days when you could pull up to the pump and somebody would serve you—which used to be me—there were so many—

Interjection.

Hon. Graydon Smith: "Regular or unleaded?" That's how old I am.

We were the first job for a lot of people, the first job for those high school students who came and either were going to work that gas pump and check the oil under the

hood of that car or work in the restaurant and learn what it takes to interact with people. I am a big fan of these small business first jobs, especially the ones that are customer-facing, because it teaches you how to interact with people, and I think it's a bit of a lost art these days. You never know who's coming in the door. You never know what mood they might be in, but you have to be there, as a young person, developing your people skills, welcoming them in, working with them, whether they're in a good mood or a bad mood, representing that business that hired you to be that front face for them. Boy, I'll tell you, when we did that for 27 years, when my parents did that, we had so many great people come through our doors who had that first job and went on to amazing things—businesses of their own, going away to school, going to university and ending up as a professional. It all begins somewhere. Often, it begins in those small businesses.

So we need to keep those small businesses healthy. We need to make sure that the money that they work so hard to make every year, every day—they keep more of it, because it's not just about them keeping money for them. It's about them keeping money to reinvest in their business. It's about them having more money to hire that next employee and grow that employee count by one.

It's not only about the first job; sometimes it's about a lifetime job. A lot of small businesses grow, and suddenly they're not so small anymore. They're a medium-sized business because they were able to make the right investments. They were able to get the right employees. They were able to keep some dollars and invest in themselves, invest in their dream, invest in the way that they saw to move forward.

So this small business tax cut is the right note at the right time to show small business in this province that we see you, we hear you, we respect you.

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I want to thank Associate Minister Tangri for the work that she does on a daily basis, visiting small businesses all across this province. She has been a fantastic representative, not only for the businesses that exist, but for the businesses that want to get going.

When we look at our small business centres that are located throughout the province, where young people can come in with an idea and a dream and maybe not much more and learn how to do a business plan, learn how to take that dream and turn it into reality—it's all things that we are doing through this budget, this government, to make sure that small businesses know that being in Ontario, being in this province, is the right place to be.

Speaker, just to wrap up, I want to say to the potential homebuyers out there in Ontario, we've got your back.

I want to say to the small business owners in Ontario, we've got your back.

I want to say to the municipalities that we work with every single day and admittedly have a complex array of problems that cannot all be solved immediately but can be solved with good planning and working together, we've got your back.

But more importantly, to everyone in every community across this province, whether it's continuing to invest in infrastructure, continuing to invest in health care, continuing to invest in transit, continuing to invest in roads—through all these actions, we can safely say to every Ontarian, again, from east, west, north and south, we've got your back.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: My question is for the Minister of Finance.

We're in an unprecedented affordability crisis. People are being squeezed at the grocery store. Last year, over a million people used food banks—a record number in Ontario. There was a record increase in homelessness last year of 8%. Youth unemployment is at record levels.

Given this crisis, given all the records that we're setting in the cost-of-living crisis, how could he table a budget that doesn't even mention the words "rent" or "groceries"?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you for the question.

I think one of the things that is very apparent in the budget that we brought forward is that we do respect that affordability can be a challenge for people in Ontario.

As I said before, when we look at the cost of housing, whether that's buying a new home or even being able to afford rent—we're seeing significantly more rental units being built in Ontario over the last three years, actually. We're on a record pace with rental units.

And we continue to work with municipalities and our housing supply and service managers to make sure that we're making investments in people all throughout Ontario.

I think if you carefully go through this budget, you'll find that every page that talks about everything we are doing is making an investment for people in Ontario and ensuring that affordability is a component of that. We'll continue to do that and make sure that people of Ontario are put first.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

Mr. Jonathan Tsao: Speaker, the residents of Don Valley North have been waiting literally decades for a Sheppard subway extension, yet budget 2026 once again—year after year—fails to mention it.

Can the minister explain why the government seems to have funds for fanciful tunnels and luxury spas and an 11% increase to the Premier's office staff, yet they force residents of Don Valley North and Scarborough to take overcrowded buses and sit in traffic every single day?

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I appreciate the question.

Our government, again, has been very transparent in how we see infrastructure as playing a key role to protecting Ontario.

That's why, when we look at what we have done so recently with the new subway lines, with Line 5 and Line—and remember, that's the Finch West LRT and that's the Eglinton Crosstown LRT. When we look at these historic investments, we don't look at them just for this generation; we look at it for multiple generations.

My riding of York Centre is on Sheppard Avenue. I want to see the day—one day—that the two Sheppard lines will be connected, so we don't have the gap between the Sheppard West station and Sheppard-Yonge station. This is something that our government will continue to work towards.

In the meantime, when it comes to infrastructure, we're not going to stop. We are going to keep going. Even when other people tell us to stop, we're not stopping.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

Mr. Deepak Anand: Speaker, as we all know, buying a house is an important dream for many people. Right now, we are in a situation where we see gridlock, in terms of buyers waiting for the price to come down. There is a demand, there is enough supply, but there is no movement.

I'm thankful to the Minister of Finance that we are actually enhancing Ontario's existing HST housing relief for all buyers—not just limited to the first-home buyers. With these changes, it will be a relief to those who are looking for that help.

What more is this government doing to spur the building of these homes through the MHIP program? Can the minister explain that to the people?

Hon. Graydon Smith: Thank you very much to the great member. I appreciate the question.

I know the amount of investments that we have made over the last few years in communities to enable housing is historic—in the billions of dollars. I think we're up to \$3 billion at this point. Just kind of following up on what I talked about in my speech, it's all in an effort to make sure that communities have the infrastructure for the housing to be built. We know that we need the water lines, the waste water lines, the plants. Through that program, we've been able to do that. And we've been able to support other housing-enabling infrastructure to ensure that, again, no matter what part of the province you are in, you are seeing infrastructure dollars invested to make sure that when that opportunity to build comes along, you can act on that; when that opportunity to grow your community comes along, you can act on that.

We'll always be there to be a partner for our municipalities in Ontario, to enable more housing.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I'm happy to rise in this House to ask a question specifically around the budget.

As we all know, a budget is really a document that lays out the government's priorities as well as its values.

This document, I would say, is showing us what the government is willing to do to support Ontarians.

What is also contained in the budget is \$13.8 billion of a deficit, which is now double to what was originally forecast. The government is borrowing over \$58 billion of long-term spending, out of which is about \$16 billion just of interest payments.

Yet, we see that over the last eight years, we are not seeing a government fixing health care, fixing education;

a government that is not making homes or building homes that are more affordable.

What are we getting in a government budget that is sitting at a \$13.8-billion deficit?

Hon. Graydon Smith: I'm glad the member had an opportunity to go through the budget and see exactly where those investments are landing.

Whether it's roads and bridges; whether it's transit; whether it's moving people in cities or whether it's moving people between cities; whether it's investing in health care and more money for hospitals; whether it's investing in more money for primary care; whether it's investing in the municipalities that, as I talked about, are a backbone of how we deliver services here; whether it's cutting the HST for homes on behalf of people; whether it's opening new markets to make sure that our economy continues to grow—all this is contained within the budget. This is a blueprint for Ontario to move forward in uncertain economic times.

I always find it hilarious when the NDP stands up and complains about deficits, because I cannot imagine what the deficit would be under an NDP government. They've never seen a dollar they didn't want to spend, whether it was in the wallet or not.

Anyway, we're being fiscally prudent and making investments that matter to Ontarians at a time when they need it most, and we'll never apologize for that.

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The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): I recognize the member from Ottawa–Vanier.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Speaker, through this budget bill, the government is choosing to invest significantly in expanding correctional facilities, building more jails, and the Solicitor General definitely put a lot of emphasis on this point during his speech.

However, meanwhile, communities across Ontario are asking for more mental health support. They're asking for addiction treatment and for supportive housing.

I'd like the government to explain why it is prioritizing incarceration over prevention, and provide evidence that this approach will actually improve community safety rather than simply cycle more vulnerable people through the justice system.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: When it comes to keeping Ontario safe, we will do just that, and we will be unapologetic.

And I've said many times, "Show me a government in our lifetime that has been more laser-focused on public safety"—it's our government, led by the Premier.

To the member opposite: We can do two things at the same time. We can, as the Minister of Health has shown us, build the HART hubs. We can, as part of the Ministry of the Solicitor General, come out with mobile crisis response team grants—that's the MCRT grant—that help many police services deal with people who are having health crises.

At the end of the day, when it comes to public safety, let's face it: The times that we're in require us to make the investments in our public safety, in our corrections, in our

police services, and to make sure that everyone knows—firefighters, too—that we've got their backs. And this is something we're really proud of.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

HOUSE SITTINGS

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): 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, and therefore, the afternoon routine on Wednesday, April 1, 2026, shall commence at 1 p.m.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

MIGHTY MEN OF ZORRA

Hon. Ernie Hardeman: Last Friday, I had the pleasure of seeing *Mighty Men of Zorra* at Embro's Thistle Theatre. The play tells the true story of a group of ordinary farmers who achieved extraordinary fame.

In 1888, the people of Embro formed a tug-of-war team known as the *Mighty Men of Zorra*. The team was made up of five rope-pulling farmers and their coach. Most were in their forties and one member, Ira Hummason, was 51 years old. Despite their humble appearance, they quickly defeated local and provincial teams, and went on to beat competitors in New York state. Their strength reflects the proud Scottish heritage in the community. Tug-of-war has deep roots in Scotland and has long been a cornerstone of Highland games, where feats of strength and teamwork are celebrated as expressions of pride. In 1890, the *Mighty Men of Zorra* travelled to Chicago to compete for the world championship. There, unfamiliar rules worked against them. After a controversial loss, supporters demanded a rematch, which took place in August 1893. After two intense pulls, the teams were tied. The final match was described as one of the greatest in sports history. The *Mighty Men of Zorra* prevailed, earning the title of world champions. It was a victory that helped put Zorra and Oxford on the map.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to celebrate this chapter of Oxford's local history—a story that continues to inspire today.

EDWARD POTTINGER

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Today I rise on behalf of the people of Toronto–Danforth to honour the life and legacy of Edward "Ed" Pottinger, a beloved Jamaican Canadian community builder and the co-founder of one of the city's most iconic cultural institutions: the Real Jerk, an amazing restaurant.

Ed Pottinger passed away on March 12, 2026, at the age of 69.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, he brought to Toronto not only the flavours of his homeland, but its warmth, energy and deep sense of community.

In 1984, Ed and his wife, Lily Pottinger, opened the first Real Jerk at Greenwood and Queen. I have to say, it was noticed immediately; anyone who ate there told their friends.

The new and expanded Jerk became a neighbourhood anchor at Queen and Broadview in the Riverside neighbourhood for two decades before moving to its now-famous home at Gerrard and Carlaw in 2013.

The Real Jerk became internationally known in 2016 when Drake and Rihanna filmed part of the global hit music video *Work* inside the restaurant, instantly putting the east end landmark on the world map.

I have to say Ed Pottinger himself was really the heart of the place. He not only served food, but he was an incredibly gracious, friendly person to encounter when you came into the restaurant.

To Lily: Toronto–Danforth and Ontario thank you. Your partnership with Ed shaped not only a business but a community. Your work together strengthened our neighbourhood, lifted up Caribbean culture, and created a space where generations have gathered, celebrated and felt seen.

RIDING OF NEPEAN

MPP Tyler Watt: Over the winter break away from the Legislature, I had the chance to spend meaningful time in my amazing riding of Nepean, and it reminded me exactly why I'm so grateful to represent this community at Queen's Park. From celebrating the new year in Barrhaven and Bells Corners to marking Chinese New Year and joining iftars during Ramadan, I saw first-hand the diversity and strength that makes Nepean so special.

I have to say, one of the highlights of the break was the iconic Brrrhaven chili cook-off. It was packed with families, neighbours and local businesses all coming together, sharing food, laughter and a little bit of friendly competition—which I almost won.

Moments like that matter. They remind us that community isn't just something we talk about in this chamber; it's something people in Nepean live every single day.

A great example of this is the Multifaith Housing Initiative that is leading the way in affordable housing in our city.

In every conversation, whether it was with city councillors, Ottawa police or residents walking into my office, I heard the same thing: People care deeply about this community, and they want to see it thrive. That's what drives me.

Nepean is growing, it's diverse, and it's full of people who show up for each other every single day.

I want you to know that I will keep showing up for you. It is the honour of a lifetime to represent Nepean.

ADDISON HILL

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Cancer is the most common cause of disease-related death in Canada, and over 70% of

adult survivors of childhood cancer suffer significant, lifelong side effects of their treatment and disease.

Addison Hill was a brilliant, kind, energetic 13-year-old girl, mature beyond her years, who presented with concerning signs and symptoms of a cancer of the breast over a period of several weeks. By the time she was referred to a specialist at SickKids, the cancer had evolved to a point that proved impossible to cure.

It is fortunate that cancer is rare in childhood, with an incidence rate in Ontario of about 160 per million, but that makes it all the more challenging to be alert to the symptoms and signs of concern. Most family physicians and many community pediatricians may go through an entire career seeing only one or two kids with cancer.

Addy's parents, Jessica and Dave, and their family established Team Addy to support childhood cancer research at SickKids. This was Addy's wish, and they have honoured her wish, galvanizing their community of Elora and thousands of others across our country.

I want to thank Jessica and Dave for their efforts to raise awareness around childhood cancer.

Every loss of life is a tragedy, especially amongst those who are young and vulnerable.

I want to thank Team Addy for promoting symptom awareness so that treatment can be given earlier and lives can be saved.

It is an honour for me to share Addy's story in this place to amplify Addy's legacy. Addy's legacy lives on.

My thanks to Team Addy for the great work that they do.

JUNO AWARDS

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Hamilton West–Ancaster–Dundas.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Thank you very much, Speaker. I know you and all the other Hamilton MPPs will join me in showing how proud we are of Hamilton. We hosted the 55th Juno Awards. We welcomed 25,000 visitors to Hamilton, and Hamilton sure put on a party.

From artists to crew, makeup artists to managers, the Canadian music industry shapes our culture, creates jobs, and shares Canada's stories with the world.

Congratulations to all of this year's nominees and winners.

With more than 50 Indigenous nominees and the introduction of Latin Music Recording of the Year, the Junos reflect ongoing, important work to reduce barriers and expand representation so that we can honour the diversity and the vibrancy of our province and of our country.

Many Ontario artists, including TOBi and Jully Black, were among those recognized.

And Hamilton's own Steve Marriner took home his first Juno for Blues Album of the Year.

Of course, the queen, the grand dame of the music industry, Joni Mitchell, was rightfully celebrated for a lifetime of making us proud to be Canadians.

1020

But I want to end with a local story. Local hometown educator Raquel McIntosh won the MusiCounts Teacher of the Year—to make sure that we include all kinds of young people in our music industry. She said, “Hamilton, I hope you’re proud of me.” We’re proud of you, and we’re proud of Hamilton.

Thank you so much for what you did this weekend.

MUNICIPALITIES

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: I would like to take this opportunity to welcome many municipal leaders from Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry, and Glengarry–Prescott–Russell. They are all here. Look at these nice faces there. Of course, they didn’t come here for this session this morning. They came here for the annual OGRA convention, Good Roads convention. It’s always great to sit down with our municipal leaders to discuss how we can improve services for our residents.

The Ontario budget presented last week includes concrete measures to support families and strengthen our communities—among them, the elimination of the 13% HST on new homes, which is for homes valued at \$1 million or less, which represents cost savings of up to \$130,000. This will directly help families in SDG and GPR make ownership more affordable and encourage local construction, creating jobs and stimulating our regional economy.

We will continue to work with our municipal leaders to make sure we build the infrastructure needed in our towns to support residential and commercial growth.

Madam Speaker, in our region of eastern Ontario, we don’t have the largest cities and we don’t have the biggest attractions, but I like to think we have the best people.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all the municipal leaders for the great work they’re doing for the residents of SDG and GPR. We’ll continue to work with you, and we thank you for everything you do.

**JACK CRAWFORD AND
MICHAELA GOSSELIN**

Mr. Brian Saunderson: My riding of Simcoe–Grey is known for excellence, and today I want to pay tribute to two incredible athletes. This February, Canadians watched with pride as our athletes competed in the Winter Olympic Games and Paralympic Winter Games in Milano-Cortina.

Jack Crawford is a two-time Olympian who competed in Beijing, where he won a bronze medal in the alpine combined, and most recently in Milano-Cortina, where he placed ninth in the downhill and 16th in the super-G. Jack honed his skills at the Craighleith and Georgian Peaks ski clubs and comes from an accomplished family of skiers. His sister Candace competed at the PyeongChang games, and his aunt Judy Crawford competed at the Sapporo games. Jack’s historic World Cup victory at the famed Kitzbühel course in 2025 broke a 42-year drought for Canada, going back to Todd Brooker’s win in 1983.

Michaela Gosselin of Collingwood is a para-alpine skier who grew up skiing at Osler Bluff Ski Club. She is a two-time Paralympian, competing in Beijing and Milano-Cortina. In Italy, she competed in five events and won a bronze in the women’s standing slalom, with her mom, dad, sister and aunt there to watch and share that incredible moment.

Speaker, seven years ago, at the age of 18, Michaela was diagnosed with bone cancer which resulted in a scapulectomy of her left shoulder. Through grit, determination, her love of skiing and the support of her family and her father, Kevin—a former national alpine team member—and her mother, Rachel, Michaela turned adversity into opportunity.

Congratulations to Michaela and Jack. You are shining examples of the pursuit of excellence and the power of sport, and I thank you both for your example.

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

MPP Lise Vaugeois: The Premier wants bail hearings to be livestreamed—a move that will cost the public millions because it is likely unconstitutional. Meanwhile, the Minister of Education has banned what should be public: the livestreaming of special education advisory meetings. Does anyone else see a glaring contradiction here?

And now, because the Premier has been ordered to share records from the phone he uses to make deals with public money, that he doesn’t want the public to know about, this government is retroactively killing off access to information so that we never find out what other scurrilous, self-serving and reprehensible deals he is making with public dollars. Given how many times this government has been caught using public dollars to enrich their friends or finance the Premier’s pet vanity projects, there must be a lot in those records they want to hide.

If this were a sketch on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, it would be hilarious to watch the Premier claim there is nothing political about hiding his government’s records while accusing the privacy commissioner of being politically motivated for protecting the public’s right to know.

Unfortunately, this is not a comedy sketch, and we are dealing with a government that is determined to hide from accountability while doing everything in their power to undermine our democracy.

WIARTON WILLIE

MPP Paul Vickers: Madam Speaker, I rise today on a sombre occasion. On March 10, during the noon hour, the news spread across the land: Wiarton Willie, Canada’s Groundhog Day prognosticator, had passed away.

The fifth Wiarton Willie made his weather prognostication debut in 2022, and he predicted an early spring. That started a five-year run where he only predicted early springs, and he was never wrong. Spring was always just around the corner.

Madam Speaker, I had the privilege of participating in the prediction morning festivities this year, on Groundhog Day. As our shadow cabinet huddled on the stage, Mayor Jay Kirkland shared that Willie had told him that despite the rough winter, closed roads, cancelled school buses, Willie once again believed in an early spring.

The Warton Willie Festival puts Warton on the map, just as its founder, Mac McKenzie, intended when this festival started with a fur hat and a Toronto Star reporter.

I encourage all members of this House to make the trip to Warton for Groundhog Day, to see the festivities for yourself. Who knows? You could become a personal friend of Willie, just like the Premier.

And what else do we say about our remarkable rodent Willie, but thank you? May your successor be as optimistic in his predictions as you.

Long live Willie.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

Mr. Will Bouma: I'd like to welcome family of page John Thayil: Jo, Jinu and Jorden; and also, from the Ontario Association of Optometrists, from Brantford-Brant, Dr. Greg Wilson and the CEO, Mark Donnison.

Welcome to your House.

Mr. Brian Saunderson: It's my great pleasure to welcome the pride of Collingwood and Simcoe-Grey, and Ontario, actually, and one of our newly minted Paralympic medallists: Michaela Gosselin—and her parents, Kevin and Rachel.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I would also ask all those in the chamber today to welcome the family of page captain Devlin Tomlin, from the community of Scarborough Southwest.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I'd like to welcome students from Queen's University, members of the Queen's University Liberal Association, who are visiting the House today.

MPP George Darouze: I would like to thank the eastern Ontario municipality leaders who are here this week in Toronto; especially my friends Mayor Mike Tarnowski, Mayor Mario Zanth, Tony Fraser and Steve Densham.

Welcome to Queen's Park.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: It's my pleasure to welcome Alex Calderon, who's here today from my own riding of the beautiful Bay of Quinte. Welcome to your House.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I'd like to welcome the united counties of Prescott-Russell and Stormont-Dundas-South Glengarry—as well as two special shout-outs: to Maureen Adams, who is finishing a great career as CAO in eastern Ontario, as well as happy birthday to Sue Landry, who is celebrating her birthday. I'm sure she did not want that. She is the wife of our warden right now.

Hon. Michael A. Tibollo: I'm delighted this morning to introduce four distinguished guests hailing from the beautiful town of Bassiano in the province of Latina, in the region of Lazio: Giovanbattista Onorio, Giovanni Cacciotti, Corrada Tatangelo, and Iolanda Russo.

Welcome to Queen's Park.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It gives me great pleasure to welcome Dr. Pasquale Vecchio, a local optometrist from my riding of London North Centre, as well as Mark Donnison, CEO of the Ontario Association of Optometrists. I encourage all members to attend their reception at 5 p.m. this evening in the dining room.

1030

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I'd like to welcome to our House Chandra-Li Paul, the Ontario Federation of Labour's director of women's rights.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I'd like to welcome Liam Merber, who is one of our page captains today, from my riding of Don Valley West; his mom, Nicole Watson, who is in the gallery; as well as Jordana Lupo from Seneca College, who has been volunteering in my office.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Je voudrais souhaiter la bienvenue à Julie LaPalme. She's from my riding office and it's her first time at Queen's Park. Welcome Julie.

Mr. Aris Babikian: It is a great pleasure to welcome to Queen's Park teachers and students from Dr. Norman Bethune Collegiate Institute and BearBella team, Vincent Lu, Sally Shen and Noel Chao.

Mr. Deepak Anand: I'd like to welcome Clarence D'Souza, the CEO of CRF medical specializing in health care technology planning, from Mississauga-Malton. Welcome to Queen's Park.

MPP Tyler Watt: I'd like to welcome members from the Ontario Young Liberals from McMaster, Waterloo and Western. Welcome to your House.

Mr. Stephen Blais: I'd like to welcome the Ontario Association of Optometrists to Queen's Park, including those from across the province—especially Dr. Janelle King from Orléans. And I want to thank Mark Donnison, CEO of the OAO, for bringing everyone to Queen's Park. Welcome.

Hon. Stan Cho: A couple of things: I just want to wish my nephew, Caleb Park, a happy seventh birthday. Also—I think they're just walking into the Legislature now—it's my privilege to welcome two proud Korean Canadian police officers from York region: Eric Seo and Korean police consul Tak Kwang-oh.

Welcome to Queen's Park.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I'd like to welcome a beautiful Beaches-East Yorker to the House: Celecia Partap with the optometrist association. Welcome to your House.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Kingston and the Islands on a point of order.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Speaker, I seek unanimous consent to immediately move a motion without notice authorizing the Standing Committee on the Interior to immediately hold public hearings to hear from Ontario farmers about the impacts of the Middle East war on world fertilizer prices and their livelihoods.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Mr. Hsu is seeking unanimous consent to immediately move a motion without notice authorizing the Standing Committee on the Interior to immediately hold public hearings to hear from

Ontario farmers about the impacts of the Middle East war on world fertilizer prices and their livelihoods. Agreed?

Interjection: No.

QUESTION PERIOD

ONTARIO BUDGET

Ms. Jessica Bell: Last week, this government tabled a budget that's more about protecting them and less about helping Ontario. With the funding that is allocated to health care, we will not see any meaningful improvements to primary care, we will not see an end to hallway medicine, and we will continue to see emergency room closures across Ontario.

My question is this: Why is the Premier failing to properly fund health care so that he can meet Ontario's needs?

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

Hon. Sylvia Jones: I'm not sure where the member opposite has been, but the budget on Thursday had an increase of \$1.1 billion in home and community care. We are, of course, investing in our hospitals an additional \$1.1 billion to ensure that they have the operating capital to continue their important work.

World-class hospitals that are operating—whether it's SickKids, whether it's University Health Network, we should be incredibly proud of the work that our hospital sector and our primary care providers do.

Of course, I haven't even touched on the primary care expansion that has seen literally 330,000 people attached to a primary care clinician in the last year alone. We're making those investments, and we're doing that work to ensure that, come 2029, every single Ontario resident will have access to a primary care provider. That's the work that we're doing under Premier Ford.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member for University–Rosedale.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Back to the Premier: I'll tell you what this budget does include. It includes measures to protect this government's cellphone records back to 1988. That's what this budget includes. But what it doesn't include is real investment in schools. With the funding that is allocated to education, we will continue to see overcrowded classrooms, we will continue to see cuts to special education, and we will continue to see teacher shortages.

My question is to the Premier. Why is this Premier so fixated on helping himself but is not interested in helping the one million children succeed in public school?

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

Hon. Paul Calandra: Madam Speaker, I suppose you have to read the budget to realize that education spending is scheduled to go up yet again, as it has every single year that we have been in office.

But more important than that is that we're starting to see a real, fundamental change within the system. We have the highest graduation rates in the history of the province, under this Conservative government. Frankly, because of the reforms that this government started back in 2018, we are seeing literacy rates, reading and writing results at the highest level in provincial history. And we are finally starting to see math scores go up, albeit not at the level that we wanted.

That's why we're doubling down and making investments. This budget has significant investments to help us on the way, with respect to improving those math scores. And it has a historic \$41-million investment to bring safety back into the schools by inviting our community police officers back into our schools. So it's good news for students and parents.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member for University–Rosedale.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, half of grade 6 students do not meet the standard of math. That is a fact, and that is your government's track record.

I want to talk a little bit more about what's in the budget. What we see in the budget is that there's money for a Ferris wheel in Niagara, even though Niagara already has a Ferris wheel. But there is no meaningful measure in this budget to make life more affordable. There is no talk in this budget of making rent more affordable. There is no talk in this budget of lowering grocery prices or stopping price gouging. In fact, the word "groceries" is not mentioned in this budget at all.

My question is to the Premier. Why is this Premier so focused on delivering a budget full of his pet projects when it should be laser-focused on making life more affordable for Ontarians who are struggling to get by?

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

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: Global economic uncertainty is driving up costs for workers and families. Our government will do whatever it takes to protect Ontario families and keep costs down.

We have provided nearly \$12 billion in support for families. HST cut for new home buyers, saving up to \$130,000—and as well as all new home buyers. We have permanently cut the gas and fuel tax, saving Ontario households \$400.

We are working to protect and create good-paying jobs for the people of Ontario by making Ontario the most competitive place to invest and do business in the G7, with this budget.

NURSE PRACTITIONERS

MPP Robin Lennox: Madam Speaker, this question is for the Premier.

We could boost capacity in Ontario's primary care system by giving nurse practitioners the ability to fully practise in our public system. As it is, less than half of Ontarians are able to get a same-day appointment with their primary care provider for urgent issues. That puts

unnecessary pressure on our emergency departments. Nurse practitioners can be part of the solution, but they've been left waiting, with nothing in the budget and no communication from the Ministry of Health.

The federal government set a deadline for this Wednesday for nurse practitioners to be brought under OHIP.

To the Premier: You've known about this for over a year. Why don't you have a plan to offer nurse practitioners in Ontario?

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

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Well, in fact, we didn't wait for the budget to come out. We've actually been expanding nurse practitioner seats. In fact, while I was working at the Orangeville home show this past weekend, I had a mother come up and say thank you for expanding nurse practitioner seats in the province of Ontario. "My daughter got in, and she is starting in September." That's the expansion. That's the commitment.

Speaker, I have to acknowledge the work of the member opposite, because I see that this weekend she was thrilled to join the Hamilton FHT in celebrating the expansion of the health care clinic at Eva Rothwell. This collaboration has provided access to primary care for 740 patients in our north end and will be expanded to include up to 1,800 patients. Clearly, the member opposite sees the value of primary care expansion when she's in her own riding.

1040

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Hamilton Centre.

MPP Robin Lennox: It's wonderful to see the Minister of Health actually paying attention to the work that a health worker is doing in her community.

Let me tell you more about that fantastic clinic that you're talking about. The nurse practitioner in that clinic is regulated as an employee. She cannot leave that clinic and bill for her services like every other primary care provider. Why won't you give her that flexibility and our community the ability to have nurse practitioners where and when they are needed?

By the way, if you hadn't dragged your feet, we wouldn't have one in five Ontarians paying out of pocket to access primary care in this province.

To the minister: When will you take action to ensure that Ontarians can access primary care from a nurse practitioner without reaching into their own pockets to pay?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I'm going to remind members to direct your questions through the Speaker.

I recognize the Minister of Health.

Hon. Sylvia Jones: As the member opposite, in her own words, says, a multidisciplinary team includes nurse practitioners, family physicians, child and youth mental health support, diet techs, pharmacy and more. What she is talking about is exactly what our \$3.4-billion investment in primary care expansion is about—making sure that clinicians can work together, not individually, because we

know the best patient outcomes come from those multidisciplinary teams that include family physicians, nurse practitioners, nurses, RPNs, dietitians, mental health workers. That's when we get exceptional care, and that's the investment that our government is doing.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Hamilton Centre with a final supplementary.

MPP Robin Lennox: Back to the Minister of Health: While the Minister of Health was spending her weekend following my activities, I was spending my weekend thinking about the health of the people of Ontario.

The people of Ontario were told two years ago we "will make sure that any clinic that is charging for an OHIP-funded service is ended, and the patients will be reimbursed." That was you, Minister, in March 2024, speaking about this exact issue—patients paying out of pocket to access primary care from nurse practitioners—and yet, here we are two years later.

Nurse practitioners must be brought under OHIP for providing medically necessary services. You knew the deadline was this Wednesday.

So what will it be, Minister? Will you finally put your money where your mouth is and bring nurse practitioners under OHIP?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): A reminder to the members that you ask your questions through the Speaker. I recognize the Minister of Health.

Hon. Sylvia Jones: A \$3.4-billion expansion in primary care—that is putting your money where your mouth is. We have a 10% overcapacity in the last year alone. We were working on a pathway for attaching 300,000 people to primary care; in fact, we actually attached 330,000 people.

We are well on our way to making sure that all Ontario residents have access to a primary care clinician—and yes, they will be in multidisciplinary teams because we know those are where the outcomes for patients and clinicians want to be, and we're seeing that change.

As we expand primary care access, we are seeing less pressure on our emergency department. We are seeing individuals who are getting access to diagnosis and treatment sooner because they have access to a primary care clinician. It is working.

I have no interest in going back to where the health care—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Question?

ONTARIO BUDGET

Mr. John Fraser: Warton Willie—God rest his soul—may have really got it wrong when he predicted an early spring, but I am confident that he could have predicted the Ontario budget. It's Groundhog Day—more of the same empty rhetoric, a cut-and-paste from the last budget. They couldn't even come up with a new title. All this at a time when families are hurting—life is harder.

After eight long years and eight budgets, it's clear that this Conservative government is tired and out of touch.

Speaker, through you: Why is there nothing in this budget to help families with their budgets?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The Minister of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement.

Hon. Stephen Crawford: I would encourage the member opposite to actually read the budget; perhaps he hasn't. He has been too focused on Wiarton Willie.

What's in this budget are a lot of affordability measures which our government has brought about in the past and will continue to.

First of all, we're capping the resale of ticket sales in this province for the first time in history in Canada. We're proud to stand up for fans in Ontario so that families can go to hockey games, baseball games, concerts.

We've also brought about an HST and GST tax cut for new homes. That will save families \$130,000 on a new home. That's serious savings.

That party there has voted against every affordability measure we brought in the past, whether it's a gas tax cut or others.

I'll have more to say in the supplementary.

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

Mr. John Fraser: I did read the budget. "Protect Ontario"—about 74 times. The Premier is not protecting anything; he's pretending. He's pretending there is something in this budget for families, and there is not. There's no HST relief on home heating or energy, even though energy prices are going up. There's no relief for skyrocketing rents. And there's no middle-income tax cut—oh, you know, the one the Premier promised eight years ago.

Speaker, life is hard, and Ontario families have to make tough choices.

After eight years and eight budgets, it's easy to see that this Premier and this government are just tired and out of touch.

I'll ask again: Why is there nothing in this budget to help families with their budgets?

Hon. Stephen Crawford: The only person who's tired and out of touch is the leader—the interim leader, I should say; I think the third time—of the third party. That's who is out of touch.

Speaker, they voted against every affordability measure that we've brought in the province of Ontario.

We've also reduced small business tax by a significant margin to help those small businesses.

We're cutting down ticket resales.

Speaking of energy: Yes, oil has gone up, unfortunately, due to the crisis in the Middle East. But who voted against the carbon tax, every single time in this House—to push up oil and gas prices? The third party opposite.

Who voted against the LIFT tax credit that gave the largest tax decrease for low-income families in the province of Ontario's history? It was the party opposite.

We are standing up for businesses, for workers, and fighting for the people of Ontario, and we will continue to do so.

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

Mr. John Fraser: Well, that's the same answer, I think, we've heard here for eight years.

Life is hard for Ontario families, and this Ford government is out of touch and out of ideas.

We're half a trillion dollars in debt, when families face hard choices.

What's the Premier chasing in this budget? Well, buying Billy Bishop; a floating fantasy island convention centre; a luxury spa; and a tunnel of love—sorry, that's the tunnel the Premier loves—and God knows what else. So it's kind of like the Premier fancies himself a billionaire—just with other people's money.

Speaker, life is hard. Families are struggling. Why is there nothing in this budget to help families with their budgets?

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

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: In these uncertain economic times, our responsible fiscal plan has put us in a strong position to weather economic headwinds. Our government has cut taxes and received credit upgrades.

The previous government raised taxes and got downgraded.

Under our watch, Ontario has received two credit rating upgrades for the first time in almost 20 years from all four credit rating agencies. We are reversing a trend of credit downgrades that Ontario faced under the previous Liberal government.

1050

Thanks to our fiscally responsible management of Ontario's finances, we are able to continue making historic investments in the public services that Ontarians rely on, from health care to education and more.

We will not be taking finance lessons from a party that has left Ontario with the largest subsovereign debt in the world.

ONTARIO BUDGET

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Just last week, the finance minister tabled a rinse-and-repeat budget that sugar-coats the reality of life in Ontario.

After eight years of this deflated Doug Ford Conservative government, life is harder—a record 700,000 people out of work; 200,000 young people can't find their first job; one million people using food banks; more people living on the streets. For all of these people, life is harder.

This government removed rent control because they said it would create housing. Instead, housing starts are down and rents are up. For renters and those trying to buy their first home, life is harder.

My question to the finance minister: When will he stop pretending his plan is working and actually deliver a budget that serves the people of Ontario?

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

Hon. Graydon Smith: For eight years, we've been delivering budgets in Ontario that have mattered to the lives of Ontarians.

Contained within this budget is the single biggest measure to help the cost of housing that we have seen in a generation: lowering the provincial portion of the HST on not just homes for new buyers, but for all buyers in Ontario. If the members opposite don't think \$130,000 in the pocket of a new home buyer is serious money, don't think that that helps with affordability, I'd love to see your bank accounts, because they must be a lot bigger than everybody else's in Ontario.

Speaker, we are making a difference for people every single day. All throughout this budget, including in housing, we are making sure that costs get reined in and choice gets added on to the people of Ontario for the housing that they want, whether that's rental or whether that's ownership.

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: This is a budget for Bay Street, not Main Street—\$4 billion for investors in this government's latest attempt to spur growth. But that middle-income tax cut they promised eight years ago? Nowhere in sight. And they could really use that right now, given this affordability crisis.

This ineffective Doug Ford Conservative government lost 9,000 manufacturing jobs. So those 300,000 manufacturing jobs they promised? Nowhere in sight.

They promised to fix hallway health care, but it has gotten worse. Their solution: Take hallway health care data out of sight.

So my question, back to the finance minister: When will he stop pretending his plan is working and actually deliver a budget that helps the people of Ontario?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I'll remind members that we refer to members in the House by their title, not their name.

Back to the Minister of Public and Business Service Delivery and Procurement.

Hon. Stephen Crawford: We're very proud of the budget that we brought out on Thursday with the great Minister of Finance.

The only pretending that happened was when we took office in 2018 and we uncovered, with an independent audit, a \$15-billion deficit. That was the only pretending.

What's happening in Ontario today? Let's go back to 2018, when we took power. The budget for the government of Ontario at that time was \$155 billion. Today, eight years later, we are proud on this side of the House that we've grown the budget with not one tax increase but by growing the economy in this province—a \$245-billion budget. That's not pretending. That's real.

Speaker, I will also add that the Ontario economy, under our leadership, has grown to \$1 trillion—\$1 trillion.

The economic growth that we're creating in this province is second to none.

We're going to continue fighting for Ontarians.

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: There's no hiding the fact that this government has added \$130 billion to the debt and we're racing towards the half-trillion-dollar man. This government also wasted \$3 billion—they actually borrowed it. They borrowed \$3 billion plus interest to give out cheques right before an election. Their plan to protect Ontario is just pretending.

Look at the facts again, Speaker. All of the economic indicators that should be up are actually down.

Say it with me, folks: Expected GDP growth?

Interjections: Down.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Expected housing starts?

Interjections: Down.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Expected job creation?

Interjections: Down.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: This is not a plan to protect Ontario. It's a plan that neglects Ontario.

Back to the finance minister: When will he stand up, step up, and admit that his plan to protect Ontario is just pretend?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Eglinton—Lawrence.

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: Our real GDP is 1.2%, and we are one of the few reporting provinces with a path to balance and one of the lowest deficits in all of Canada relative to GDP.

As we protect Ontario's economy, we are bringing investment back to Ontario and bringing back the jobs the Liberal government has chased away.

Speaker, our government is focused on making Ontario a more resilient and self-sufficient economy and making life more affordable for the people of Ontario.

We will be taking no lessons from a party that bankrupted the province, left our health care system on the brink of collapse and even managed to create a housing crisis while we were in it.

EDUCATION FUNDING

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Supervisors appointed by the Minister of Education are making cuts that are taking supports and resources away from our kids and taking educators out of our schools.

The latest cuts to be announced are in the Toronto Catholic District School Board, where kids are losing access to language classes and reading support programs. Some 77 front-line instructors are losing their jobs because of these cuts.

Can the minister please explain why his hand-picked supervisor is earning \$350,000 a year to fire educators and cut language and literacy classes?

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

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, international language will continue to be offered at the Toronto Catholic District School Board. They had a unique program that no other board in the province of Ontario had. But we'll continue

to support those programs on weekends. The TCDSB has also decided to update its literacy programs to be more in line with the program that is offered across 71 other school boards across the province of Ontario that is also funded by the Ministry of Education. They have decided to come in line with those two programs.

At the same time, we're seeing some positive things. This budget, of course, has an increase in funding, but, ultimately, what we're seeing is the highest graduation rate in the history of the province. Thanks to this Progressive Conservative government, we're seeing literacy, reading and writing scores at their highest level ever because of the changes that were brought on by this government. And we're seeing math scores starting to finally go in a positive direction, albeit not as fast as we would like. That's why this budget is doubling down and putting more money into that.

At the same time, there's a historic investment to bring back safety into our schools by inviting our police officers back in and connecting students and teachers with community policing.

It's a good-news budget.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Ottawa West–Nepean.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: The minister's appointee, Frank Benedetto, told families that all school-day language programs will be gone as of September. The Minister of Infrastructure said no, Ukrainian schools—two of which are in her riding—will still have language instruction and “very little will change” for those students.

Can the minister please tell parents, are their language programs being cut because the Minister of Infrastructure didn't pick up the phone for them?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Speaker, in that instance—as you would know, and I'd assume the member opposite would know, there is a significant amount of Ukrainian students who have come, fleeing the war in Ukraine. At the same time, the churches and the community have decided to pick up some of the responsibility for that international language program because there are so many people who have come and still need some additional help. That's what it is that we're supposed to do. But, at the same time, the program itself will continue to be offered across the system, as it is in 71 other boards, on weekends. That is something that is supported by the Ministry of Education. We're quite proud of that program.

I myself, as a student, learned Italian on weekends at the York Catholic District School Board. I went to St. Patrick's every Saturday morning between 9 and 12 o'clock. My mom used to drop me off there, and that's how I relearned Italian.

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This happens all across the province of Ontario. The TCDSB is coming in line with what happens in 71 other school boards across the province.

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Many of us are taught from a young age that if we make a promise, we should keep it.

In 2018, Doug Ford made a promise to stop the gravy train.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I'll ask the member to refer to people in the chamber by their title.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: In 2018, the leader of the Conservative Party made a promise to stop the gravy train. He was just pretending.

Eight years later, just like the debt that has ballooned to half a trillion dollars, the Premier, a.k.a. now the great pretender, has not stopped the gravy train. He has doubled down on it, and he has doubled the number of people working in his office—50 people, and a total office salary that has grown from \$2 million in 2018 to \$8 million today.

Through you, Speaker, to the President of the Treasury Board: How does this government justify their broken promise to stop the gravy train?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the government House leader.

Hon. Steve Clark: Speaker, through you to the honourable member: She'll know that we were elected on a platform to protect Ontario.

All three parties—the mainstream parties—have all had their time in government in my lifetime.

The Premier's office provides a very important link to other ministries, to programs, to caucuses, and those young men and women who are in the Premier's office perform a very, very important role. So from my perspective, I'm not sure what the member was alluding to.

The fact of the matter is, we're proud of our government. We're proud of the men and women who support our constituency offices, who support our ministries, who support all of the legislative functions that we do as MPPs, regardless of whether they sit here in this building or in buildings all across Ontario.

I know when it comes to our caucus, we're all working on one single thing, and that's to do whatever we can do to protect this province amidst global pressures.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Don Valley West.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I don't know what fantasy tunnel this ineffective Conservative government is living in, but in real life here in Ontario, people are struggling to buy groceries, find a job and afford a home.

The budget they tabled last week is a budget of broken promises—no mention of their promise to build 1.5 million homes; no mention of the great pretender's promise to create 300,000 manufacturing jobs. Do you know why? Because he has actually lost 9,000.

With 700,000 people unemployed and more than 34,000 jobs lost last year alone, the only place in this province with record job growth is the Premier's office.

To the President of the Treasury Board: When will this failed Conservative government stop pretending to protect Ontario and make good on their promise to stop the gravy train?

Hon. Steve Clark: I'm not sure where this member and her party think they're going to go. They've had three struggling back-to-back-to-back elections.

Our party, over the last year, since the last election, in the midst of tariffs and global uncertainty—our plan has been simple. We need to put a plan together—like we've done in this budget, like we've done in the last budget—to ensure that we have protection for workers, families and businesses.

Speaker, through you to the member: I was at an Ontario Federation of Agriculture meeting this Saturday morning and had a great response from local farmers. One of my mayors showed me a graphic, and the graphic was actually a down payment on a new home. The sole reason why that transaction took place was because of what was in our budget—that measure in our budget on the HST and new home protection.

It's those types of policies that this government will continue—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Question?

HEALTH CARE

MPP Monica Ciriello: My question is for the Minister of Health.

People in Ontario and across Hamilton depend on strong, accessible primary care, and they want to know that their government is delivering results that matter the most.

In Hamilton, we have seen first-hand how meaningful provincial investments can strengthen local primary care capacity. Through a \$2.2-million investment in primary care team funding, the Greater Hamilton Health Network has already connected more than 6,000 people to team-based primary care, who previously had no access. We saw this investment in Hamilton at the Eva Rothwell Centre, bringing primary care directly into a grassroots community hub supporting individuals and families living in poverty.

These successes show what's possible when targeted provincial action supports local innovation and community-based care.

Speaker, can the minister please update us on how our government is strengthening primary care across Ontario and connecting even more people to the care they need when they need it?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Thank you to the team member from Hamilton Mountain for your interest in this issue.

Of course, Ontario continues to lead the country, with over 90% of Ontario residents connected to a primary care physician/clinician. However, through our investment of \$3.4 billion in the primary care action plan, we are, in fact, going to connect an additional two million more people to primary care over the next four years. And we are, of course, already seeing results in communities across Ontario, from Hamilton to the Port Arthur Health Centre family health team in Thunder Bay. They didn't just meet their attachment goal; they achieved 269% of their target, attaching over 7,695 patients. Keep in mind, these were

organizations that had committed to attaching just under 3,000.

This tremendous achievement shows what is possible when primary care teams have the money, the team and the support that they need. These results—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Hamilton Mountain.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Thank you for your leadership to ensure that Ontario residents across this great province have strong access to primary care.

Families in Hamilton and across Ontario want confidence that this strong progress is a part of a long-term plan to ensure everyone can access team-based primary care.

The early success in Hamilton—including more than 6,000 new patients who were connected to a primary care interprofessional team—shows the impact of provincial support for community-driven innovation.

But my residents of Hamilton Mountain want to know how this momentum will continue, how more residents will be connected, how providers will be supported, and how investments will expand care capacity in the years ahead.

Speaker, can the minister speak further on how our government's recent and upcoming investments will help ensure that more Ontarians have access to timely, connected primary care across our great province?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: I know that the member opposite and her constituents will be watching closely as we continue with our progress.

This past year alone, we've already attached more than 330,000 people—exceeding our annual target by over 10%. As I've stated previously, this progress is being seen in communities across Ontario.

Another example is our investment in the Flemingdon Health Centre, which received over \$4.5 million and has attached over 6,000 patients to primary care.

These strategic local investments in our interprofessional primary care teams are helping us expand capacity, making sure that—connecting people to primary care is our goal. And we are achieving those goals.

Alongside these investments, we've added 20,000 new physicians licensed in the province of Ontario since taking office.

Those investments mean that we have primary care clinicians, nurses, nurse practitioners able to do this work and connect through an interprofessional team. Our plan is working.

UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE FUNDING

Ms. Peggy Sattler: My question is to the Premier.

Thursday's budget revealed the truth behind this government's so-called investment in post-secondary education. Not only does the budget cut \$70 million from PSE this year and \$1.5 billion by 2028-29; it also shows that \$385 million was left unspent last year while 10,000 college workers were laid off, student services were reduced, and at least 700 programs were cancelled.

Speaker, how can this Premier justify cutting funding and leaving money on the table while our post-secondary system was crumbling around us?

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

1110

Hon. Nolan Quinn: As that member knows, the federal government made many, many, many changes to the international student allocations, which—our government stepped up with historic funding: \$6.4 billion. I know it will never come out of the lips of the opposition, but \$6.4 billion is an historic funding amount for not only Ontario, but for Canada. Part of that is \$3.3 billion for high-priority programs that are going to ensure that our economy keeps growing the way it wants to go.

I won't take any lessons from the opposition about how to run an economy.

There's \$1.7 billion for 70,000 newly funded seats to ensure that we have access for our post-secondary learners. That's on top of the 20,000 seats we funded with budget 2025 and the \$750-million investment into STEM.

We also have \$1.1 billion to increase the student funding rate across the whole board and another \$284 million for small, northern, rural and French institutions, because we understand the economics of having post-secondary in smaller communities. It's a little bit more expensive.

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

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Speaker, the numbers don't lie. A cut to PSE funding is not an investment, and the fallout is being felt across this province.

Since this government's historic funding announcement, we have seen more program closures, more job cuts. Algonquin, Fanshawe, George Brown and Humber just issued mass layoff notices.

What's worse, it is students from low- and moderate-income families who will be hurt the most as money is moved out of OSAP grants to pay for any increases in operating. This government's shell game will drive down domestic enrolment in whatever in-demand or high-priority programs are left.

Speaker, why is this government denying Ontario students the post-secondary opportunities that they deserve and our economy depends on?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Speaker, the only shell game I can see is the opposition leader trying to hang on to her job when the deputy leader is going over to the Liberal Party.

Speaker, that \$6.4-billion investment is stabilizing the sector. We understand that the sector has been destabilized because of the federal government's decisions.

Ms. Catherine Fife: That's a grade 7 answer. Do better.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I hear the member from Waterloo yelling, "Do better."

Let's talk about the time when the Rae government was around. I know that's a long time ago and our students weren't even alive at that point, but the reality is, tuition went up three times the rate of inflation under a short

amount of time with the Rae government. If you were in power or the Liberals were in power, inflation would be almost \$15,000 right now—so let's not talk about accessibility or affordability, because you are the government that inflated tuition to rates that are not even acceptable for everyone.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Order. A reminder that we go through the Speaker and a reminder that we act respectfully in the Legislature.

I recognize the member for Etobicoke–Lakeshore.

COST OF LIVING

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Speaker, it has been eight long years of this tired Conservative government. It is no secret that Ontario's economy is broken. Families find life harder. To walk into a grocery store now is an infuriating and exhausting experience. Nearly 700,000 people are unemployed, and over one million people needed to use a food bank last year. And more kids are going to school hungry.

Now, after a budget that could have provided Ontarians real relief, this government is instead shielding itself from scrutiny. This is dead wrong, and we deserve better. We are in the midst of an affordability crisis. And while grocery prices are out of control, this government is doing nothing.

So my question is simple. Speaker, to the Minister of Finance: Do you know how much people in Ontario pay for a dozen eggs?

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

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: We are in a situation right now with a war going on, and gas prices increased. Our government has worked to decrease and permanently decrease the gas tax.

We've provided nearly \$12 billion in support to families.

We have taken tolls off of the 407 East, saving commuters \$7,200 a year.

One important thing I heard over the weekend in my riding was—as I walked along the small businesses in my riding, I heard from small business owners who told me how thankful they were for us to cut the small business tax. This impacts 375,000 businesses in this province.

This is what we are doing to help the people of Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member for Etobicoke–Lakeshore.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Speaker, the minister didn't answer my question, but it doesn't surprise me, given how out of touch the budget was last week.

Let me tell the minister, as a mom who routinely shops to feed two growing and hungry teenage boys: Eggs are up almost 60%, to \$4.93 a dozen, since he and the Premier came to power. A pound of butter is up almost 50%.

It seems to me that the minister has been spending more time looking out for government insiders than everyday Ontarians.

Speaker, people deserve better—better than the Premier's vanity projects and retroactive laws to shield them from scrutiny.

We on this side of the aisle are focused on real results. We are focused on lowering costs and creating opportunities for people to thrive.

Speaker, since the minister could not answer how much more eggs are in 2026, maybe he can answer, how much more will an average family of four in Ontario spend on food this year?

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: Once again, we are saving Ontarians \$11.9 billion with various programs we're doing, not just—and I'm going back to the small business tax, because this is what I'm hearing loud and clear. These are the mom-and-pops that go out and buy the eggs at the grocery store. These are the mom-and-pops making, with the restaurants in each and every one of our ridings—that they need to buy those eggs. And we're cutting the gas tax. That is, provincially, what we're doing to help them when they go to the grocery store and they buy those eggs. Also, when those eggs have to go from the farmer to the table—that is a gas tax we are cutting and helping Ontarians with. Those tolls on the 407—they also help, as well, in the production from farm to table.

So I want you to understand we are doing everything we can to help people in Ontario, period.

INDIGENOUS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: My question is for the Minister of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Economic Reconciliation.

We know that building roads, strengthening energy infrastructure and responsibly developing the north is about more than just projects; it's about unlocking opportunity, prosperity and long-term economic growth for communities across our province.

In northern Ontario, we're already seeing unprecedented momentum as major infrastructure projects move forward in partnership with First Nations. Our government recognizes that First Nations are best positioned to lead the vision for their communities and that meaningful partnership is essential to getting this right.

Can the minister share with the House some of the progress being made to help unlock the Ring of Fire?

L'hon. Greg Rickford: Merci au député de Glengarry–Prescott–Russell pour son travail dans sa circonscription.

There's an exciting story to talk about in the Ring of the Fire. It goes back about a year and a half ago, when we announced plans to work with Minodahmun Development Corp., owned and operated by four First Nations communities, to set up a commercial plaza there.

Madam Speaker, as we head into Geraldton proper and farther parts north, we entered into a shared prosperity agreement with Aroland First Nation, amongst other things, to dramatically improve and increase the electricity

capacity in their community and focus on a couple of key infrastructure projects there.

A community partnership agreement with Webequie First Nation, Greenstone and Marten Falls aligned the province, those First Nations communities and those municipalities on projects that were priorities for them and to help the province and the people of Ontario move farther into the Ring of Fire.

1120

The environmental assessments, led by First Nations, are now complete for approval with the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, and the Greenstone transmission line identifies, from Red Rock clear through to Aroland First Nation, a new capacity to run electricity to the Matawa communities farther north who have none. This is exciting news and a lot of work in just over a year and a half.

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

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: Thank you to the minister for this important information.

Speaker, our government has been clear: Protecting Ontario means taking action to strengthen our economy, secure our supply chains, and responsibly develop our natural resources here at home. Sourcing critical minerals within our province is central to that goal and to building long-term prosperity.

We know the Ring of Fire is one of the most promising mineral development opportunities in the world, with enormous economic potential.

Through our Protect Ontario plan, we are advancing nation-building projects efficiently while upholding strong environmental standards and meaningful partnerships with First Nations.

Can the minister explain how our accelerated approach to the Ring of Fire is helping to protect Ontario's economic future?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I'll do my best.

Of course, at PDAC, I was joined by so many colleagues here to announce, with the Premier, an accelerated plan to build the corridor to prosperity, connecting isolated northern communities with Aroland and farther south First Nations and farther south to Geraldton and parts beyond.

We were able to pivot to an economic partnership agreement with Webequie First Nation and Marten Falls First Nation that looks at their ability to access the Indigenous opportunities fund to build and refurbish an aerodrome on the Eagle's Nest site, the primary site for Ring of Fire activities; aggregate production; and housing capacity for the workers who will be required to do the work in that area.

We established a relationship table with Eabametoong First Nation, which is setting the foundation for a community partnership agreement.

We're looking at the prospect of greater rail capacity and shovels in the ground on all parts of the corridor to prosperity this year.

When we talk about protecting Ontario, we're protecting northern Ontario, and we're looking forward to all of the activities this year to make—

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

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

Ms. Catherine Fife: This question is for the Premier.

This government has decided, against taxpayer wishes, that one of their biggest priorities is building a luxury spa on the Toronto waterfront. They also want to build a new island and a convention centre on the Toronto waterfront. They have taken control away from the city so that they can expand the airport on the Toronto waterfront. This government is obsessed with the Toronto waterfront.

The public is justifiably concerned with the lack of transparency, lack of environmental impact and the loss of public space with your fantasy plan.

Does the Premier know that there is more to Ontario than the Toronto waterfront?

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

Hon. Vijay Thanigasalam: Madam Speaker, Waterfront Toronto is leading one of the most ambitious waterfront revitalization efforts in the world, and we are proud to be at the centre of this plan. We are transforming underutilized and underdeveloped lands into vibrant, mixed-use communities that will showcase Ontario's leadership in modern urban innovation.

Our investment will enable 14,000 homes, create an estimated 100,000 in skilled trades jobs, and add \$143 billion to the economy.

While the opposition parties talked and sat on their hands, we funded roughly \$1.4 billion to protect the Port Lands from flooding so families and other people can create a thriving life.

We'll continue to build infrastructure and continue to make sure this infrastructure is there for generations to come.

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

Ms. Catherine Fife: Every file in the province of Ontario is on fire, and these guys think they can build a fantasy island. It's bizarre.

Your priorities are bizarre.

In the past year, this government has fired 700 nurses, and, with last week's budget, more cuts are on the way. They have failed to end hallway health care. They have failed to address record unemployment. They failed to address the housing crisis.

You've gutted OSAP grants, abandoning more students to debt.

And our northern highways are some of the deadliest in Canada.

Why does this Premier think that his waterfront fantasy fetish should trump the real needs of the people of this province?

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

Hon. Stan Cho: Our priorities are bizarre? Look at the member and the party asking this question. They are the

ones with the priorities that are bizarre. This is a party that has said no to everything that has given progress to the people of this province.

I remember, in 2018, they called the Ontario Line a back-of-the-napkin plan.

The Leader of the Opposition, in 2019, called online learning an Alabama-style waste of time. Where would we be without that during the pandemic?

And now we are revitalizing the most iconic waterfront in the country, and they call that a "bizarre" plan.

Speaker, we lost two decades of Ontario Place—two decades, because it was sinking into Lake Ontario.

This is a party that said no to absolutely everything.

Now we're building up a Niagara strategy. We are revitalizing Mississauga and that strategy. We are bringing millions in tourism and developing the economy. And yes, we're building—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Order.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The government side will come to order. The opposition will come to order. Question?

ONTARIO BUDGET

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Somebody had his energy drink this morning.

Speaker, this government talks a lot about affordability, although, as displayed with my colleague, I'm not so sure they are actually in touch with what's going on at the grocery store. They don't seem to have a fetish about that and the prices there.

When they had the chance to actually act for renters in this province, they failed. Last week, they voted down my bill that would have stopped unfair rent increases. This is a basic measure to give tenants a sense of certainty in really uncertain times you always talk about, which we all acknowledge.

Now they table a budget that does nothing to rein in rising rent costs or protect everyday seniors and families.

Speaker, to the Premier: How can this out-of-touch Conservative government claim this budget protects Ontarians while voting against renters?

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

Hon. Graydon Smith: This budget protects Ontarians. The budget we bring next year will protect Ontarians. The budget we bring the year after that will protect Ontarians. We've been elected to govern this province time and time again because we're always looking out for Ontarians.

Speaker, we've removed the provincial portion of the HST on new purpose-built rental housing. Last year, we saw a historic surge in rental housing starts—over 25,000 new units. If you want to lower the cost, you increase the capacity. It's simple supply and demand. And we are doing that. That is, by the way, the highest level of rental starts ever. So our plan for rentals in Ontario is working.

We'll continue to work for renters in Ontario, homebuyers in Ontario, people in Ontario, to make sure that every time we bring a budget, they see the value in it. And do you know what? In 2029, I'll bet they elect us again.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member for Toronto–St. Paul's.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: You see this all over again: They say one thing and they do another, over and over and over again. They claim to stand for working families, all the folks, but then when it comes time to act, they vote against making renters in this province have it easier. In fact, they're making it harder for renters in this province, in Ontario.

There is no relief for renters right now, no help with rising grocery bills, no support for higher hydro costs, and you're actually making it harder for parents to send their kids to college or university with cuts to OSAP.

Once again, to the Premier: At a time when Ontarians need him to make life more affordable, why is this budget dead set on making life more expensive?

1130

Hon. Graydon Smith: Again, this is about supply. How do you lower the cost of something? You have an adequate supply. The real cause of rental unaffordability hasn't been the fact that we need more private members' bills with rent control. That would actually stifle the building of supply in Ontario. What we need to do is incent builders to build more rental units. We did just that by removing the HST on purpose-built rentals. And what have we seen? More rental units. What will more rental units in the system do? Lower the cost.

In many municipalities, rent is falling. It's leaving more money in people's pockets.

This government will continue to work to make sure there is an adequate supply. We are not going to involve ourselves in a market that stifles supply with bad ideas that stifle supply. We're going to build more rental units for more people in every community in this province.

ENERGY POLICIES

MPP Bill Rosenberg: My question is for the Associate Minister of Energy-Intensive Industries.

Ontario's energy consumption is projected to increase significantly, by up to 90% under the high-growth scenario, by the year 2050.

Under the previous Liberal government, we saw short-sighted, siloed energy planning which separated electricity, natural gas and other fuels. The results of this approach led to a skyrocketing 300% increase in electricity rates.

Ontario's industries and workers need the certainty of reliable and secure energy. Families across our province need to know their homes will continue to be powered by affordable energy.

Can the associate minister tell the House how our government is protecting our electricity supply and building for future demand surge?

Hon. Sam Oosterhoff: I have to thank the member for Algoma–Manitoulin for his strong advocacy and leadership for his community. Since he showed up here, he has been delivering for that community in a way that we have never seen for that community. I have to say, his leadership, especially on this important file, on the issue of energy—building out a massive energy grid that we know we need to meet that incoming surge of electricity demand here in the province of Ontario.

I was pleased, just a few short months ago, to announce investments that are coming down the pipe—a 290-kilometre new transmission line connecting Barrie to Sudbury. Why is that so important? It's really about addressing that critical bottleneck and ensuring that northern Ontario, which we've seen is going to be absolutely growing in massive leaps and bounds over the coming decades—an estimated 41 new mines coming to northern Ontario, an 81% increase in demand. We're building out the transmission capacity to power that growth and ensure that good jobs and good industries can continue to grow in northern Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member for Algoma–Manitoulin.

MPP Bill Rosenberg: Thank you to the associate minister for his response.

Ontarians remember the damage that the Liberal policies caused to our energy sector and the consequences that followed.

Today, in a time of growing geopolitical uncertainty, it has never been more important to strengthen local capacity and to build Ontario's energy self-reliance. That's why our government has been at the forefront of prioritizing a made-in-Ontario energy supply chain—one that supports jobs, strengthens our economy, and keeps our industries and businesses competitive.

Can the associate minister share details about how our government has protected Ontario's industries by unleashing the full potential of our energy sector?

Hon. Sam Oosterhoff: Again, I want to thank the member for the question.

He's absolutely right that our historic transmission expansion projects across this province, including into northern Ontario, are a way that, through the integrated energy plan, we are powering growth. We know how important that growth is for the sake of our economy and for the sake of our industry.

I want to talk for a second about what the member mentioned: an integrated energy approach that takes in all of the above sources. We know that when you look at what we're doing in our procurements, whether it's the massive biomass contracts that we've seen in northern Ontario, whether it's supports in renewables, whether it's supports in natural gas and, of course, our incredible nuclear fleet, it's really about building out a strong, reliable and secure energy supply chain that supports tens of thousands of good jobs across this province. That's what protecting Ontario looks like.

As we build out our transmission capacity, we're going to continue to invest in new jobs and new supports for

workers and continue to ensure that industries and families have access to affordable, reliable energy for today and many years to come.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): There being no further business, this House stands in recess until 1 p.m.

The House recessed from 1135 to 1300.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

Mr. Brian Saunderson: Further to my member's statement this morning, it's my great pleasure to welcome to the House, in the Speaker's gallery, a darling of Collingwood, a hero of Canada, our most recent Paralympic bronze medallist in Milano Cortina, Michaela Gosselin, and her parents, Kevin and Rachel.

Hon. Rob Flack: I'm just noticing, Speaker, that we have some distinguished guests up in the gallery. We've got Scott from OHBA there, BILD is there, FRPO is there, RESCON is there, all representing the housing industry in this province, getting more homes built faster. Welcome to Queen's Park.

MPP Paul Vickers: I wish to rise today to welcome Bethany Taylor, the sister of my EA, Graham Taylor, to Queen's Park today. Bethany is here on behalf of Grey county at the annual Good Roads convention, where she presented to a panel of students aspiring to public service about the importance of municipal work.

Welcome to the House, Bethany.

INTRODUCTION OF GOVERNMENT BILLS

BUILDING HOMES AND IMPROVING TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE ACT, 2026

LOI DE 2026 POUR LA CONSTRUCTION DE LOGEMENTS ET L'AMÉLIORATION DE L'INFRASTRUCTURE DE TRANSPORT

Mr. Flack moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 98, An Act to enact the Fare Alignment and Seamless Transit Act, 2026 and to amend various Acts / Projet de loi 98, Loi édictant la Loi de 2026 sur l'harmonisation des tarifs et l'intégration des transports en commun et modifiant diverses lois.

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 provide a brief explanation?

Hon. Rob Flack: The proposed legislation, the Building Homes and Improving Transportation Infrastructure Act, 2026, will make targeted updates across multiple statutes to support Ontario's economic growth, transit infrastructure and speeding up housing construction. We are proposing to accelerate the delivery of key transit

infrastructure, streamline planning processes, support water and waste water infrastructure, and improve transparency around development charges.

Together, these changes will help build homes faster, reduce costs and delays, and support Ontario's continued economic growth.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

FAIR AND FREE ELECTIONS ACT, 2026

LOI DE 2026 POUR DES ÉLECTIONS LIBRES ET HONNÊTES

Mr. Fraser moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 99, An Act to amend the Election Act and the Election Finances Act with respect to electoral matters / Projet de loi 99, Loi modifiant la Loi électorale et la Loi sur le financement des élections à l'égard de questions électorales.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Would the member like to explain the bill?

Mr. John Fraser: I'd first like to say I really love the support of my colleagues.

Quite simply, the changes to the fixed election date require that we make some changes to the length of the writ. We have to give the people who prepare our elections enough time to be ready. That's the first thing.

The second thing is to allow the electoral officer to make appointments of returning officers like they do in other provinces, simply because it's not getting done. The OIC method of doing it is not fast enough. Things are happening at the last minute.

The third thing is we have to give the Chief Electoral Officer some more power in terms of being able to combat misinformation.

PETITIONS

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: I'm pleased to rise today to introduce a petition on behalf of students and their families who are making their voices heard loud and clear. Many have already been outside Queen's Park speaking about and against the government's changes to OSAP. Today, I'm proud to bring their voices directly to the Legislature.

This is now the second day that Liberal members have been presenting petitions from across Ontario on these OSAP changes. Students in Ajax and Ontario understand what these changes mean: more debt, more stress and more barriers to completing their education. At a time when young people are already facing rising costs, economic uncertainty and are wondering if they're ever going

to be able to own a home, frankly, the government's changes are simply the wrong choice.

That's why this petition calls on the government to reverse these changes, properly consult with students and institutions and uphold the promise of accessible and affordable post-secondary education.

I would like to thank students in my riding and across Ontario for their advocacy and for making their voices heard. I'm proud to stand with them today, and I'm pleased to affix my signature to this petition.

ONTARIO ECONOMY

Hon. Steve Clark: I want to thank my colleague and friend the member for Essex for this initiative. This petition is to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, and it essentially calls on the Legislature to adopt regulations and issue procurement directives as appropriate to prioritize Ontario-made goods.

Our province is the number one export market in 15 US states. We help keep millions of Americans working. The US Supreme Court has declared President Trump's tariffs to be illegal, but we need to develop these regulations so that we put Ontario products first.

I want to commend the member for Essex on some of the initiatives he's working on. I went back this weekend, and it just took literally 10 seconds to get some signatures on this petition.

I'm pleased to affix my signature, and I'll send it to the table with page Avish.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I rise today with a petition to raise social assistance rates. For almost two decades now I've been a minister—first a hospital chaplain, then in ministry in communities—and I have seen people on OW and ODSP for a couple of decades. I've watched them age. I've watched them struggle. I've watched them move into homelessness. The crisis that we're facing is dire. We really need to double both ODSP and OW. In fact, economically it only makes sense because we're actually paying out far more in hospital fees later and in other social services.

So I am very pleased to affix my name to this, and I want to thank Sally Palmer for bringing this to us. I'm going to give it to page Else to bring up to you.

CANCER SCREENING

Mr. Ted Hsu: I rise today with a petition from members of my riding of Kingston and the Islands and the nearby regions.

It's on behalf of the 20% of women diagnosed with breast cancer who are over the age of 75. They're asking for the expansion of the Ontario Breast Screening Program to allow women over the age of 74 to self-refer for mammogram screening. The idea is to improve early

detection, to improve health outcomes and to reduce long-term health care costs.

EDUCATION FUNDING

MPP Tyler Watt: I proudly rise today to table a petition calling on the Legislative Assembly to make the necessary investments in public education to lower class sizes, increase student supports and ensure students have the schools they need. This comes from a bunch of education workers and advocates in my riding. There is a crisis going on in schools, and it's about time that we do something about it.

I proudly will affix my name to this petition, and I will give it to Robbie to bring forward.

1310

EDUCATION FUNDING

Ms. Catherine Fife: It's my pleasure to table a petition on behalf of ETFO Waterloo Region today. They have quite honestly outlined many issues that are existing in our education system: the record violence that's happening in our schools, many staff working short without the appropriate supports for students in classrooms, and special education students who are being excluded due to funding restrictions.

They also understand this concept called "inflationary pressures," which is missing in this budget, unfortunately.

They're putting out a call to ensure that the government funds classrooms so that there are not huge classes that are unmanageable so that every student gets the attention that they need. At the end of the day, class size does matter.

I got involved in politics because of public education. Public education is always worth fighting for. It is my pleasure to support this petition and affix my signature to it.

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I'm very proud to rise in this House to present these petitions. The petition is entitled "Save OSAP—Fund Education Now." I'm proud to read it on behalf of the official opposition.

"To the Legislative Assembly:

"Whereas Doug Ford's government has created an expensive vicious cycle for Ontario's youth with sky-high rents, fewer opportunities, and higher costs at every turn;

"Whereas Ontario now has the highest youth unemployment rate in Canada, yet" the Premier's "government is making life even harder by hiking tuition and gutting OSAP grants;...

"Whereas for years, both Liberal and Conservative governments have left Ontario ranking dead last in per-student funding in Canada, and" more "careless cuts are putting Ontario's economic future at risk;

"Whereas Ontario's youth shouldn't have to pay the price for" this government's "failures, and deserve a government that invests in their future."

This petition is signed by a number of residents, and I am pleased to attach my signature to it and to return it to the centre table with wonderful page Marigold.

ONTARIO ECONOMY

MPP Paul Vickers: I have a petition today to support made-in-Ontario public procurement so our hard-earned taxpayer dollars stay right here in Ontario. These efforts will support Ontario businesses, workers and families across our manufacturing, construction and technology sectors. We have heard so much over the past year about supporting our economy, and I'm glad to see our procurement policies doing exactly that.

I have mayors and business owners and everyday people from Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound willing to sign this petition, and I'm pleased to affix my signature to this petition and send it to the centre table with the page Else—and she is my home page.

EDUCATION FUNDING

Ms. Jessica Bell: This is a petition to the Ontario Legislative Assembly calling for a reduction in class sizes in our public elementary schools because a significant amount of money—over \$6 billion—has been cut from public education since 2018, when you factor in population growth and inflation, and it's having a real impact. This petition identifies some of those issues, from overcrowded class sizes to an increase in violence—and also seeing some really concerning cuts to special education and mental health supports for kids.

I'm going to be giving this petition to page Robbie, and I'll be affixing my signature to it because I fully support the demands in this petition.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Mr. Ted Hsu: I have a petition today entitled “Petition to Raise Social Assistance Rates.” It's petitioning the Legislative Assembly to double social assistance rates for OW and ODSP.

I think that you only have to knock on doors and talk to people in certain neighbourhoods to know how hard it is to live on the current level of social assistance rates.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It's my honour to present the following petitions on behalf of Sally Palmer, professor emerita from the school of social work and the faculty of social sciences at McMaster University. The petition is entitled “To Raise Social Assistance Rates.”

I'd also like to thank Middlesex-London Health Unit's dietitian, Kim Leacy; board chair Laurie Lashbrook; and directors Glen Pearson and Jane Roy for their advocacy to extend the ODSP earnings exemption for Ontario Works recipients.

You see, Speaker, in this petition, it points out how people on Ontario Works or ODSP are deeply below the poverty level. It's been shown that doubling these funds would actually help people. It would end up saving the province in the long run.

We know that income and wage are among the most integral social determinants of health, so let's listen to the experts in this field. Listen to the people who are the food bank. Let's double social assistance so that people are able to get healthy, able to get good employment, able to get their education.

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

EDUCATION FUNDING

Mr. Ted Hsu: I have a petition today from the people who are connected to the Limestone District School Board, which is one of the school boards that includes my riding of Kingston and the Islands.

This petition is asking for the reduction of class sizes in our public elementary schools. They want the Legislature of Ontario to make the necessary investments to public education to lower class sizes, increase student supports and ensure students have the schools they need. I'm sure, Speaker, you've also spoken with teachers and heard of the need to have more educational assistants, and heard that sometimes special education teachers aren't able to teach special education because they're needed to fill in somewhere else. So I'm very happy to support this petition.

EDUCATION FUNDING

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I'd like to present this petition to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. The title of this petition is “Stop Cuts to Education!”, recognizing that more families and students are now experiencing the first-hand effects of this government's cuts to education; recognizing that schools are underfunded, are overstaffed and overrun with crowded classrooms, creating unsuitable environments for learning for the children.

Schools are now dangerously overpacked, and there are fewer and fewer one-on-one supports for students with exceptionalities. Therefore, the undersigned petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to call on this government to prioritize children and worker safety by investing in education, hiring more teachers and education workers, and keeping those class sizes small.

I'm proud to sign this petition and to send this back to the centre table with page Devlin from Scarborough Southwest.

EDUCATION FUNDING

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I rise with a petition that is entitled “Reduce Class Sizes in our Public Elementary Schools.”

I note that I am not the first today to rise with a very large stack. I hope that the government is paying attention to our students and our families who are struggling with growing class sizes, increased violence and lack of supports for mental health, with the \$6.3-billion shortfall for education.

I have to say, Speaker, our students today are absorbing the stresses of this world—the illegal war in Iran, climate change, the lack of supports in their own classroom—and they need more caring adults. They need more investments, not fewer, so it is my honour to stand on behalf of the TDSB parents and families that have signed this, to affix my name and to give it to page Ronald to bring to the table.

OPTOMETRY SERVICES

Mr. Ted Hsu: I have a petition from my riding of Kingston and the Islands entitled “Petition to Save Eye Care in Ontario.” I think many of us here will remember speaking to optometrists in our ridings about the fact that the OHIP reimbursement for a visit was much lower than the actual cost of providing that care.

This petition asks the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to instruct the Ontario government to immediately commit to legally binding formal negotiations to ensure that any future OHIP-insured optometry services are, at a minimum, funded at the cost of delivery, thereby saving eye care in Ontario.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Once again, I’m proud to rise in this House to present this petition to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. It is to call on this government to raise social assistance rates.

Recognizing that “social assistance rates are well below Canada’s official Market Basket Measure poverty line and far from adequate to cover the rising costs of food and rent: \$733 for individuals on OW and \$1,408 for ODSP;

“Whereas an open letter to the Premier and two cabinet ministers, signed by over 230 organizations” has already been submitted—

1320

Interjection: Wow.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Yes, wow. If only they can get a response.

“Whereas small increases to ODSP have” left Ontario citizens living with legislative poverty. We know that people are going hungry. We know that government can do more.

The undersigned of this petition are calling on this assembly to double the social assistance rates of those living on OW and ODSP.

I want to thank Professor Sally Palmer once again for her steadfast advocacy. She hand-collects all these petitions on her own. God bless her. She makes sure that the voices of these people signing the petition are read into this House day in and day out. Thank you, Dr. Palmer.

I’m pleased to present this to the centre table with page Liam.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

PLAN TO PROTECT ONTARIO ACT (BUDGET MEASURES), 2026

LOI DE 2026 SUR LE PLAN POUR PROTÉGER L'ONTARIO (MESURES BUDGÉTAIRES)

Resuming the debate adjourned on March 30, 2026, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 97, An Act to implement Budget measures, to enact, amend or repeal various statutes and to revoke various regulations / Projet de loi 97, Loi visant à mettre en oeuvre les mesures budgétaires, à édicter, à modifier ou à abroger diverses lois et à abroger divers règlements.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Further debate? The member for University–Rosedale.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, Speaker. I think I stood up a little early, so I apologize for that. I was a little enthusiastic about it. I am sharing my time with the member for London West and the member for Waterloo.

Wow, budget day—I first want to start off by talking a little bit about the pre-budget consultations that took place. I very much enjoyed travelling with some of my colleagues from the different parties around Ontario to hear what Ontarians would like to see in the pre-budget consultations. I especially enjoyed the extra night we spent at Pembroke because of the extreme snowstorm that we had to experience, and I learned a lot. It was really a valuable experience for me.

I want to summarize some of the things that I heard in the pre-budget consultations. Over 189 people gave presentations. It was very comprehensive. We received over 3,000 written submissions. We conducted roughly 65 total hours of hearings. It was really quite comprehensive.

I want to thank legislative research for the excellent work you did in summarizing by ministry some of the main themes that we heard. It’s extremely helpful because the content that you get is enormous. So I’d like to give a special shout-out to them.

Before I get into what’s actually in the budget, I just want to summarize some of the themes that we heard in pre-budget consultations. We heard from the agricultural food and agri-business sector about the need to provide them with additional support in the face of the Trump tariff war that we’re having. They’re certainly being impacted by that. Some of the requests that they made included having additional financial assistance so that they could scale up and bring in value-added manufacturing, which is a move that we certainly support. Unfortunately, we didn’t see those improvements and changes in the budget. We also heard again the request to expand the Ontario Risk Management Program to ensure that there is certainty for agri-business. We didn’t see that in the budget either, which is unfortunate.

I want to give a shout-out to the organizations that came to speak about a very specific health concern—it was surprising how frequently it came up—which is the issue around the very dramatic increase in vaping, especially among teenagers. If you walk by a high school these days, it's inevitable that you will see a vape shop close by. Investigations have identified that some of these vape shops that are located near high schools are selling to high school students, and there are a lot of issues with the flavoured products and with addiction.

We had some individuals from the Canadian Cancer Society talk about how up to 20% of grade 10 students vape. While we do not know the long-term consequences of vaping, what we do know is that there are cancerous materials in these vape products, and experts are expecting this to be tomorrow's public health issue. They called on the government to take some action in the budget about that issue; it's not in the budget.

We heard from numerous organizations that work within the developmental services sector, and the worry they demonstrated when they came to committee was really something to behold. We had individuals come who spoke about the need for increased funding to the Ontario Autism Program, and that is certainly a call that I support. While there has been an increase in funding to the Ontario Autism Program above the rate of inflation, what we are hearing from the Ontario Autism Coalition is that it's really woefully short given the need, given the long wait times people have to access the kind of care and the kind of education that their kids are really looking for and the therapy they're looking for.

Literally, just a week ago, I was walking down Shaw Street and a parent came up to me and talked about their 14-year-old son who was on the wait-list for access to therapy. His dad expressed great frustration that he was still waiting, and he was worried about what kind of impact that was going to have on his kid and his ability to reach his full potential. Because every month, every day, it counts.

We heard from a lot of organizations who talked about the growing increase in poverty in Ontario and the need to increase Ontario Works and Ontario disability support payments so that we can really help seniors, low-income people, people who are disabled, who cannot work—to just lift them above the poverty line and make it so that they can afford to go to the grocery store and buy food, make it so that they can cover the rent. It was pretty concerning to see that all across the board.

We heard a lot from students and the post-secondary education sector about the need to stop the hemorrhaging of jobs, classes, departments and courses that were being laid off and closed as a result of the shrinking in the amount of funding to the post-secondary sector. The government has made some announcements on this, but they come with a very ugly price. So while we did see an increase in funding, what we didn't see is an increase of funding so that it's on par with what other provinces give students. In fact, we are still dead last—not just a little bit last, but really, really, really dead last. So we've got some concerns about that.

And then this government, even though no one asked for it—not a single person in pre-budget consultations asked for it—made the decision to change the OSAP program from mostly a grant program to mostly a loan program and opened the door to increased tuition. We've seen the anger that students are feeling in response to that pretty dramatic increase in costs at a time when you have to go to college and university to get a decent job. It's never been more expensive to live in this province, and youth unemployment is really high. We've heard from many students who feel that this government has really turned their back on what it's like to be a young person in Ontario today. There's a lot of anger there.

We heard from many teachers who came to committee to speak about what it's actually like in the classroom today. The stories and the experiences were really concerning. We heard about the increase in violence. We heard about the issues with transportation and busing, especially in more rural areas like Pembroke. We heard about the increase in class sizes, what it's like to be a parent of a special education student or a student who has special needs. We heard about the shortage in French teachers—teachers across the board, but especially French teachers. We heard about the lack of mental health supports. We heard about the dismal state of libraries in schools. It was really quite concerning across the board.

Shortly after those pre-budget consultations, I was having another conversation with a constituent who was telling me that their child, who is in SK, has been told that they can no longer go to their local school because the teachers do not have the supports that they need to cater to this child and run a class, because this child is autistic and non-verbal. You can imagine how that parent is feeling right now. That's very concerning.

1330

We heard a lot from conservation authorities, who are very worried about the government's decision to amalgamate conservation authorities even though no one asked for it. They can see what impact that is going to have on our ability to manage flooding and ensure that we are not building new homes in flood plains, which means that homeowner inevitably is going to experience some kind of flood that's going to cost them a whole lot of money and raise their insurance rates, if they're able to get insurance to cover that at all—so very concerning.

We heard about the need within the health care sector to deal with wage parity. We had family health team after family health team come in and say, "You know, we have staffing shortages of 40% or more because we can't pay a nurse or a social worker or a physio what they could get in a hospital, and so they are leaving or they're not even applying for these jobs. And it's impacting our ability to provide primary care in the community because we just can't fill these jobs." So they called for wage parity, to increase wages to be on par with what an equivalent staff person could get in a hospital. I don't know how many times I heard that. It was really a common theme.

We heard from hospitals across the board, including Brockville, Kemptville, as well as Ottawa, about the state

of overcrowding, upwards of, in some cases, 170%. Hospitals were operating at 170% capacity or more. It's very concerning, and the ask was really clear there: Increase hospital funding so that we can meet the need. They were really clear about that.

Overall, it provided a pretty stark snapshot of what is happening in Ontario today and where people are feeling that they're really struggling to get by. We heard a lot of that.

So what actually did we get? I'm going to talk a little bit about that, and then I'm going to move to the actual bill itself. I'm going to go through what the budget included on five key topics that we felt were the most important, what we were hearing most often.

We actually graded the government on their budget, and it's pretty safe to say they didn't pass the test on all the key things that matter. If we were grading the budget on funding the Premier's pet legacy projects, then he would definitely be getting an A+, but on the issues that really matter to Ontarians, they were getting scores between a D- and an F, and I want to go through these in turn.

The first matter that we graded the government on was on whether this budget is actually going to make life more affordable for Ontarians, and I think it's safe to say that they didn't. We were looking for measures that would stabilize rent prices and make it more affordable for people to go to the grocery store and buy food, and we didn't see anything like that in the budget. There was no move to stabilize rent prices by bringing in stronger rent control, clamping down on above-guideline rent increases, building more affordable housing, and the word "groceries" actually didn't appear in the budget at all.

We would have liked the government to look at what other provinces are doing to see whether those things can be applied here. Manitoba just eliminated the PST off essential grocery items. We could have brought in a stronger consumer watchdog to stop Loblaws and the big grocery giants engaging in what quite clearly is price gouging, but we didn't see any of that in this budget. We didn't see any of that.

On health care and education, the two biggest responsibilities of the provincial government, we assessed the government's budget on whether they fixed the problems that we're seeing in these two departments, and, unfortunately, the issues that we see in health care in 2026 are going to be the very same issues that we see in health care in 2027. The overcrowding in hospitals is going to continue. The very scary situation of emergency rooms closing, especially in rural areas—we don't see any kind of funding investment that's going to address that problem.

While we certainly have seen a focus on expanding access to primary care through the program that is being overseen by Dr. Philpott, what we're also hearing from medical experts is that the amount of investment that is happening is not enough to ensure that every Ontarian has a family doctor or a nurse practitioner that is available to see them. The OMA—the Ontario Medical Association—

in their pre-budget consultations said pretty clearly that we are still on track to have two million people or more without access to a family doctor. We would have liked to have seen that fixed in the budget, but we didn't see it.

I think it's safe to say that in Ontario our public health care system should be able to provide us with a primary care provider. We should be able to get tests if we need them. We should be able to see a specialist if there is something that is concerning, and our hospitals should be able to meet the needs of the community. That's what we expect from our health care system.

We also expect that we are not paying out of pocket when we visit the doctor or the nurse practitioner to access medically necessary services. In fact, that's the law. It's the law. It's the provincial law and the federal law. This government is not just underfunding public health care; what we are seeing is this government is moving ahead with bringing for-profit health care into Ontario, a two-tier health care system. The consequences of that are that it's going to cost us more, and it's not going to improve health outcomes.

The education cuts are, quite frankly, concerning. We are seeing a cut to education infrastructure, which means that the issues we are seeing in our schools like hot classrooms, classrooms that are too cold, boilers that don't work, flooding roofs—one of my kids' schools just had the principal's office and the administrator's office flooded earlier this year and it took months—months—for it to be repaired. That's pretty typical.

We're seeing cuts to infrastructure funding, and we are also seeing this government not increasing operating funding to match inflation and population need, which means all these issues that we see right now, from overcrowding to teacher shortages, are going to continue.

When it comes to jobs, 700,000 people in Ontario are unemployed. What we've seen this government do in this budget is put a whole lot more money into their Protect Ontario fund situation. We don't even know where that money is going. We don't know what companies are getting it. There doesn't seem to be any restrictions on whether it just goes to Canadian companies or Ontario companies, or if it can go to foreign companies as well.

These negotiations around what the agreements are going to look like are all being done with highly paid lawyers behind closed doors. So we don't know if there are job guarantees. We don't know if there is a ban on executive bonuses. We don't know if it's going to come with commitments to ensure that factories stay here in Ontario. We just don't know. All we see is announcements that companies are getting a whole lot of money, and we question what we're going to get to show for it.

What we would like to see is a real plan to invest in municipalities, infrastructure and public services so that we can provide good jobs to people and protect the jobs that we've got. While this government is giving some lip service to putting Ontario first, the measures that we are seeing so far just don't go far enough. That's what we're seeing.

The final thing I want to talk about before I run out of time is what's happening with housing. Since this gov-

ernment got elected in 2018, housing is still the number one issue I hear at the door. Health care is second; housing is number one. People say to me, “I can’t afford the rent;” “I’d love to buy a home, but I can’t save up enough money;” “My partner and I can’t save up enough money with the jobs that we have and with the cost of housing today;” “I’m really worried about the homelessness crisis. It seems to be going from bad to worse. What is the Ontario government doing?”

1340

After looking at this the budget, I can say that the Ontario government is not doing much at all. Funding to affordable housing has been cut. I don’t know how you could cut it in the situation that we’re in right now, but this government is choosing to cut funding to affordable housing. There’s nothing in here to make rent more affordable. And everything this government is trying to do to kick-start housing starts is not working. It doesn’t work, which means that in 2027, the housing issues that we have today are going to continue unless we see some more significant improvements.

That’s all I have time to summarize today in the budget. We hope this budget goes to committee so that people can give their opinion on it because I recall, in the last legislative session—how many bills did they send to committee? One or none? It was one or the other, none or one. Given that this budget is \$230 billion, you would hope that you would give people the opportunity to provide comment. I know we will continue to be doing so.

Thank you, and I will be handing it over to the member for London West.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): I recognize the member from London West.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I am pleased to participate in the debate on the Conservative government’s 2026-27 budget. I’m going to begin my remarks with focusing on the institutions that we all know are fundamental to the health and well-being of Ontarians, that shape our economy and make Ontario’s workforce as competitive as it is. And that, of course, Speaker, is our post-secondary sector: our publicly assisted colleges and universities.

I use the word “publicly assisted” because what we have seen over the past couple of decades under the Liberals and Conservatives is a chronic and ongoing underfunding of the sector, to the point that government operating grants make up much less than half of the revenues that colleges and universities take in.

As government revenues have declined, this particular government in Ontario was happy to allow the exploitation, frankly, of international students who pay as much as six to eight times the amount of tuition that domestic students pay. Those international student tuition dollars were effectively shoring up our sector, subsidizing the delivery of post-secondary education in Ontario. This has been happening for years. And although the government says it was just over a year and a half or so ago—when the federal government introduced the cap on international student tuition—that the sector went into crisis, this

government knows that that is not the truth, and that the sector has been spiralling for a while.

Just in the last two to three years alone, we have seen over 700 programs close at the college level—many more at the university level. We’ve seen over 10,000 jobs lost among college workers, which represents the largest mass layoffs in Ontario’s history.

Last week, we heard about mass termination notices being issued at George Brown College. Humber is undertaking a similar process. Voluntary exit packages are being offered at institutions across Ontario.

The consequences, Speaker, are being felt by students who are seeing a significant reduction in student support services. They’re also being felt by employers and communities because employers are no longer able to rely on that reliable pipeline of talent that they looked to local institutions to provide. And, as you know, we’re seeing entire campuses close. Communities are also losing these anchor institutions that are so critical to local economies.

Instead of recognizing the importance of the sector, this budget does nothing to help stabilize and ensure the long-term security of our colleges and universities. It actually shows that post-secondary funding has been cut. We see that there is going to be a cut of \$70 million this year and \$105 billion by 2028-29. And while our sector was in a tailspin, the budget shows that \$385 million was unspent last year. The government just stood by and allowed all these programs to be closed, staff to be laid off, campuses to be shut down and chose not to spend the money that was allocated.

This budget shows that this year’s funding for post-secondary education has dropped in real terms by 1.9%. Next year, it will drop 10.6%, and Ontario will continue to be well behind every other province, last place in the country, in terms of per-student funding.

The worst thing about all this, Speaker, is that any new funding that this government likes to claim, in the face of the numbers in the budget that show that post-secondary education is being cut—but any new increases to operating funding is coming on the backs of students from low- and moderate-income families.

The government made the decision without any consultation with students, the public—anyone in Ontario—that they were going to shift from a student financial aid program that largely provides grants, to one that provides loans instead. And that means, in the midst of an affordability crisis, in the midst of a jobs crisis, young people in this province are going to be saddled with thousands of dollars of debt before they can even find their first job—or they will make the difficult decision not to go to post-secondary education because they worry about taking on this burden of debt. That is going to harm our entire province when we see domestic enrolments go down in Ontario.

The government talks about aligning the sector to labour market needs. I want to give you an example of one of the programs that has been cut in my community at Fanshawe College. Fanshawe is now up to having closed a total of 59 programs—most recently, nine more pro-

grams were announced earlier in March. One of those is dental assisting. The college notes that the program operates at a structural loss—it's an expensive program to deliver because of lab ratios etc.—and that's why other colleges—St. Clair College, Confederation College—have also closed their dental assisting programs.

But Ontario is short over 3,000 dental assistants. It's also projected that Ontario is going to require an additional 1,000 dental assistants because of the Canadian dental plan. It's just so short-sighted of this province to be allowing our college and university sectors to deteriorate to the point where colleges like Fanshawe can't deliver programs that feed directly into not just local labour markets, but the provincial labour market.

We've seen this also at Algonquin where 30 programs were cut, including music industry arts and applied museum studies, both of which feed directly into the local labour market in eastern Ontario.

We saw over 50 tourism, hospitality and culinary college programs that have been cancelled or suspended in Ontario since 2024, at a time when that sector is projecting a labour shortage of 88,000 workers in this province by 2031. The colleges that have had to close those programs—Loyalist and St. Lawrence, for example. They're located right in a region—Prince Edward county—where tourism and hospitality are one of the top economic generators in those communities.

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Speaker, this would have been an opportunity, with this budget, for the government to provide the stability that colleges and universities need to deliver the programs that support our local labour markets, our provincial labour markets, and that contribute to Ontario's health and well-being and our economic competitiveness, but this government chose not to do that.

My colleague talked about the failing grade that the official opposition has assigned to this budget because it's not just in post-secondary education that the government missed the opportunity to try to address the real problems that exist. They also did it in some of those key fundamentals that people expect the government to deliver on, and that is health care, education, housing, jobs. But in the middle of this affordability crisis that we are all gripped with in our communities across the province, there was a real expectation that the government would step up and do something about the cost of rent and groceries, which are the biggest affordability stressors in most people's lives.

This budget doesn't even mention the word "groceries" once. It does nothing to make life more affordable for everyday Ontarians. We are expecting significant increases in grocery prices over the coming year. Food prices are estimated to go up by as much as 6% over the next 12 months, and with this war in Iran, it is likely to be significantly greater than that.

And what happens when people can't afford to buy food, Speaker? They rely more and more on food banks. In London, we see preliminary data from January to March 2026 showed a significant 9.4% increase in households seeking help. Some of these households are new to food

bank use, but the food bank also reports that they are seeing more and more people coming in repeatedly, so they're having to access food monthly or quarterly. What this indicates is that poverty and hunger are deepening in our community.

I have to give a shout-out to Glen Pearson, who was the founder of the London Food Bank. They just launched their spring food drive last week. He was very blunt, Speaker, about the fact that this is not sustainable, that food banks like the London Food Bank can't continue to rely on community donations to feed an increasing number of people who are hungry. Donors are also experiencing the same financial pressures with groceries and rent and are going to be less and less able to donate. He says government intervention is desperately needed but does not seem to be forthcoming. We saw that in this budget. He notes that without the government, we can't defeat hunger. It is impossible.

We also know, as I mentioned, that rent is another big stressor for many people in this province. We hear all the time from constituents who are living in constant fear that they will get notice of a rent increase that will force them to have to look for somewhere else to live—and there are no other affordable options. When you're looking at people who are on low incomes or fixed incomes, it is very, very difficult to find an affordable place to live. Even as rent prices are moderating somewhat, you can't possibly find an affordable place to live if you are working a minimum-wage job in this province, but the budget did not include any protections or help for renters. In fact, the government has just simply thrown in the towel. They have said that they are giving up on the target of building 1.5 million homes by 2031, which we know is what is needed in this province. And what happens when you don't have a housing strategy to meet the housing needs of Ontarians? You see homelessness increasing dramatically.

I want to thank the London-St. Thomas real estate board for the round table they hosted with my colleagues from London North Centre and London Fanshawe and I, where they talked about the connection between homelessness and the real estate market, because the homelessness crisis impacts property values and market stability. They called for this government to take some concrete actions, like creating a dedicated homelessness task force for the region to bring all the players together and look at some policy recommendations that could really make a difference.

The homelessness crisis in London continues to worsen. We have 1,900 people who experience homelessness right now. That's a 323% increase since 2015. We have more than 7,000 people on the supportive housing wait-list. So it defies logic to try to comprehend why this government didn't take action to try to address the needs of people who are really struggling to find affordable housing.

I also want to speak for a moment about the fact that there's nothing in this budget to deal with unfair AGIs. I want to acknowledge Doug and Carolyn Proctor, who met with me in my office. They're tenants at two low-income buildings on Base Line Road West that largely house seniors, low-income tenants and people on fixed incomes,

and they got a notice of a 9% above-guideline increase. Their landlord is Boardwalk—and let's just look at Boardwalk: That is a multinational company that has got \$9.1 billion in assets. They operate more than 34,000 units across the country.

Doug and Carolyn talked to me about how frustrated and helpless they felt in trying to navigate this process with the Landlord and Tenant Board to bring forward the concerns of tenants about this 9% above-guideline increase. They said that they tried to organize tenants. Many tenants were worried that if they participated, writing a letter to go with the package before the Landlord and Tenant Board, they could end up being evicted, and some tenants in those buildings have just said they can't afford a 9% AGI—understandably—and so they feel they have no choice but to move out.

The other reason for the failing grade that we have given this budget is the lack of attention to the real problems that so many parents with school-aged students are experiencing in our schools. I've heard from many constituents who are concerned about the large class sizes, the lack of before and after school care and, in particular, the dire shortage of EAs in our schools, and it's a particular problem in integrated classrooms, but it's also a problem in congregated classrooms.

I have a parent who told me her daughter is in a congregated class of six students, three of whom are in wheelchairs. One has FASD, one has autism, one has Down's, and there's only two EAs assigned to those six students. That means that the three students who are in wheelchairs don't even have enough EA support to push them at one time.

1400

That same parent told me about the increase in violence in the classroom. She says her daughter told her that an EA had to hide in the classroom and was crying. The EA was hiding from the youth who had just assaulted her and was still looking for her. The next time the daughter saw the EA, she had a sling on her arm. We know this, Speaker. There's so much evidence about the rising incidence of violence in our classrooms.

I wish I could say something about health care in London. At my next opportunity to participate in the debate on the budget motion I certainly will, because it's another area where this government has failed Ontarians.

And, of course, on jobs: London now has the highest unemployment rate of all Ontario big cities, the second-highest in Canada, and yet this government does nothing to address the jobs crisis in this province.

With that, I will pass it along to my colleague the member for Waterloo.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): I recognize the member from Waterloo.

Ms. Catherine Fife: It's a pleasure always to bring the voices and concerns of the people of Waterloo to the floor of this Legislature, and, my goodness, they have a lot of concerns with this budget.

I always start off by talking about budget documents as moral documents, a moral document that should reflect the

needs of the people that we're elected to serve. If you're looking and paying attention to what's happening in our communities, both my colleagues have highlighted huge concerns in health care and education, in housing and infrastructure as well. Waterloo region, of course, is faced with a major crisis right now around not having enough water to continue to build, and so we have a freeze on all new development in Waterloo region. So there's a definite correlation between underinvestment by the provincial government impacting our communities and, quite honestly, holding them down or holding them back.

I do want to say as well—my colleague who is the finance critic talked about the public consultation process. All of us, I think, at some point, have participated in this, when we as legislators go around the province and we hear first-hand from different communities. We all hear the same thing. People from the not-for-profit sector, from the health care sector, from education, private citizens get the opportunity to make their case, make the economic case, for strategic investment—many compelling arguments for this government to course-correct on the systemic underfunding of our public services, especially during a trade war with the United States. These cases obviously were ignored by the government.

You know, I remember there was a former Liberal staffer in the last election who commented that we would do this with the Liberals at the time, and then they would get the report—we all write the report together—and they would just throw it in the trash. I think that this government probably did that with this report.

So not only did you waste the time of the people that you were elected to serve, you wasted a fair amount of money as well. But you're very, very efficient about wasting money for a government that portrays a conservative image. The shocking waste of money in this government would make a traditional Conservative like Bill Davis just roll around in his grave, quite honestly.

The fact of the matter is that this budget was an opportunity—because people see that there's opportunities right now for the province to do things differently. There's an appetite for us to work more collaboratively together. There's an opportunity with our tariff response council, where we're hearing from the sector and saying, "Listen, do you have solutions?" And then we amplify those solutions to the government, and then the government promptly ignores them. This is not leadership, in my view. When you take an oath to be an MPP in this place—it doesn't reflect the responsibility that we all have.

You know, don't take my word for it, because there certainly were a number of stakeholders who read this budget and decided that this was not for them. One of these, one feedback, was from agriculture, food and agribusiness, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. This is what they said: "We are disappointed by the absence of direct policy aimed at expanding food processing capacity in Ontario. The budget did not introduce any targeted policies aimed at expanding Ontario's food processing sector. In terms of GDP and jobs created in Ontario, food manufacturing is neck and neck with the auto manu-

facturing sector, and is a unique strength for Ontario's economy, but it requires further investment to deliver its full potential."

This government needs to stop taking farmers for granted. We lose 319 acres a day in Ontario. This is good farmland. As you heard, the OFA has made a strong economic case for strategic investment, and yet, at the same time, this government is still seeking to further their Wilmot land grab in Wilmot township—770 acres of prime agricultural land which is currently being farmed, some of the best soil in the province of Ontario. These guys want to pave it over for an undisclosed industrial project. And this government has actually funded the expropriation and buying of that land more than they have invested in water infrastructure. It's a perfect example of a perfect storm where a government has lost its way and doesn't understand that our job is actually to make the lives of people better, not undermine their goals in our communities.

Children, community and social services, around autism: "Autism Ontario provided cautionary written submissions to the Ministry of Education in February 2026"—they participated in public consultations—"regarding its proposed SRO program regulation. Un-addressed in the 2026 Ontario budget are the government's plans to support students who receive special education services in their classrooms." This has not been met. Remember what you've said in the past. You said you were going to fix the painful, life-changing wait-list for those who are on the autism spectrum. You had a chance to do so, and you failed.

Colleges, universities and research: The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations—this is what they've got to say about your budget: It "doesn't provide the adequate, stable funding for universities required to serve Ontarians now and in the future ... Ontario currently sits last in the nation for total per-domestic-student funding, almost \$7,000 behind the national average."

Today there were some fairly unhinged responses in question period, but the minister was talking about the University of Waterloo. The physical capital infrastructure deficit in Ontario is across all of these institutions. We have seen the layoffs with the pink slips on campus. We've seen whole campus programs shut down. But what the minister was talking about was the University of Waterloo. I invite him to come to the campus. There's actually a metal plate in one of the buildings that says, "This is where the bucket goes," because there's a constant leak in the roof. They don't have enough money to actually keep our campuses and maintain them in a healthy manner. This has been consistently a message from the colleges and universities.

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance said, and this is so painful in the face of a minister who doesn't understand that when you change the OSAP grant-to-loan ratio and then you make loans 85%, the privilege—

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Seventy-five.

Ms. Catherine Fife: —75%, yes, as if that makes it any better, but I'll take the correction.

They go on to say, "Students were already struggling with affordability, and recent cuts to OSAP mean students are going to graduate with more debt than ever." That debt can be oppressive, it truly can, and it impacts the trajectory of people's lives.

On the education front, AEFO, ETFO, OECTA, OSSTF and CUPE-OSBCU said the education budget "fails students." This is a direct quote. This is why people are on the front lawn of Queen's Park. Clearly you don't care too much that people have to come to their House to try to get your attention.

1410

But this is what they say collectively; this is every education union in Ontario: "Despite the government's messaging, per-student funding (once adjusted for inflation) remains lower than when this government first took office"—in 2018. They go on to say that they want to work with you, but "the crisis in Ontario schools demands leadership, not delays. It's time to begin the process now and build the stable, well-resourced education system that students have been denied for too long."

This is the thing about having access to public education—a quality public education system. It's that we want students in this province to be able to reach their potential. In fact, we need them to reach their potential. So you shouldn't continue on with a funding formula that you know is not meeting the needs of students, because there's this little thing called inflation, right? If you ignore it, then basically you're by design underfunding these systems.

Environment, conservation and parks: The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing just dropped a bill that's really going to shock the entire the entire province of Ontario, especially from an environmental perspective. If we didn't know that you didn't respect the environment with what you've done to conservation authorities and what you've done with parks and what you've done with undermining municipal planning, the latest bill that you just dropped is basically gasoline on that fire, I would say.

From Environmental Defence, Tim Gray goes on to say about budget 2026, "The word 'environment' only occurs in this budget in conjunction with 'economic' or 'trade' and never as something that the Ontario government plans to protect or in which to invest. This is another missed opportunity to chart a future for the province that aligns with how the rest of the world is moving to address the mounting crises our world faces. Ontario is at risk of being left behind."

It is 2026. Climate change is real. When you don't fund and when you don't invest in ensuring that, for instance, our water systems can be maintained and modernized, then you have what is going on right now in Waterloo region, where we're not building anything because we are on an aquifer—80% of our water comes from the aquifer; 20% comes from Grand River. Because you have short changed municipalities and have never updated the infrastructure investment fund, we are now at a standstill. And you can't build if you don't have water. I can't believe we have to say this in 2026.

The Ontario Trial Lawyers Association—this is what they have to say: "The budget fails to address Ontario's

ongoing auto insurance challenges and misses a critical opportunity to deliver meaningful reform and stronger protections for consumers and accident victims.” I will also say our court system and the backlog in our court system right now is impacting our communities—negatively impacting those, for instance, who are survivors of sexual assault. Last year in our court system 1,326 sexual assault cases were dispensed. They were either timed out or people withdrew because—when people come forward and say to the court system in the province of Ontario, “This has happened to me; I am seeking justice,” they should not have to wait four years for that justice. If it’s a case of sexual assault, they should be receiving consistent support and care throughout that time. You should not be revictimized and retraumatized by the court system in Ontario, but that is the reality for so many women in this province.

Once again, the Attorney General—I don’t know if he was able to secure the funds to ensure that courts are open, that we are securing the appropriate staff. Courts should not be shut down here on University Avenue because they can’t afford a caretaker or they can’t afford security. This is atrocious. The justice system is that core tenet of our democracy, Mr. Speaker.

On health care, Unifor goes on to say, “Without addressing chronic staffing shortages and increased public funding subsidizing private, for-profit health care and long-term-care operators, these investments risk falling short of delivering the quality care that Ontarians need.”

This morning, the Minister of Health called our health care system in the province of Ontario “world-class.” In no other jurisdiction would a 12-hour emergency room wait be regarded as world-class. I think the bar just keeps falling lower and lower and lower. That’s a statement that signifies for us that there is such a serious disconnect between what happens in this place, this alternate universe here in Queen’s Park—particularly at question period—and the lived experience of Ontarians out there right now.

The nurse practitioner issue is just such a perfect example. Here you had a Minister of Health from two years ago ask to modernize that funding model so that people don’t have to pay out of pocket to see a nurse practitioner, especially when that’s the only health care professional in their community. You have embedded now systemic underfunding and tiers of support on the health care front that definitely is not fair or equitable or driven by quality, Mr. Speaker.

On Indigenous affairs and First Nations—because there was a question this morning on how great everything is going—this is from the Chiefs of Ontario: “Much of the budget’s language surrounding Ontario’s economic defence and the Ring of Fire is not surprising.” They’re used to being disrespected, I think. “We understand the need to explore new ways to stimulate the economy”—and this is the key part—“but there must be full partnership and the free, prior and informed consent of all impacted First Nations before any development begins.”

Speaking of damage, this is the way you damage a relationship: when in the face of talk and rhetoric around

reconciliation, there were hundreds of people out in front of the Fairmont hotel this morning from Grassy Narrows still, after 35 years, asking for support and reconciliation through their health care system. They were knowingly poisoned, yet they still have to come and beg the government for the money that you promised to support them with. Is that money in this budget? No, it is not.

They also go on to say, “Chiefs of Ontario is still deeply concerned over Bill 5 and the broad powers it grants the province to fast-track projects designated as SEZs, including the exemptions from certain regulatory and assessment requirements.”

I think we’re learning, in real time—literally hour to hour by hour—how this government has a great disdain for democracy, by bringing in legislation where you can then override the laws of the land. The Attorney General has even entered into this “notwithstanding” court case at the federal level. You want to use that blunt hammer when things are not going your way. I personally hope that the province of Ontario does not win that case, Speaker.

I want to say one more thing from the Chiefs of Ontario because it connects to the question that I asked this morning, around the fantasy waterfront fetish that the Premier seems to have. All he is, is focused on the waterfront, the waterfront, the waterfront, and really just steamrolling over the laws of the land to make this happen.

This is what the Chiefs of Ontario say about that: “These concerns are particularly relevant as Ontario seeks to take control over the expansion of Billy Bishop airport, which is located on the ancestral territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples.”

Once again, you have shown your disdain and your disregard for reconciliation in 2026.

These cases are going to end up in the courts. You seem to feel that you can do anything—steamroll over charter rights—but, at the end of the day, these end up back in the courts.

On the infrastructure: Aside from the unhinged comments that came out of the waterfront development, the OFL say, “A strong economy depends on strong public infrastructure”—something you don’t seem to be paying attention to.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives said, “The 2026 budget—much like previous budgets—fails to address the underfunding of health care, K-12 education, post-secondary education, community and social services, and rental and social housing... Despite reports showing that Ontario lags behind most provinces in most of these areas, this year’s budget makes no attempt to close those gaps.”

1420

You know where we are as a province. You know where the problem areas are. You know that there is a renewed sense, I think, from this side of the House that we do want to be solutions oriented. We want to make sure that people are doing better in Ontario, and yet you tabled a budget that knowingly and intentionally misses the mark on this.

And then finally OPSEU pretty much sums it up as a whole: “For the eighth consecutive year, the Ford government has unveiled a provincial budget designed to slowly suffocate the public services Ontarians depend on....

“Year after year, we are offered short-sighted spending plans which prioritize Doug Ford’s vanity projects instead of addressing service cuts and staffing shortages.... Workers, students, and families are told the cupboard is bare, but the Premier is more than happy to spend our money on things no one asked for instead of things that everyone needs.”

And it is incredible that a year ago you found the money for a snap election. You found \$3 billion for those pre-election rebate cheques—how convenient that you were able to do that. And now you have introduced in this budget reprehensible FOI legislation, burying FOI changes, preventing the public and us to find out actually what you’re doing, which is how we found out about the green belt scandal, about the strip joint at the Skills Development Fund.

But you know what? We’re still going to keep fighting. We still show up for the people of this province. We fight every day.

This budget is a missed opportunity to help the people of this province. It’s a shameful—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to the members for their comments this afternoon.

Speaker, other provinces are raising taxes. They are cutting public sector jobs. Ontario has chosen a different course. Thanks to their prudent fiscal management, Ontario is one of the few provinces that still has a path to balance. We have one of the lowest deficits relative to GDP. We’ve received two credit rating upgrades, maintaining a AA rating across all four major agencies for the first time in two decades.

That fiscal strength allows us to invest, cut taxes and protect public services, and that’s what we’re doing in this budget. Compare that to the NDP’s federal cousins this weekend who made it very clear that they’re in favour of raising taxes.

And so, through you, Speaker, will the members opposite support this budget and Ontario’s responsible financial plan?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): The member from University–Rosedale.

Ms. Jessica Bell: The Conservatives are not the prudent fiscal managers that they pretend themselves to be. This government is on track to have a debt level of \$500 billion. That’s this government’s track record.

At the same time, in this budget we’re seeing staffing layoffs within the post-secondary sector, health care sector and also the education sector. So it astonishes me that this government can spend so much and deliver so little. There’s nothing in this budget that indicates this government is demonstrating that they are fiscally responsible.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Question?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: To my colleagues, thank you for your presentation. I’m very curious to hear you explain more about the unsustainability of this budget, especially with the record-high deficit that Ontario is now carrying with \$13.8 billion. This is now double from what was originally forecasted.

But even more concerning is the habit, the addiction that this government has, of borrowing money to pay for debt service. That’s borrowing money at an additional interest rate to pay the interest that they’re already paying. That interest is now sitting at \$16.2 billion and expected to rise to almost \$20 billion in two more years. Can you explain how that is going to bankrupt Ontario if they keep going?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): The member from University–Rosedale

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you to the member from Toronto Centre for that question.

Experts across the board are starting to raise some pretty serious questions about this government’s increased debt load. Debt has gone up more than 40% since the Conservative government came into power, and I regularly hear the Minister of Finance being called the half-trillion-dollar man, which references the amount of debt his government is on track to accumulating.

The first thing that I’m also hearing people say this government should do is look at what you’re wasting money on. Stop spending so much money on for-profit health care. It costs more and health outcomes aren’t as good. Why waste money on that?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Stop it.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes, stop all this business. Just stop, stop, stop it. There’s all this business with these silly little projects too, like a Ferris wheel in Niagara, the fantasy tunnel under the 401. The Minister of Finance can’t even say it with a straight face. Honestly, when he’s at the Empire Club, he cannot bring himself to say it. He can’t bring himself to say it. So I know a lot of you don’t love that idea either.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Question?

Mr. Ted Hsu: My honourable colleague from Waterloo spoke about what she called this little thing called inflation that this government has been using, I think, to sometimes trick the people of Ontario. I’d like to ask her, when the government cut the revenue from tuition that was going to our universities and colleges and then didn’t allow that revenue to increase at least in line with inflation—which resulted, actually, in decreased funding for universities and colleges—how much damage was accumulated during all those years that contribute to an economy that is not as strong as it could be today and this enormous budget deficit that we’re talking about?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you for the question. This is a government, I think, that really has such disrespect and disregard for publicly funded institutions, be it health care, education or the post-secondary education sector. They try to say that they’re really good with business and finance, but nobody would set a budget for your household and

then knowingly not allocate enough funding for it. So it is, in many respects, a government that is setting up the post-secondary education system to fail, or to rely more heavily on private sector.

I didn't get a chance to reference this, but this latest new provincial agency, the Protect Ontario Account Investment Fund, failed to spend \$5 billion to address the tariff war. Then they had to find some place to put that money, so now they've created a private equity firm with \$4 billion of public tax dollars. Everything is on fire. Nobody trusts them with this kind of responsibility.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): The Solicitor General.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I have a question for the member from Waterloo. Just yesterday, the federal NDP revealed themselves not the NDP of Stephen Lewis, who actually worked with Premier Davis—even though I was a little kid—and came up with progressive ideas to help build Ontario, but now we see an NDP that wants to nationalize banks and supermarkets and believes that there's no role for innovation and entrepreneurship, that there's no role for capitalism.

My question is simple. To the member from Waterloo: Is this the doctrine she subscribes to?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Listen, it's such a beautiful fire and brimstone question. I just love to answer these. The honourable member will know that there are very big differences between provincial parties and federal parties, unless you want to get into bed with Pierre Poilievre. Listen, we do need to have healthy—

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I'm not a member of that party.

Ms. Catherine Fife: You're not a member of the federal PC Party? Okay, that's good. That's a good clarification. I applaud you on that. I applaud you on your honesty.

Listen, all political parties go through growing pains. Certainly, all of us have experienced this. What I would say to the honourable member is that there are very significant differences between provincial politics and federal politics, and I, personally, like it like that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Questions?

MPP Alexa Gilmour: When it comes to health care, education, housing, it's clear that this government's priorities are way out of touch with the lived realities of the people of Ontario. When it comes to First Nations reconciliation, it's clear that this government is not acting in good faith. Additionally, this budget decreases spending on environmental protections and, right next to my riding, proposes an expansion to the Billy Bishop airport on Toronto's waterfront.

1430

So my question is—because for those in my riding who walk, who boat, who play in the sand, they're understandably really very concerned about the dangerous levels of pollution, the overwhelming noise of jets that go by and the view of endless airplanes instead of swans and other waterfowl.

I'm wondering if my colleagues might speak to the environmental opportunities that this government missed in this budget that could have made our province more livable.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you to the member from Parkdale–High Park for that question. This government has turned their back on acting on the environment—they've turned their back on it. There is no plan at all to address climate change. You've given up on any attempt to have a goal or targets or policies that would allow us to do our part as a province to address climate action. We're also starting to see some really concerning trends with air pollution in particular in cities and towns in Ontario because this government hasn't prioritized that either.

We have a lot of concerns about this government's move to take over Billy Bishop airport without any consultation at all with the city of Toronto or any kind of assessment on whether it's a good idea or not. I am very concerned about the Premier's obsession with the waterfront when we've got very real issues that people are raising with us at the door that this budget doesn't address.

Why is it that nearly two million people in Ontario do not—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Brian Saunderson): Further debate?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I'm grateful, as always, to rise in this chamber as a representative for the people of Don Valley West to be their voice and to debate Bill 97, An Act to implement Budget measures, to enact, amend or repeal various statutes and to revoke various regulations. I will be splitting my time today with the member from Ottawa South, who I know will bring valuable insights to this debate.

Speaker, this bill really is about way more than the budget. You may recall that the Premier recently said—publicly, I might add—that his team shouldn't break the rules. I guess that's a good starting point. We shouldn't break the rules. But he went on to say, "If you don't like the rules, change them," and that's exactly what this bill does: It changes the rules on a number of things.

I'm going to start with one of the most egregious, and one that I'm getting lots of emails from my constituents about—because they are paying attention—and that is the changes to freedom-of-information requests. Those freedom-of-information requests were the basis for the evidence that the RCMP is using to do its investigation of this government's actions on the greenbelt—probably more things.

If this government truly believed the current system on freedom of information was broken, then okay, we could have a productive debate about whether or not those changes would be useful and would actually improve the system. But usually when you fix something, it's kind of implied you're fixing it going forward; you're fixing something so that tomorrow you'll do something differently. But what does this change do in this bill? They're fixing something in the past. You can't rewrite the past—the past is the past. But this dodgy Conservative government isn't only changing the rules going forward—for

the worse, I might add—they're changing them going backwards. And the only reason to do that is to protect somebody. Who are they trying to protect? I think they're trying to protect the Premier; they're trying to protect his cabinet; they're trying to protect his parliamentary assistants—so basically every Conservative MPP—because there are things that this Premier and his Conservative colleagues want to keep hidden from public scrutiny.

They might talk about transparency, but they absolutely do not want to be transparent, and this bill is evidence of that. Hence, the Premier's advice: "If you don't like the rules, change them." And that's exactly what this government is doing with this budget bill and their disastrous changes to the FOI rules.

And we can't talk about the government protecting itself without bringing up their true intentions, Speaker. Again, we can talk about transparency, but transparency is not just in what you say; it is how you act. In this case, we have an actual act about how we should be transparent with taxpayers, how the government should be transparent with taxpayers, and they are making major, major changes to the actual transparency of how they act with taxpayers.

It should go without saying that the government and all of us here work for the people of Ontario. We work for our constituents. We need to be accountable to them, not just when it's convenient, not just when it's politically advantageous, but all the time. That is the foundation of a functioning democracy. We don't have an emperor; we have a Premier—well, we're supposed to have a Premier. And why do we believe in this? Because we think it's the right thing to do. We think that this accountability, which is partly provided through freedom of information, is an important part of our system and how it works. It's what people expect when those people give you great power: They expect transparency. This government has great power, but it does not have great transparency.

But let's talk about this from a practical angle, especially when we're talking about the budget and the hundreds of millions of dollars that we're spending of people's tax dollars. Every tax dollar that we spend should be accounted for, right, Speaker? It represents how we make choices. It represents what families do to put food on the table, what businesses do and how workers use their paycheque to support themselves and their families.

Our constituents are in many ways kind of like a shareholder, some might argue. They invest in our province every day and, like shareholders, they have a fundamental right to know how their investments are being managed. They have a right to know how decisions are made, how money is spent and whether those in charge are actually acting in the taxpayers' best interest. Transparency is not optional; it's the bare minimum.

So when this Conservative government tries to take away one of the most important tools that we have, that the public has, that journalists have to keep the Premier, cabinet members and their staff accountable, what are we supposed to think? What conclusion are Ontarians supposed to draw, other than that there must be something they do not want people to see? If you're confident in your

decision, you don't hide from scrutiny; you embrace it. We have a Premier who regularly tells us, "Oh, we're the most transparent government in history," even as he actively fights to keep his own phone records—to the taxpayers of Ontario, to stakeholders, to lobbyists, to donors—hidden. And he's using taxpayer-funded lawyers to do it—even worse. That contradiction speaks volumes. You cannot, on one hand, claim you're being transparent while simultaneously, with the other hand, building barriers to transparency.

It's more of what we're calling now this "pretend to protect Ontario" government. It's almost like they think if you say something often enough, the people will believe it. It certainly seems that's why we're getting bombarded. Honestly, I can't count—I've lost count—of how many times, just on my way home, I hear a "Protect Ontario" ad, paid for with taxpayer dollars. If you want to talk about being transparent, then that should be allowed to be tested.

So taxpayers and Ontarians understand that this government is absolutely doing the opposite of being transparent with the changes to the freedom of information act. That is why they are writing to my office, and I'm sure all of the members of the opposition—and probably even some of the government's own members, but of course we won't know that, because now there are freedom-of-information requests about their emails.

That's why these changes are so concerning: They don't just tweak the system; they fundamentally weaken the ability of the public, journalists and members of this House to get answers about what the government is actually doing. They make it harder to connect the dots, harder to follow the money and harder to hold decision-makers accountable.

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I think it's only fair to address some of the points that the Premier and his government have made about FOI requests and these changes and why he claims that the current system is too invasive. Because when you listen closely, Speaker, many of the arguments just don't hold water. They don't hold up under scrutiny.

One of the main ones he's been shouting about is that his phone contains private and personal information of citizens and that that would become publicly available to everybody. But Speaker, it's flat-out wrong. It's just wrong. That is just not true.

There have always been strong protections in place for personal information of that nature, and these changes that the government is making would not change that. So unless the Premier is planning to make another change to release the personal, confidential emails of his constituents, he doesn't have to worry. He shouldn't be talking about that because—you talk about fearmongering; that is fearmongering. Sensitive information is routinely redacted before anything is released, and the Premier knows that. It's not new; it's standard practice.

We have very capable people working in the Information and Privacy Commissioner's office whose entire job is to make those assessments and determinations. They understand the need to protect privacy with the public's

right to know, and they've been doing it responsibly for years. To suggest otherwise is, quite frankly, disrespectful and dismissive of the expertise of those dedicated public servants.

The government has also claimed that amending this law to absolve ministers from being—I'll use the word "accountable"—subject to FOI requests will somehow bring Ontario in line with other jurisdictions. But again, Speaker, that's exactly why it's so important to check the facts. And again, one quick trip to the Information and Privacy Commissioner's website will give you a full rundown of whether or not this claim is true.

Guess what? In nearly all provinces, the reality is that ministers are, in fact, subject to FOI requests. They are accountable. Their records can be accessed, reviewed and scrutinized, just as they should be in a healthy democracy.

The Information and Privacy Commissioner went so far as to speak publicly about this. Even though she was criticized by the Premier, she did it, because she's acting in the best interests of the public. That is her job. She is not partisan; she's an independent watchdog. Here's what the privacy commissioner, Patricia Kosseim, had to say about these changes: "Taking away Ontarians' access rights—retroactively and into the future—denies them the information they need to understand government decision-making at the highest levels and hold their governments to account. Such a change would not modernize access laws, strengthen privacy, or enhance security; it would weaken transparency and accountability for generations to come. This should be concerning for all Ontarians, regardless of political affiliation. We urge the government to reconsider its proposal and keep public trust onside."

Pretty compelling words, Speaker.

So yes, there are carve-outs. There are safeguards for personal information. There are thoughtful mechanisms in place to ensure that that information that needs to be protected is protected while at the same time providing transparency.

This is important. This is a fundamental change to, as I say, how we operate in our democracy here in Ontario. It's very concerning not only to the experts on this topic like the Information and Privacy Commissioner, but to many constituents in my riding who are writing to me about it.

When a government does things like this that will basically erode transparency, they are also eroding trust. I mean, surely, even the government members can agree that when we erode trust in our public institutions, that hurts all of us, whether it's in the police, whether it's in our schools, whether it's in our courts. When we erode the trust in those systems, that hurts all of us.

Speaker, this isn't about improving FOI; it's about avoiding responsibility. But they're also avoiding the elephant in the room: that after eight years of this disastrous Ford Conservative government, life is harder here in Ontario. This tired, out-of-ideas Ford Conservative government released a rinse-and-repeat budget with the same title as last year. Why? Because last year's plan to protect Ontario did not work, and this one won't either. It's another budget that pretends to protect Ontario.

Let's look at the numbers, Speaker. Compared to the 2025 budget, everything that should be up is actually down: GDP growth, down 0.3% in real terms; expected job creation, down 16,000 jobs; expected housing starts, down 31,000; and, in real dollars, program spending, also down by 0.7%. That, Speaker, is what really will be hurting families and households here in Ontario. The average household is going to see fewer services for their money. They're not getting their money's worth. This government will be spending \$16 billion just to finance the half trillion dollars in debt that they've accumulated. That's not good value for money. We will have a few thousand fewer dollars in services from this over-promising, under-delivering Ford Conservative government.

Speaker, you might ask, why is all this happening? Of course, the government will try to blame anyone but themselves. But honestly, it's because this government is inept. They promised to create economic growth, and that would have allowed them to deliver what Ontario needs as we face these turbulent economic times. They promised a middle-income tax cut to families. They promised to fix hallway health care. They promised to create 300,000 manufacturing jobs. Instead, Speaker, during an affordability crisis when families could really use that extra close to \$1,000 in their pockets from an income tax cut, what do we have instead? We have worse hallway health care, and we have 9,000 fewer manufacturing jobs than when this government took office. So no wonder they're not talking about that anymore. It's the eighth year in a row where the Conservatives have delivered a budget of broken promises.

Speaker, we know the Premier likes to talk about running the government like a business. Clearly, this business would be bankrupt if it were a business. They've had deficits virtually every year. They're running the government like a business that's in the red. They are in the red, Speaker. They have yet to table a balanced budget. And as we know, the path to balance is once again delayed for the sixth time. This is not just recent events that have caused this to happen; it's the sixth time this government has delayed the path to balance.

The growth in the debt, close to 5% nominally, and interest payments growing by 7% nominally—that's rising four to six times faster than program spending. So over the next three years, program spending will decline in real dollars while our debt grows to half a trillion dollars, all from a government that promised fiscal prudence—just another broken promise. Speaker, they're spending more of our money and we're getting less for it: worse health care, worse education for our kids and worse prospects for youth.

This isn't a budget that protects Ontario; it's a budget that pretends to protect Ontario. We know that one of the reasons for that is because they really are attracted to shiny baubles. They'd rather talk about redoing an airport and rebuilding a convention centre when people are actually struggling to put food on the table, they're struggling to pay their rent, they're struggling to buy their first home, and young people—almost record unemployment for

young people in this province. In the province of Ontario, which used to be the land of opportunity, we now have 14% of young people who can't find their first job.

People are worried about paying groceries every week. They're worried about whether or not they will be able to afford rent with an unreasonable AGI, a situation that would have been fixed if the government had voted to support the member from Toronto—St. Paul's bill on AGI increases. They're worried about how long the wait will be when they go to the ER, if they even bother going, or if their ER is even open, because we know this government has had record numbers of ER closures.

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We know that this government is more focused on chasing headlines than on creating solutions. Let's just look at the record. Skills Development Fund: over \$700 million sent to projects that public servants scored as poor, basically failing, low, or medium. That's a lot of money. That \$742 million would go a long way in our schools, in our health care system. It could have created a career fund for youth to help them find their first job.

Some \$2.2 billion to build a new building near their favourite spa on Lake Ontario—when we have a science centre in the Don Valley built by Raymond Moriyama, a Japanese Canadian, one of the world's most renowned architects. And they've not been upfront with that.

We all know the story, but just to recap here: First of all, the government said they were moving it to save money. Oh, but then the Auditor General's report came out, and it showed that it would actually be cheaper to fix it where it was. So okay, now the government has to find a new excuse. Oh, it's the roof; the roof is going to cave in. Well, schools across this province use the same material for their roof and they haven't caved in. Speaker, the Ontario Science Centre roof survived the historic level of snow we had this winter. The roof is still standing. If we could use props, I would hold up some of the pictures taken by the great people working to save the Ontario Science Centre, including many from my riding of Don Valley West, which show the roof is not, in fact, collapsing.

So, Speaker, we know these are all just lame attempts to hide what their real mission is in closing the Ontario Science Centre. Maybe it is to help their friends at Therme, to whom they have given a 95-year lease on one of the most valuable pieces of property in the country. They gave it to a foreign-owned spa. How is that protecting Ontario?

I say they're doing it to protect themselves and their friends. We don't know the whole story yet. And this is actually why this FOI change, which I was talking about earlier, will make it even harder for the public to know the truth. That's exactly what this government wants; they want to hide the truth.

Speaker, we have the \$400-million parking garage at Ontario Place when people can't find affordable places to live. We have over \$1 billion wasted to get beer and alcohol in corner stores a year early. Just to be clear, I'm not against that; I think it's a convenient choice for people, but they didn't need to do it a year early. They spent \$1

billion to do it a year early. I'm curious if the Premier would have done that with his own money. Put it into the relativity to his own family business: Would he have spent that kind of money to do something a year early? I don't think so, Speaker. It was not a wise use of money.

The \$3 billion, handing out cheques just weeks before an election—let's be clear: The Premier said, "Oh, I'm giving you back your money." Actually, no, he was giving you back borrowed money. The government had a deficit. That means they borrowed that money to write those cheques just before an election. It does raise serious concerns about their motives and timing.

Now let's talk about health care. We all know about the private nursing agencies and the billion dollars spent on those when they could have just kept the nurses in the hospitals if they hadn't put Bill 124 in place. And then we've got \$1 billion literally set on fire when they burned masks because they didn't implement a simple tracking system for their mask supply inventory.

And then, one of my favourites, Speaker—it continues to live on: the blue licence plates that can't be read in the dark. How much did we spend on that? I don't know. They won't tell us.

The spend-and-waste agenda of this government is clear. None of this spending will mean shorter wait times in hospitals, more affordable rent for renters, more education workers and teachers in our classrooms. Speaker, this bill is more of the same from this Premier, who not only wants to be Premier for life—those are his words—he also wants to be the mayor of Toronto, or maybe have his nephew do it as his proxy, and maybe he even wants to be Prime Minister.

It's an attitude of command and control. We've seen it in my riding of Don Valley West. One of the reasons I ran was this government interfered with the city of Toronto and cancelled the Midtown in Focus plan, Speaker, which had had years of work and consultation. Everybody was in agreement, and it would have taken advantage, built more housing along the Eglinton Crosstown, which finally is open. But that change, Speaker, cancelling that Midtown in Focus plan, is having serious consequences in my riding of Don Valley West. We have tower upon tower being proposed, and, every one of those proposed towers, there's a big sign in front of it that says, "Hey, if you have kids, they won't go to school in this neighbourhood because our schools are full." So yes, we need more housing, but we also need more schools to support the kids who are going to live in that housing.

Speaker, of course, there are all the things the Premier has done as mayor of Toronto—or as Premier of Toronto. He is removing bike lanes. Now, he's not going to allow buses at the SkyDome. And of course, he's taking over Billy Bishop airport—not a small thing to do.

We also have the command-and-control Premier now also worried about his personal shopping habits with this bill. The Premier wants to shop on Family Day and Victoria Day, so—command-and-control Premier: "I therefore will issue an edict. The city of Toronto may not close stores so that workers can be with their families on Family Day. I will tell the city of Toronto what they can do."

And then, Speaker, there's schedule 3, maybe even more concerning—certainly, again, lots of emails from my constituents about it—where we find the proposed amalgamations of Ontario's conservation authorities that exist clearly to protect Ontario and to prevent our natural environment to make sure housing is built in safe places. I know my colleague and seat neighbour, the member from beautiful Beaches–East York, has been chomping at the bit when it comes to fighting this unbelievable decision. She has been a strong and consistent advocate for evidence-based environmental policy. She did that at city hall, and she's doing it here, Speaker. She's respecting and says we should all respect local expertise that conservation authorities bring to the table.

Speaker, you know what's really ironic? That the Minister of Rural Affairs, member from Huron–Bruce, actually agrees with her about that. In fact, she wrote a letter to the Minister of the Environment about this, and she said, "We must follow the science. It is in that spirit that I share with you that local efforts to ensure public safety, managing flood and erosion risks, and supporting healthy watersheds that drain specifically into Lake Huron, must be considered unique." She went on to say that having a conservation authority specifically for the shoreline of Lake Huron in her riding is "necessary." Those are thoughtful words, Speaker. They actually reflect a deep understanding of how the ecosystems work, how watersheds differ and how local knowledge—she's actually saying that—and local efforts to ensure public safety are important when it comes to protecting communities.

But it seems that this logic only applies in Huron–Bruce, Speaker. Otherwise, the government would not be implementing this schedule; they would be backtracking on these changes everywhere. But no, it only happened for Huron–Bruce.

Again, this is a government that does not want to protect Ontario. It wants to pretend that it's protecting Ontario, and it wants to make sure that it protects itself, because when you look again closely at this schedule, you also see that it not only removes local authority, but it weakens the connection between communities and the decisions that affect them. It removes an important layer of accountability. By changing how these conservation authorities are governed, by removing the requirement for this decision to be beholden to section 2 of the Environmental Bill of Rights, this bill reduces the role of public input and scrutiny. That means decisions can be made—guess what, Speaker?—with less transparency, less oversight and less accountability to the people they impact.

I'm going to turn in my last few moments to schedule 12, something quite important that we need to recognize: this government's reliance on debt—because of their deficits, in large part. While they may want to distract us with changes to the FOI—and certainly it has been a distraction, but it's a serious distraction—the financial reality of this province is in trouble.

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This irresponsible Ford government has accumulated almost \$40 billion worth of deficits just through 2024-25.

They plan to add another \$20 billion on top of that by 2028. The Financial Accountability Office—again, an independent office—has made it clear the budget will not be balanced, as they promised initially, by 2027-28, and that deficits could top \$70 billion. They're missing their own target. As I said, that means interest is the fastest growing component of budgetary expenditures.

As I said, this is happening because the economy is not growing the way it needs to under this government. They are spending irresponsibly, and that is costing us all.

Under this Premier, real GDP growth is lower than it was under the last three Liberal Premiers. That's not a matter of opinion; it's a matter of record.

When growth slows, revenues slow. We take in less taxes, and that means there is less to spend while, of course, we have costs rising and a population that's aging. We all know that is creating a significant pressure, and that is what this government is facing: significant spending pressures because of their irresponsible spending and inability to grow the economy.

We know that the government needs to borrow at times and that they need to borrow to invest. But they also need to have a strategy around how to reduce the debt.

They're actually breaking their own law, so guess what? As the Premier said, if you don't like the rules, change them. So what does this schedule do? It actually removes the requirement to have an update, a progress report, a scorecard on how they're doing to reduce the debt. Again, it's a government that's protecting itself with this budget, not protecting Ontarians.

The government's plan is failing, and it's obvious to those of us who are watching. Speaker, the plan to protect Ontario is just a pretend plan to protect Ontario.

I look forward to continuing the debate. I'll turn my time over to my colleague from Ottawa South.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): The member from Ottawa South.

Mr. John Fraser: I just want to start by thanking the member for Don Valley West for her work and for her remarks today—spent a lot of time last week going over this budget. We're lucky to have her.

We all know life is harder. For some people, it's really hard; for some families, it's really hard just to try to put food on the table, to clothe the kids, to pay their housing costs. We all know life is harder.

So this morning, I asked that question. After eight long years—eight long, hard years of this Premier and this out-of-touch, out-of-ideas government—why is there nothing in this budget to help families with their budgets? It's hard to believe. It's like you're out there in left field somewhere. I know it was opening day last week, but you were in left field before anybody else got there.

Hon. Steve Clark: Did we hit a home run?

Mr. John Fraser: No, you hit a foul ball. That's what you hit. You hit a foul ball, a real foul ball with this budget.

You know, I looked at the budget, but I got confused and lost because I wasn't sure—is it this budget, or was it the fall economic statement, or was it the last budget? They all have the same title. You didn't even have enough

imagination to come up with a new title, which finance ministers have done for years. This is a cut-and-paste. This budget's a cut-and-paste.

And the thing is, there is nothing in here to help families with their budgets—after eight long years, nothing.

So when I asked the question this morning, the response was, “We fixed ticket sales. We fixed ticket sales—no more scalping.” It's like, well, you broke it. You want credit for fixing it? Are you going to get credit for putting out the fire that you set?

Nothing—that's the first response. That's the first response someone on the other side can come up with: “We fixed something that we broke.” After eight years, guys, you're not the solution; you're the problem. You're the problem, and families know that. Families know that because life is harder and the government is ignoring them.

You're making life harder. You're making life harder for families. OSAP—I see the minister is here. I'm glad he's here. You broke OSAP. And what you said to families who are just trying to send their son or daughter to school to get a degree, a diploma, a trade: “We're going to make you go into more debt. Because we love debt”—because we're almost half a trillion dollars in debt—“we love debt, so we're going to make you go into debt.”

It shows a fundamental misunderstanding of what a modern economy is like. The only way to succeed in the global economy is to have the most highly trained, healthy people; to have the best post-secondary education system in the world; to have the best health care system in the world. That's the path to success. With this government, they're letting the college system wither.

I know they've been touting a historic investment of \$6.4 billion over four years. Well, that's about 30% less in real dollars than what was given in 2005. But it's not about the money; it's about the outcome. And the outcome here is: harder on families, more debt. Everybody knows that here. You're going to put families into debt at a time when they don't need to be in debt. You're going to make students carry a lifelong burden of debt. My son's 40, still paying down his. You're going to make it worse. You're going to make it worse.

There are people—

Interjections.

Mr. John Fraser: Well, not everybody comes from money. Not everybody is privileged. Not everybody gets the same marks as everybody else. Sometimes people need help. Often people need help. But what the government did was, instead of something new to help families, they said, “You're on your own. You're going to have to borrow more. You're on your own. You're going to have to borrow more. We're not thinking about you. We're thinking about us.”

Because what are we thinking about here? What's the Premier's thinking about? What's the Premier's biggest thing? Buying Billy Bishop airport.

Do you think the people living in northern Ontario, driving Highway 11, give a flying fig about Billy Bishop airport? Do you think that people trying to help their son

or daughter go to school care about Billy Bishop airport or care about a floating fantasy convention centre somewhere in the middle of Lake Ontario? Or a luxury spa? Or, as I said this morning, the tunnel of love or the tunnel that the Premier loves?

We're talking about all this stuff but we're not talking about what's important to families. Two million people still don't have a family doctor. There's nothing in this budget. You just cut and paste what you put in the last budget. It's not working, folks. Times are hard. Times are tough. You know it. And this budget doesn't do it—not even close, not even remotely close, when the first answer you have when I say, “What's in here to help families with their budgets?” is, “We fixed the thing we broke”—ticket sales.

Well, even if it wasn't you who broke it, I'm not sure families are worried about Taylor Swift tickets right now. They're more worried about what's on the kitchen table in the morning. Or they're worried about putting gas in their car. But that was the first response. That was pathetic when I heard that this morning. That's the most pathetic response I've heard in here for a long time. “We fixed the thing we broke.” Honestly.

I did mention Wiarton Willie this morning. You all know that he did pass away after making a very bad prediction this year. He missed it. But I said this morning I was convinced that he would have been able to predict this budget, because it's like Groundhog Day: more of the same empty rhetoric, cut and paste. As I said this morning, there are three documents with exactly the same name.

If you go to Billy Bishop, you'll see tons of ads like this. Actually, you'll see ads anywhere. If you open up your phone here, you'll see Protect Ontario. Who are you trying to kid? Who are you trying to fool? You're not protecting anybody. You're not protecting anything. You're pretending there's something in the budget for people's everyday lives. It's not there. You all know it. Their schools don't work. They can't find a family doctor. They're waiting too long in the ER or they're waiting too long for surgery or their emergency room is closed or their school doesn't have enough special education assistants and supports. Their schools aren't working. They're not safe places to learn or to work. The things that people need, you're not taking care of.

1510

The Premier is pretending he's a billionaire. The problem is, he's using the people's money to get all those big projects he wants; all those things that he likes to flood the zone with. Honestly, really, why are we talking about buying an airport when people are struggling to put food on the table? Why are we talking about buying an airport when people can't pay their rent? Why are we talking about people, when they go to the gas pump—why are we talking about Billy Bishop? We're talking about people too, but why are we talking about buying Billy Bishop when people are going to the pumps and they're thinking, “Well, how am I going to afford to do this other thing I have to do for my kids?” It's not there.

So, all this empty rhetoric and this puffery about protecting Ontario isn't helping anybody one bit—not helping

anybody one bit. You're not protecting; you're pretending. That's what it's all about. And you're spending tens of millions of dollars to tell people you're protecting Ontario, and you're not.

Hey, news flash: 2018, 9,000 more manufacturing jobs. Wait, I thought this was a job-creation government—9,000 fewer manufacturing jobs. Do you guys all know that fact? But there is record job growth. I want to hand it to you guys; I want to hand it to the Premier: There is record job growth, and I have to congratulate the Premier. He's gone from about \$2 million a year for his staff budget to \$8 million, in eight years—\$2 million to \$8 million. Hey, that's a gravy train, folks. That's a gravy train. The guy who was going to end the gravy train has got his little cap on and he's tooting the horn. From \$2 million to \$8 million—record job growth, except if you're in northern Ontario, or anywhere else, and you see that and you're going, "What about me? What are they doing? What are they doing for my family?" Right? "What are they doing for my family?" Do you want to know record growth? Executive offices in the Ford government: In 2018, the spending on executive offices—that's all the executive offices in government; ministers and deputy ministers—anybody know? It was \$34 million. Does anybody want to take a guess what it is right now? It's \$82 million. You haven't quite tripled it, but that's pretty incredible. I know the Premier talked about the gravy train a lot. I just didn't know he liked it so much. I didn't know; it's incredible.

But the thing is, you're missing the mark. And then the things that you do in here, you slide in things like passing FOI legislation, buried in a budget, and doing it retroactively. There must be something really bad in that phone. I don't know. I don't know what it is; I don't want to speculate.

Mr. Stephen Blais: Steve knows.

Mr. John Fraser: Steve—yes, there you go. We used to say the Polaroids, but anyhow—I digress. I might sound like the member from Waterloo. I might go down that rabbit hole.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Oh, no, don't do it. Save yourself.

Mr. John Fraser: Save myself, yes. Well, saying "fetish" and "FOI" in one word would be kind of—that would be like—

Interjections.

Mr. John Fraser: My point is—I'm glad I've got your attention.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): The member from Ottawa South, through the Speaker, please.

Mr. John Fraser: My point is that the things that aren't supposed to go up have gone up and the things that are supposed to go down have gone up—or is that right?

Anyhow, here's the thing: You say you're protecting people, but when in the next breath you say, "Your family is going to take on more debt because your son or daughter wants to go to school," that's not protecting anybody. When there are 9,000 fewer jobs—manufacturing jobs—here in Ontario than there were in 2018, that's not protecting people. There are 700,000 people out of work. If you're one of those 700,000 people that are out of work

and you hear the Premier talking about buying Billy Bishop, some floating fantasy convention centre in Lake Ontario, a luxury spa, a multi-billion-dollar tunnel in downtown Toronto, you think, do they even know that I'm here? Life is so much harder for people now. Eight years later, after this government, life is so much harder, and there is no recognition in this budget of the fact that life is harder. The only thing that's in this budget is: "Aren't we great? We're protecting you." The Premier is saying, "We're protecting you from crime," but he says, "Crime is up, crime is up, crime is up." Well, who's been around for eight years? What have you been doing for eight years, Premier? Crime is up. Tell us. If you're going to say that, explain to us how it could be up under your watch, since you're so tough on crime. You've only had eight years. What do you want, 30? What do you want?

We need to focus on things that are important to families: their health care, their schools. Right now, what's happening in our schools isn't right. What the Minister of Education is doing in our schools is wrong. Schools belong to the families and the communities that they serve. They're not safe places to learn, they're not safe places to work, and that's because class sizes are too big, special education has been starved, and we have a mental health crisis in our schools that's not being addressed. That makes life harder for families. If your son or daughter is in a class that's too big, they're not getting what they need. If your son or daughter has an exceptional need and there's no SSL or EA or support, life's harder for you, right? If your child is suffering, your son or daughter is suffering, or their mental health is suffering and there's nothing in the school to support that, life's harder for you. You guys had eight years to get this right—eight years.

Now, our schools are being taken over one by one by one person, by the Minister of Education, who believes he's not the Minister of Education but the emperor of education, so he's going to issue decrees about not politicizing graduation ceremonies when he's politicizing the whole education system. It's incredible. While life is hard for families who aren't getting what they need in schools, the minister is messing around. It's his own little personal political playground.

And so excuse me if I don't get excited about the third edition of A Plan to Protect Ontario, because you're not doing it. You're not protecting families. You're not helping families. Life is harder for them. It's more expensive. Groceries are more expensive, gas is more expensive, kids' clothes are more expensive. Everything is more expensive, and there is nothing in here that's going to fix that.

Fixing ticket sales—the thing that you broke—doesn't even address that at all. I think it's great that we're taking the HST off homes. I'll give you credit for that. But you know what? That's not helping every family, and you know that. You know that.

So when I ask a simple question, "Tell me what's in this budget to help families with their budgets," and you can't say something to me, you don't have, like, three things that you can say to me that are relevant and important and new

and a recognition of what's going on, what that means is you don't fundamentally understand the job that's in front of you, which is addressing affordability. You're not doing anything. But you say, "I'm protecting you." You're not doing it. You're pretending, man. You're totally pretending. And the problem is that that pretending is hurting people. It's not recognizing where they are at. Life is hard. You've had eight years. You should know by now the things that you can do to help families. But you put yourself in a fiscal box—half a trillion dollars—right?

I heard a member this morning—I won't say which one—brag about the fact that we in this province have the largest subnational debt, which you guys have, right? I think they were trying to say that when they came to office, your government had the largest subnational debt, but you've brought it up to half a trillion dollars. That was another answer that was like, "Oh my gosh. These guys are disconnected from reality. No wonder they don't understand how hard and how expensive life is for families." Right? You're half a trillion in debt. You put yourself in a box, added more to the debt than any other Premier in history in that period of time.

I mean, you talk a good game. You know, the thing about talking a good game is you can have a lot of things to say and a lot of bragging and a lot of talking, but at some point people realize you can't deliver. And this budget? It doesn't deliver for families—you can't tell me.

1520

This morning, in question period—six, seven chances. It should have been, "We did this, we did this, we did this. We took the HST off home heating and energy. That's what we did; it helped families. We reversed our OSAP mistake, our OSAP error. We're putting it back, so we're not going to put you into debt." There's answer number two.

What's answer number three? Answer number three could be—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Middle-income tax cut.

Mr. John Fraser: Yes—middle-income tax cut. Oh, thank you so much. It's good to have the member from Don Valley West here, because she's helping to remind me of things.

Remember the middle-income tax cut? All of you were around in 2018—

Interjections.

Mr. John Fraser: It's not all of you, so I'm not going to put it on you.

The Premier promised a 20% middle-income tax cut. That was eight years ago—eight years ago. And he's forgotten that because I think he's a little bit more focused on fantasy island and his tunnel of love.

Interjection.

Mr. John Fraser: Sorry. Okay. I can't get off it. I know, I'm beating that one to death. I'm sorry. I apologize. I don't know if I have to withdraw, but I withdraw from all these folks around here. I won't go back into that.

Even a program to help young people get their first job, it's not even in there—no programs, honestly. Maybe you

could have done those three things; then that would have been an answer.

But "Hey, we took care of ticket sales," even though they were okay in 2018. Now, if you'd said, "We made them better than they were in 2018"—but the story is that it was good in 2018; we broke it and now we fixed it. At the same time, you're doing the thing that you said was not enforceable.

You're not fooling anybody; you're fooling yourselves. You drank the Kool-Aid. You're watching the ads, all those AI ads about protecting Ontario, the ones that the people in northern Ontario love—protecting all this stuff about northern Ontario. But we're buying an airport. We're buying Billy Bishop. But we're protecting Ontario. Look at this wonderful ad—tens of millions of dollars. Here's what those ads have done: They've brainwashed all of you. All of you think you're protecting Ontario. You're not, okay? Put the Kool-Aid down.

Families aren't asking for much. They just want a little bit of help—just a little bit of help, like cutting the HST on home energy, home heating and electricity. You didn't do that. Easy enough to do—didn't do it. They need to be able to feel confident that their son or daughter will have a bright future, that they won't go into debt, that that family won't go into debt. They want hope, too, that our economy will be great because we're doing what we need to do for our young people. You're not doing that.

You should have three answers when I say, "What are you doing for families?" And the only thing you can point to is so far in the rear-view mirror, it doesn't matter anymore. "Oh, we cut the gas tax." Okay, great. It's done. What are you doing for them now? Just little things, something little—you're not even doing that. So I don't think you should spend too much more time pretending you're protecting Ontario, because it's not doing you or Ontario families any favours.

I would just like to wind up my remarks today and remind this government that the things that people count on are not working. Some two million people don't have a family doctor. In a couple days, the thing that could have helped a bit with that—which is allowing nurse practitioners to bill for primary care—will not have been done by this government, even though, two years ago, the minister said they should figure it out.

Primary care is important to people. And in having two million people without a family doctor, people are getting sicker longer, dying sooner. That's what's happening.

ERs: Thessalon, I think it was, closed down on the weekend again. There are record ER closures, a thing that people depend on—sometimes for primary care, unfortunately, because we don't have too many family doctors. It's not working. Wait-lists are too long. Hallway health care is up, so much so that the government doesn't want to measure it anymore. Maybe it doesn't have a big enough measuring stick.

The thing you said you'd fix is worse. The thing you talked about, you don't want to talk about anymore. Eight long years—you're not the solution anymore; you're the problem. Life is hard, more expensive, and the things that

people count on—like I'm just talking about right now, like health care—are not there. And so many people now are having to use their credit card instead of their OHIP card to get basic health care services. You're making life harder. You're not making it easier; you're making life harder for people.

Their schools—I mentioned this—are not safe places to learn, not safe places to work. Their class sizes have gotten too big because the government has allowed them to grow.

Special education: Boards have to find about \$800 million just to have it where it's at right now, which is not good enough. That's \$800 million the government doesn't give them. They have to find it in the cupboard somewhere.

And this government talks about mental health all the time, but what are you doing in schools? Not much. Our kids are affected by social media. Our kids are affected by—especially young men—online gambling. The government is the Wild West. You can advertise it. It's all over. It's almost like this government is all about gambling and booze. If you look at it, if you're a young person, that's what you hear. People count on their schools being there for them.

You know, Bill Davis—

Ms. Catherine Fife: A real Conservative.

Mr. John Fraser: A real Progressive Conservative. Bill Davis built the college system, and governments after that kept it going, kept it going, kept it going. This government: 10,000 fewer people working there.

What happened with OSAP? They turned it on its head, and what they said to people—180 degrees, not a transition. Right away, you're going to go into debt. They made the loan portion the smallest portion, and the debt portion the biggest portion. It's making it harder.

After eight long years of this tired, out-of-gas, out-of-touch, out-of-ideas Conservative government, people aren't better off. They're worse off. Life's harder. It's harder to afford things, and the government is not even doing something little, a little bit to help them, like cutting the HST on hydro and home heating. That would just give people a few hundred bucks a year extra. You're not even doing that.

It's like you don't even know that they're there, and that you think by saying "Protect Ontario," they're going to believe you. They're not believing you anymore because they see the results. They know it because they feel it in their lives.

And when they hear the Premier talking about one of those things that he fantasizes about, whether it's the Billy Bishop airport or that darned convention centre or the luxury spa or that tunnel or whatever else comes out of his head, they're going, "What about me? What about my family? What about my kids? If I'm in northern Ontario, what about my roads? What about my school? What about the doctor I don't have?" That's what people are saying, and there's nothing in this budget to address it.

Now, you do say "Protect Ontario" more than anything else apart from prepositions. You're not fooling anybody. You're not protecting; you're pretending. The Minister of

Finance and the Premier are pretending. They're pretending that they're doing something for Ontario families, and you're not.

1530

Because if you were, when I asked the question this morning, I would have heard something that was meaningful to every person in this province, every family in this province—just one thing; it didn't have to be big. They just want a little bit of help, and part of that little bit of help is that they know we're here. There's nothing in this budget that says to Ontarians, "We know that you're here, and here's a little bit of help. Maybe we can't help you as much as we want to because we've got ourselves in a half-trillion-dollar box, but we know that you're there. And we're not going to talk about convention centres and we're not going to talk about buying an airport. We're going to talk about things that are important to you. We're going to talk about your schools; we're going to talk about you getting a family doctor. We're not going to put that stuff on the back page of the speech."

Take a look at the speech. I don't have it with me right now, but take a look at the speech. Where's health care and education? It's barely there, and it's about one or two lines on about page 13. Think about it—guys, that's what people see. That's what they're hearing. You're not talking about the things that they need in their everyday lives, and you're not giving them just a little bit of help. Again, that's not going to solve all their problems, but it's going to be, "The government is actually thinking about me."

You've got 59 seconds left to put up with me, and I'll finish with this: Speaker, life is hard. Choices are tough for Ontario families these days, and the things that they count on, the things that they need, aren't there. They weren't there in this budget, they're not there right now, and the little bit of help they were looking for in this budget is not there.

So it's clear to me that after eight long years, this Conservative government and this Premier are tired, out of gas, out of ideas and only out for their friends and insiders.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): It's time for questions.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: I think Ontarians understand, especially in the times that we're in with threats never before imagined, that we need somebody who will tell them not what they want to hear but what they need to hear.

I want to ask my friend across the aisle: For the 15 years that the Ontario Liberals were in power, tell us, please, what transit did they build, what hospitals did they build, what long-term-care facility did they build, what insightful things they did that would transform an economy for the next generation?

We need to understand this, because we don't want people to feel that we forgot about what they didn't do for 15 years.

Mr. John Fraser: Speaker, we built or rebuilt 30,000 long-term-care beds. We had more than 100 hospital capital projects. Each hospital in the city of Ottawa had major construction over that time. I know because I was

there. We made class sizes smaller. We measured wait times. We ended coal. We harmonized the sales tax, which was good for business. We did a lot of stuff. I'm not going to make a litany of stuff that's here—this whole idea that all that was bad.

I really respect the minister, but what the people need to hear is, "We know you're there and you're talking about us and you're giving us a bit of help." Billy Bishop is not helping Ontarians. It's not helping Ontarians in their everyday lives. That's what they're not hearing.

They know times are hard. They know you can't do everything they want you to do. But they want to see something, and there's nada—there's nothing.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to thank the member from Don Valley West for her presentation. I was particularly interested in her discussion of FOIs. We often hear governments talk about transparency and accountability, yet their actions speak otherwise. It does also raise the question as to why the Premier would want to cancel FOIs that are currently under way.

But I'd like to take this House back to 2011, prior to the provincial election, when David Livingston, the chief of staff to Dalton McGuinty, as well as the deputy chief of staff, Laura Miller, and her partner, Peter Faist, wiped dozens of hard drives. In fact, Peter Faist was paid \$10,000 to wipe these hard drives ahead of the gas plant scandal, deleting all of these emails in order to avoid the FOI process.

Could the member for Don Valley West speak about the importance of the FOI process in the gas plant scandal?

Mr. John Fraser: Actually, it was all done through committee, and you can't really wipe anything you've written on a computer, and we all know that.

Interjection.

Mr. John Fraser: Well, I'm not saying that that was right, but the FOI had nothing to do with it.

But I do agree with you on FOIs. They're an important part—

Interjection.

Mr. John Fraser: Well, we didn't try to change it. This government is trying to change it retroactively, mostly because of the Premier's phone. It's just his texts; we're not looking to see if there's anything else on there. I just think it's unreasonable to do that. FOIs are a cornerstone of transparency and accountability, which makes them a cornerstone of democracy. It's wrong. What they're doing is wrong. Why are they changing FOI legislation when families need, like I say, just a bit of help? And it's not there.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further question? I see the member from Peterborough–Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you, Speaker; I appreciate that.

To the member opposite from Ottawa South: One of the key components in this budget is the small business tax reduction. We're taking it from 3.2% to 2.2%. What we know is that small businesses are the ones that invest back

into their communities. If you look at any of the minor sports teams, it's always the local group that is sponsoring those teams, if you look at the back of those sweaters. If you look at things from my own riding like Peterborough summer Musicfest, it is those small companies in the area that are making those investments so that our community can be better.

So to the member opposite: Making that reduction in the small business tax rate—isn't that something that's going to be beneficial to not only the small businesses but the entire community as a result of that?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I want to thank the member from Peterborough–Kawartha for the question because, yes, I actually tabled a small business bill not once but twice, and this government voted against it. So I'm delighted to see them making progress on this. It took two years. I tabled that bill in 2024; here we are in 2026.

But it's only a half measure, Speaker. They've cut it by 30%. Yes, absolutely, that will help small businesses. We proposed cutting it by 50%.

The other thing I want to point out is that small businesses used to be two thirds of private sector jobs in this province. Guess what it is now after eight years of this tired Conservative government? It's down to only 60% of private sector jobs.

So absolutely, small businesses need all the help they can get, and this half measure is a good start.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further question?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to thank the hundreds of London West residents who responded to my spring health care survey. The answers that they provided gave some very valuable insights into the gaps in our health care system. I just want to share some of what they said:

—28% didn't have a family doctor, and even those who had access to primary care told me that it was very difficult to be able to make an appointment;

—60% said that they had delays accessing health care in the past year, mostly for specialists, as well as diagnostics and surgery; and

—a whopping 87% said they had to pay out of pocket for health care. Many of those are those people who were on wait-lists and they were told that a private provider could see them more quickly.

My question is, is there anything in the budget to address these gaps that people in London West are experiencing in our health care system?

Mr. John Fraser: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): I see the member from Orléans for the question.

Mr. Stephen Blais: I want to thank my colleagues for highlighting important parts of the failures of this year's budget, in particular, my colleague from Don Valley, who is of course an expert in these issues.

I'm wondering if she can inform us of her position or her thoughts on the massive amounts of government debt that we haven't actually seen since the last time, and the only time, the New Democrats were in office. We might remember that they borrowed money and borrowed money

and borrowed money, and they raised taxes and raised taxes and raised taxes. And then they asked public servants to take days off work and not get paid in the social contract, and they basically bankrupted the province.

1540

I'm wondering if you can talk about the risks the current Conservative government is taking in raising the deficit, incurring so much debt and bringing us back to the good old days of Bob Rae's failed New Democrats.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I want to thank my colleague from Orléans for the excellent question. Look, the debt is a serious issue. The half-a-trillion-dollar man is what our current finance minister is going to be.

This government has also delayed their path to balance six times, Speaker. They make a promise and they can't keep it. Why? Because they don't actually have a plan to reduce the debt. They are spending, and they are spending irresponsibly. That is leading to deficit after deficit after deficit, which means that ourselves, our kids, our grandkids will be paying for this debt for years to come.

If they were actually honest about their promises, they would admit that their plan to protect Ontario is just pretend, that they have failed to grow the economy and that their path to balance is actually no path to balance at all.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

Hon. Sam Oosterhoff: I want to thank the member opposite for her participation in the debate on the budget this afternoon. One of the things I have to say I appreciate is actually this new-found concern about debt and deficits. I don't know where it was for the 15 years that your party sat in power.

One of the things I noted very carefully in the budget was that there's a \$21.9-billion tax reduction over the course of the taxes if you add them all up. There are two different charts: One is \$10 billion, and the other is \$11.9 billion.

Of course, we could get to, I assume, a smaller deficit if we increase those taxes, put those taxes on. My question is, what taxes does the member opposite want to increase in order to make up for that?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): A quick response.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Look, the question is kind of confusing because the net debt-to-GDP—when this government came to power, they said they'd reduce it. They're basically going to be back to where it was in the next couple of years. They talk about reducing taxes. Currently, as we've just talked about, they've reduced—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you so much. That concludes the debate.

Further debate?

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: Today I have the honour to rise before you to speak as part of the second reading of Bill 97, Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2026. The Minister of Finance, Peter Bethlenfalvy, began second reading of this bill by outlining the vision behind our government's plan to protect Ontario, a vision to protect

our province and its people by building the most competitive economy in the G7 to invest, create jobs and do business.

Speaker, in the past year, Ontario's reliance has been tested by global uncertainty, trade disruptions and economic headwinds, but we have been meeting these challenges head-on. Echoing what the minister said, Ontario does not operate in isolation. Ontario is part of a large network of global trade that has, for generations, created certainty and growth for our people. And now, to foster continued certainty and growth for our province, we are moving forward with a cautious yet ambitious plan that protects our province and sets us up for success.

This bill and our government's budget plan to protect Ontario is about taking measures and decisions that uphold the well-being of our people, our services and our economy. We are building a more competitive, more affordable and more resilient economy, an economy that protects Ontario and, by extension, Canada from unforeseen issues that may come our way for decades to come.

Our plan is clear, Speaker. When it comes to investments, growth, doing business and finding a place to live, we are working to make Ontario the best place in the G7. We are taking bold and decisive action to protect Ontario from the impacts of US-imposed tariffs on key sectors such as automotive, steel and forestry. Our government is fighting for Ontario workers and businesses by ensuring they have the support needed to weather these challenges and creating opportunities for long-term sustainability and job creation.

There is no denying that our government acted quickly to protect Ontario from the economic impact of these tariffs, and we are not wavering in our commitment to this priority. That is why our government has announced nearly \$30 billion in relief and support for workers and businesses since April 2025, including initiatives that help our workers, our businesses and our communities build long-term reliance and prosperity—for example, the Protect Ontario Financing Program. Launched in the summer of 2025, this \$1-billion program is a key Ontario business support program created to help certain companies cope with the financial impact of US section 232 tariffs.

That is why we know that establishing the new proposed Protect Ontario Account investment fund would help fund investments that promote innovation, long-term economic growth and other strategic priorities in Ontario. With a \$4-billion envelope, the fund will allow us to continue investing in the successful future of a stronger Ontario-owned and Canadian-owned economy for future generations.

Speaker, we are also doing whatever we can to ease the burden on businesses that want to invest and trade in Ontario. For example, by cutting red tape, our government has released a plan to help unlock Ontario's vast supply of critical minerals. Speeding up and supporting mining opportunities would benefit the provincial economy. That is why the "one project, one process" framework speeds up approvals for advanced exploration, mine development

and mine expansion projects that will help us secure Ontario's place as a leader in the critical minerals sector.

Further to that, Speaker, we launched the Trade-Impacted Communities Program in 2025. This program supports local projects that promote economic resiliency and increase export and investment opportunities, as well as bolster Ontario's strategic priority sectors and their supply chains.

Last year, our government reduced the pressure on businesses by allowing them to defer the payment of provincial taxes by six months, delivering real and meaningful benefits during times of uncertainty. Through this initiative, our government made up to \$9 billion available in liquidity relief to approximately 80,000 businesses, enabling them to sustain operations while helping us build a stronger, more predictable landscape for business.

Our government has also provided enormous relief for businesses by making historic cuts to the gas and fuel tax and many others.

These initiatives have helped to reduce the short-term financial pressures companies in Ontario may be facing and are helping businesses maintain liquidity and preserve jobs, thereby supporting Ontario's priority to protect jobs and strengthen economic reliance.

Speaking of jobs, an example of how we are safeguarding the workforce is the protect Ontario workers employment response centres, or POWER centres, funded by our government. These centres are helping retrain and reskill workers affected by layoffs, helping them secure their opportunity to continue a meaningful, lifelong career and, most of all, ensuring that we can continue employing people into good-paying jobs in the midst of economic uncertainty.

Speaker, I am glad to share that last year, 10 of these centres were operational across Ontario, helping almost 15,000 workers with service and support. And we will keep going.

1550

During the 2025 fall session of this Legislature, this chamber saw the passage of 12 legislative bills, all with the aim of advancing our government's progress on its plan to protect Ontario. Among them is the Protect Ontario by Cutting Red Tape Act, 2025, which is helping reduce regulatory burdens in Ontario, saving people and businesses of the province an additional \$5.8 million and more than 256,000 hours every year. We are also cutting red tape and supporting trade, investment and economic growth to strengthen Ontario's competitiveness through the Building a More Competitive Economy Act, 2025.

Speaker, these pieces of legislation are focused on cutting red tape, unleashing Ontario's economy, investing in infrastructure, improving services and making life more affordable. This shows that our government and this budget are focused on our continued mission to protect Ontario and doing so by building the environment for businesses to succeed, grow and hire, all without red tape holding them back. We've worked hard to eliminate this red tape since 2018. After 15 years of Liberal economic

stagnation, our government has stepped up and delivered for Ontarians.

Since 2018, our government has provided significant tax relief to improve Ontario's competitiveness and lower costs for people who call the province home. Speaker, here are some proof points that I'd like to remind my Liberal and NDP colleagues of: We've delivered the Ontario Made Manufacturing Investment Tax Credit. We've implemented the low-income individuals and families tax credit. We've permanently reduced gas and fuel tax rates and we've increased the employer health tax exemption. And the worst of it all, Speaker? The members voted against these and so many other measures to save businesses money.

Unlike them, we're going to continue supporting our workers, our businesses and our communities. We are committed to continuing managing Ontario's finances in a prudent and fiscally responsible manner to further improve Ontario's competitiveness, lower costs and provide relief in the years to come.

Our government is promoting an economic environment where businesses looking to grow can invest with confidence. We are doing so by reducing interprovincial trade barriers, supporting strategic investments and creating more opportunities for growth.

We can all agree here today that small businesses play an important role in Ontario's economy, from family-owned businesses to innovative start-ups. As an important step in furthering their well-being and protecting them from economic and trade uncertainty, I am proud to say that our government is proposing in this budget to cut the small business corporate income tax rate from 3.2% to 2.2%, effective July 1, 2026. This proposed tax cut will ensure Ontario's small businesses continue to stay competitive and resilient.

And I would love nothing more than to see the opposition members try and tell Ontarians that this is something that they are going to be voting against, because they always do, Speaker. But it doesn't matter what they may or may not vote for. In the end, we will keep delivering for Ontarians because we know there is more work to be done to make Ontario the best place to live, work, raise a family and do business. Our government is not afraid of that work—no way, not now and not ever.

Speaker, another key priority for us is improving Ontario's competitiveness for business investment. That is why it is the intention of this government to lower the cost of capital investments by allowing businesses to accelerate the income tax deduction for the cost of depreciable assets. These changes would lower the cost for investment in a broad range of assets, Speaker. It would do this by allowing immediate 100% write-offs for:

- manufacturing and processing machinery, equipment and buildings, as well as certain clean-technology assets and zero-emission vehicles;

- productivity-enhancing assets;

- capital expenditures for research and development; as well as

- allowing accelerated depreciation for liquefied natural gas equipment and related buildings' accelerated deprecia-

tion from 4% to 10% for purpose-built rental housing, and accelerated first-year deductions for up to three times the regular amount for most other depreciable assets.

Together, these measures would provide over \$3.5 billion in Ontario income tax relief to qualifying businesses over four years, from 2025-26 to 2028-29. Ultimately, what we're doing, as we always do, is finding new ways to support Ontario businesses and building a stronger economy—one that stands strong and resilient in the face of challenges and change.

Now, I'd like to focus on Ontario's families. Families in Ontario, like families everywhere, have seen costs steadily increase on everyday items. Those costs are increasing in Ontario in part because of ongoing economic uncertainty caused by tariffs. Speaker, this is why our government acted early to provide relief to families and individuals and deliver on its plan to make life more affordable across the province.

In fact, we committed almost \$11.9 billion to support families and individuals in the 2025-26 fiscal year alone. Our government is helping to keep electricity bills stable and predictable through programs such as the Ontario Electricity Rebate that is decreasing monthly bills for a typical residential consumer by about \$36, and providing support through other targeted programs such as the Low-Income Energy Assistance Program.

Last fall, our government removed the 8% provincial portion of the HST on new homes valued up to \$1 million. It was a strong step aimed at lowering costs and helping families realize the dream of home ownership. But we knew we could do more, and we did more.

Just last week, we announced a proposal as part of the 2026 budget to extend this initiative and, in working with the federal government, remove the full 13% HST on new homes valued up to \$1 million to all eligible buyers—not just first-time homebuyers—saving homebuyers up to \$130,000.

This is a big step to help families realize their dream of owning a home. I sure hope that the NDP and the Liberals will agree with us and support our government's budget bill to see this proposed measure passed.

Saving individuals and families on one of their biggest purchases of their life—their next home—is not the only way our government is continuing to lower costs. Since 2018, we have reduced a number of costs to make life more affordable. We permanently cut the gasoline tax and fuel tax rates, saving individuals and families \$2.1 billion since it was first introduced in 2022.

We also permanently removed tolls from the provincially owned portion of Highway 407 East, saving commuters an estimated \$7,200 annually.

Speaker, as announced in the 2026 budget, we are pleased to extend the One Fare program for an additional two years to keep transit costs down for riders in the greater Toronto and Hamilton area, saving users up to \$1,600 per year. We are committed to putting more money back into the pockets of the people of Ontario, where it belongs.

Our recently released 2026 budget will also help to reduce costs for the people of Ontario. Our government is

ensuring that student achievement always comes first in Ontario's publicly funded education system. But we heard from teachers that many of them did not have access to the resources they needed to support our learners and were paying for these resources and supplies out of pocket. We listened to our teachers and have now launched the Classroom Supplies Fund. This new fund will provide elementary school homeroom teachers with direct access to \$750 in funding each school year for classroom supplies. This builds on Ontario's historic levels of education funding in 2025-26 with an investment of \$30.3 billion in core education funding to focus key resources where they matter most: on student success.

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Speaker, we are a government that listens to the people of Ontario. We designed these changes to address people's key interests and well-being. This is the time to act to strengthen Ontario.

As I begin to wrap up, I return to my core argument that our plan to protect Ontario is about building growing communities and making the place we call home a stronger, more competitive and more affordable province.

Affordability is an important issue in Ontario for many people. Our government is here to help, however it can, so that the people of Ontario today and for future generations have the tools in place to live, work and make a meaningful difference in the world.

Today and always, Ontario will deliver better public services through historic investments for people and continue leveraging our prudent fiscal plan to do so. Let us work together, build Ontario's prosperity and Ontario's resilience.

I call on my NDP, Liberal, Green and independent colleagues once more to join us, Speaker. Join us and support this bill as we become the greatest destination to invest, live, grow and do business in the G7. I want to thank you all this afternoon.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): It's time for questions.

MPP Catherine McKenney: I had a question that I've been thinking about since the budget came out and now today with the announcement around the HST rebate. Because it's only for one year, it's hard to see how that will spur on new construction—by the time you get financing and approvals and everything that you need, the years will pass—

Interjections.

MPP Catherine McKenney: It will not. It won't spur up. But it will, actually, help homeowners in the next year to get a break on their mortgage, which is a good thing, and I fully, fully, fully support it. I really do.

But my question to you is, wouldn't it make more sense to have that HST rebate there permanently? Because, with just one year, I think all we're going to do is just see the unsold inventory move and not spur new construction.

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: Thank you to the member for their question. I do appreciate it and your support on the HST.

We're proposing this as a one year—you can make an agreement of purchase and sale, starting April 1. You have

one year to make that agreement of purchase and sale, so this will get a lot of people that are either sitting on the fence or actually thinking about the future. And then it gives—I believe the closing date is December 30, 2030, so there's time. If you're looking at pre-construction or any of those kinds of investments, it just gets some movement in the market.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): I see the member from Toronto—St. Paul's.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you to my colleague. I just wanted to ask about the unemployment rate in Ontario—7.6%, I believe, almost a record high, compared to Canada's unemployment rate, which is 6.7%. So Ontario, once the economic engine of this country, is now bringing Canada down. That's hardly the most competitive economy, hardly a leader. What is this government going to do to create jobs and protect the people of Ontario? Keep in mind, there are 700,000 people out of work in Ontario right now. That's including 200,000 young people. As we head into summer, 200,000 young people, students, are going to be saddled with more debt, with OSAP, etc. What's happening to their future? What's happening to our province? How are you going to create these jobs?

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: Thank you for your question. Our 2026 budget showed that our economy outperformed projections. Real GDP grew by 1.2%—higher than the 0.8% forecasted in last year's budget, which is reflecting on the hard work of Ontarians. We are working on boosting the economy to create jobs, and we have lots of programs in place to get there. So this will help us to achieve the goals and the jobs that are much needed in this province.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): The member for Bay of Quinte.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: I want to start by saying thank you to the member for Eglinton—Lawrence, as well as the member from Peterborough and the Minister of Finance, for such an incredible budget that she put together. I know that it came at the end of a lot of consultation, touring all over Ontario and hearing directly from the people who matter most.

I'm so pleased to see that so many of those items that we heard directly from the people of Ontario have made it into this budget. You take a look at \$130,000 in savings on a brand new home. That's something that consumers were asking for, and it's something that the home building industry was asking for to help spur on development, spur on those home sales. We take a look at the cutting of the small business tax rate: 30% reduction for small-business owners. As a former small-business owner myself, I know how impactful that is to small-business owners across the province of Ontario.

But then you take a look at some of the other things as well: autism support funding, up to almost \$1 billion—a 400% increase over the last eight years. There were so many families that were getting left behind under the previous Liberal government. Now thousands more families are getting the support that they desperately need.

I think about the \$1.1 billion that we're adding to home care for our seniors and, on top of that, the \$139 million that we're putting into long-term care to make sure—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you.

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: Thank you for that robust question, to the member.

This budget is pack-filled with all kinds of really great new stories. You're right about the autism, and I'm glad you pointed that out. This government is taking further action to improve services for children and youth on the autism spectrum by providing \$965 million to the Ontario Autism Program in 2026-27, including \$186 million in new funding.

This new investment will enable more children and youth to access core clinical services while further strengthening sector capacity across the province. It also builds on the government's ongoing work to modernize and enhance the Ontario Autism Program to better meet the needs of families.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

MPP Wayne Gates: Yes, I'd like to talk to you about the Niagara area, Fort Erie in particular, where we have an urgent care centre. Your government decided to shut it down—from 365 days a year to 10 hours a day, instead of 24 hours.

The people who live in Fort Erie need their urgent care centre open. So I read the budget from front to back—nothing. Nothing in this budget talks about rural Ontario and the hospitals and the urgent care centres that your government has decided to close or cut their hours.

So maybe you could tell me, what do you say to the people in Fort Erie who don't have the health care that they need and deserve when they need it, where they need it, and why they need it?

Interjection.

MPP Wayne Gates: It would be nice if the guy from Niagara West wouldn't heckle me while I'm trying to ask a very serious question about the residents of Fort Erie.

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: Ontario recognizes the vital role that hospitals play in delivering critical health services in communities across the province. We're investing in primary care, where we're getting people doctors and connecting people to doctors and primary care physicians. I know in my own riding that we did open a primary care clinic, and they're looking for patients. I've actually put it on my own website, saying, "Are you looking for doctors?"

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I want to let you know that this is why the government is investing over \$1.1 billion. You want to talk about hospitals? Additional hospital funding for 2026-27, including a 4% increase in base and targeted hospital funding: This investment—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Response?

Mrs. Michelle Cooper:—high-quality care, increased accountability, system efficiency and improved—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Members come to order, please. Thank you.

Further questions?

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thanks to the member for outlining those great investments, including in hospitals across Ontario, including the new South Niagara Hospital, which I know the member for Niagara West was a big proponent and advocate for.

My question to the member is about public safety. I know the member is very concerned about public safety in her community, and so I just wanted to ask what kind of investments our government is making to support public safety in communities across Ontario, like hers and mine.

Mrs. Michelle Cooper: Public safety is very important to the province of Ontario and our government. We have seen an increase in crime, and so we are investing in correctional facilities. We are investing in over 700 additional people in those facilities to be working with nurses, support workers, correctional officers. We are investing in in bail compliance as well.

These are ways that we're going to keep our province safe from harm and keep criminals behind bars.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): I see there's not enough time for another question, so further debate.

MPP Catherine McKenney: I'm going to share my time with the good member from Ottawa West–Nepean.

I want to start by just walking through what this budget does and doesn't do for housing, for renters and for the people who have been waiting years for a government that will act on housing. I just want to start with the most basic question, and that is, are we building enough homes? According to CMHC, we most certainly are not.

We built a third lower than just three years ago, and this budget projects, actually, that it will get worse before it gets better, with only 64,800 starts this year. That is exactly 37% of what's needed, and it really should embarrass every member on the government benches because this is a made-in-Ontario problem. Other provinces are building. They're building in Nova Scotia. They're building the prairie provinces, who have a combined population of just 5 million people—less than here and building nearly as many homes as we are. Quebec is building.

I just want to talk about what some of the government's headlines have been for their housing response. I want to get back to the HST rebate, and I'm going to say this slowly so that it's understandable: I agree with the HST rebate; it is great. Anybody who buys a home in the next year, between April 1 and March 31, 2027, will get a full HST rebate—the full 13%. That is good for anyone buying a home. It will lower the cost. We can all agree that that's a good thing.

But it is a one-year holiday, and the purpose of it was to spur new construction. Now, sure, you can go out and get a mortgage in that time, but we are not really going to

spur new construction with a one-year rebate holiday. It will be over before most buyers could start the construction on a new home.

The purpose of the rebate, if it stays at one year—which I'm hearing it's going to—is to help developers move existing, unsold inventory. So people will be able to buy a home for a lower price, but these are homes that are already built. They're sitting on the market, and they're priced well above what buyers can already afford. If you keep it at one year, it is a tax-funded discount on developer inventory.

So it's not a housing supply solution. It won't likely get you a single new home. And then we couple that with the \$300 million that the government is throwing at High Art Capital—and I don't think that that's gotten enough attention. That is to convert 2,200 unsold condominium units into long-term rental housing. It is a bailout for investors and developers with public money. It is actually going to be used to put a floor on the price of housing so it doesn't fall too far: "What do we want? We don't want it to go down; we don't want to spur new construction." Even BMO's senior economist was very direct that the \$300-million deal with High Art Capital to convert these condos into long-term rentals is, in the economist's words, a bailout: public dollars going to developers who bought at the peak of a bubble and now can't sell their inventory.

HST: Make it last. High Art Capital: We know who runs High Art Capital. We'll deal with that later.

So who is actually left out here? The Advocacy Centre For Tenants Ontario said it directly: "Without rent controls in place," the new housing that this rebate, the High Art Capital rebate, is meant to move "is at risk of being purchased by financialized landlords that ... engage in rent gouging and bad-faith evictions." So that's who we're throwing \$300 million at. This budget has nothing for renters. It has no rent control, no vacancy control, no new funding for affordable or supportive housing and, in fact, as I'll come to in a moment, it has even less than that.

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing is actually cutting their budget by \$344 million—\$344 million less during a housing crisis and a homelessness emergency. And buried in the budget, almost as a footnote, is that the social housing agreement program, which managed legacy federal-provincial mortgage agreements with social housing providers, has been eliminated. We're going to have to wait for estimates to know exactly which programs are going to be cut, but it's clear whatever small investments this government has announced with one hand, it is clawing back from those who are at high risk of homelessness with the other.

Now for DCs: again, good news. We got to learn this morning that the housing minister is serious about development charges, years after your own housing task force suggested that they should be eliminated. Although, again, while it's welcome investment, it's to provide a temporary three-year funding to only qualifying municipalities. So municipalities have to waive their DCs; they have to change their DC bylaw, and only then will the province and federal government step in for three years. If

these are great ideas and they're going to spur construction of new homes and reduce the cost of homes, why is it for a limited time? It's not a substitute either for a good sustainable partnership between the province and municipalities.

Let's think about why DCs are high in the first place. They're high because when you build and sprawl beyond existing infrastructure, like you wanted to do in the greenbelt, that costs significantly more for municipalities and their taxpayers than growth that is directed to already built-up areas with existing roads, with water, with the bridges you need, pipes that carry all of that water and waste water. So who benefits in this scenario? Again, unless you're going to direct that growth into where we already have existing infrastructure, this three-year DC holiday is again going to benefit developers who hold less-expensive land and make a windfall after rezoning.

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And let's not forget that municipalities don't have the funding they need because of years of downloading onto the property tax base. Municipalities today are starved for cash. Sure, they can qualify. Sure, they can change their DC bylaws, and then you're going to walk away in three years, and you're going to leave municipalities cash-strapped. You're doing nothing.

Again, your own housing task force said to bring down the cost of housing. To build more housing, you have to allow for that gentle density, that missing middle, that infill in already existing areas, but you won't do it. You will not go up against NIMBYism. You just will not. So the three-year DC rebate—sure, but it is not, at the end of three years, going to do it. When cities are looking for financing, it will not be there for them.

I don't want to spend the last 50 seconds I have talking about just what's wrong; I want to talk about what you really should be doing. You need to invest in non-marketing housing on public land. You need a market system, but you need non-market housing to keep housing affordable. The private market alone will never build all the homes we need, not at the prices that people can afford and not when the economics of homebuilding are broken.

You need to unlock federal dollars. You need to commit that \$62 million in annual operating funding that AMO has called for so that you unlock a billion dollars in capital funding. There are solutions; they're there for you.

I've got lots more to say at another time, but for now, I hope that you were listening and that you will extend those rebates.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): The member from Ottawa West–Nepean.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm rising on behalf of the residents of Ottawa West–Nepean to speak to this government's budget bill. The first thing I want to say is that once again, despite the fact that the Queensway Carleton Hospital is routinely over 100% capacity and 75 people are being treated on average every single day in one of the hallways, this government did not put the funding towards right-sizing the Queensway Carleton Hospital.

They are abandoning the people in the west end of Ottawa, despite the fact that we do not have timely access

to emergency care, timely access to treatments and procedures and surgeries, and despite the fact that investing in the hospital's plan—which is shovel-ready and ready to go—will create jobs in Ottawa at a time when our job market is sluggish and the federal government is laying off people. This is both an economic boost that our region needs, and it's what our region needs to ensure that everybody is getting the timely access to health care that they need when they need it. It's absolutely shameful that once again, this government has totally abandoned the people on the west side of Ottawa—including the residents of the MPP from Carleton's riding—but I'm not going to stop fighting until this hospital is funded, Speaker.

The second thing I want to note is that it's been a difficult year for Algonquin College. This year, 37 programs were cut, and the Perth campus was closed. The college has announced another 30 programs are being cut for next year, including programs that are in high demand in the area, where employers are depending on Algonquin College for all of their skilled workers, like the law clerk and paralegal program, the landscaping program, journalism and the music industry. These are not minor areas, Speaker, and yet these programs are being cut.

It's incredibly frustrating to see that while the government is increasing tuition for students and taking away their financial aid, forcing them deeper into debt, they didn't even spend their whole budget on post-secondary education this year. That funding could have been going to institutions like Algonquin to ensure that they were able to keep offering these programs that our local economy needs, that employers need, and that students want to take. That's another thing where it's completely shameful, this government's record.

Speaking about money that this government committed but did not spend, in the past eight years, this government has taken more than \$6.3 billion out of our schools. We're seeing the consequences every single day with larger class sizes, cuts to special education, the lack of mental health supports, a teacher shortage and a growing problem of violence.

And do you know what, Speaker? This government didn't even spend their whole budget this year. They cut funding to the bone. More than 40% of school boards are in deficit, and another 30% are barely making ends meet. Almost all school boards across the province have cut, cut, cut—71 out of 72 school boards are running a deficit in special education, and this government couldn't even be bothered to spend their whole budget on education this year. That's just incredibly shameful, Speaker.

When we look at what the budget includes for the next few years—next year, the funding increase for the Ministry of Education is 0.7%. The government says in the budget that inflation this year is 2.1%, and yet the funding increase that they have given to the ministry, which is supposed to cover both schools and child care, is only 0.7%—\$300 million for schools and child care. That doesn't even come close to covering half the gap in special education. School boards are spending more than \$850 million a year more than what they are getting from this

government for a system that is badly failing our kids with disabilities and special needs. The system is held together with tape and shoestring, and the government's increase for the entire Ministry of Education is not even half of that gap.

I want to talk a little bit about why it's so important that we properly fund education and what the impact of the government's cuts are, because, unlike the Minister of Education, I'm not scared to speak to teachers from across the province. I'm actually out listening to parents, not lecturing them, and listening to education workers and meeting with students.

Here are just some of the things that I've heard recently: Students are in classes so large now that a grade 12 student in Ottawa told me that you have to come early or you'll be sitting on the floor. There are not enough seats in the classroom for the number of students in the classroom. Every single day, there are kids who are learning from the floor of their classroom.

There's a school in eastern Ontario that has 68 kids that need an EA but only five EAs, so some of those EAs are supporting more than 12 kids, with some of those kids non-verbal and needing help with toileting. I don't know how you even run back and forth between that many students in a single day, let alone provide the support that each kid needs. But that school is not even bad, because there's a school in southern Ontario that has 1,150 kids. A third of them have an IEP, but the school only has three EAs. One of those EAs is assigned full-time to one student, so there are two EAs who are supporting, between the two of them, more than 300 students. How do you even remotely help any of those students on a daily basis?

Our schools do not have textbooks or laptops, but there's a school board where teachers are limited to two pages of photocopying per student per day. They have to ration because you can't teach every lesson based off what you can write on a white board. The teachers are even being told, "Don't print permission slips to send home for the kids" because the school doesn't have paper for permission slips.

Do you know what? This is not something that the government's \$750 gift card to teachers is going to fix because, first of all, they left high school teachers out of that commitment entirely, despite the fact that high school teachers also need to support their students with resources. But \$750 isn't going to cover the paper that you need just to print resources for your students every day when you don't have textbooks or laptops for them.

There's a grade 9 class in southern Ontario where students are building bridges out of popsicle sticks as their tech curriculum because the school has no tech equipment. Imagine taking a class where you're building a bridge with popsicle sticks and then you're going to go do an apprenticeship in the sector. What meaningful skills do you have to bring to that apprenticeship, not to mention how are you going stay safe in that apprenticeship?

And then there's mental health, Speaker. There's a school of 1,000 students that has one student support counsellor—one student support counsellor for 1,000

students. Students who are experiencing mental health challenges need to take a number to get to speak to their counsellor. And they're actually lucky because half of schools in Ontario have no access to mental health professionals whatsoever. There are only 0.29 psychologists per school in the entire province of Ontario—0.29 psychologists per school, but the government didn't step up with additional funding for mental health professionals in school. What they managed to find was \$41 million for police officers in schools, despite the fact that police officers do not have training to deal with youth and adolescent mental health challenges. So what the government is doing is setting kids up to fail—it's keeping both academic and special education supports and mental health supports away from our kids, but there will be police there to arrest them once they've reacted violently due to that lack of support.

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Then let's talk about education infrastructure, because the amount for education infrastructure in this budget is going down \$576 million, a cut of 15%. That's despite the fact that the Financial Accountability Office has already said that if infrastructure spending for schools did not increase, then by 2033, 75% of all schools in the province will be below a state of good repair. So the government heard that warning from the FAO of 75% of schools—three out of every four schools—below a state of good repair within the coming years if they didn't increase infrastructure funding, and they said, "We can do better than that." But they didn't mean, "We can do better than having three out of four schools be in a state of bad repair"; what they meant was, "We could have more than three out of every four schools being below a state of good repair," because that's the only thing that they can be going for if they're cutting infrastructure funding when they know that is the situation that we're already in.

We have a scenario in Ontario where half of schools in the province have failed a test for lead in the drinking water in the last four years. Half of our schools have failed a lead test, and yet the government is cutting funding for infrastructure rather than actually making our schools safe and healthy places for our kids to be.

We're seeing, in one instance, a school that's built for 70 students but has twice as many students, but they only have two bathrooms and one water fountain for 140 students, so kids are spending their entire recess in line to use the bathroom. It makes no sense that you would be cutting funding in this scenario, so shame on the government for this record once again.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): It's time for oral questions.

MPP Jamie West: Thank you to my colleagues from Ottawa Centre and Ottawa West–Nepean.

The member from Ottawa Centre spoke very clearly about the need to build more housing, and I was thinking with the title of this being "Protect Ontario" and all the advertising on protect Ontario, there's this opportunity in Ear Falls. Ear Falls has laid off 160 workers. They have idled and closed the plant, but they make wood—150

million board feet a year that we could be using for building housing. An opportunity for protecting Ontario would be to advocate for this wood to come into construction for housing. That's "Protect Ontario." What we see here is just words on a page.

Would my colleague agree that we could be supporting workers, bringing them back to work, building a real plan where laid-off workers get their jobs back and building houses at the same time, instead of whatever nonsense this is?

MPP Catherine McKenney: Thank you for that question.

We really are also forgetting that we are not just in a housing crisis but we are in a jobs crisis, and we've got laid-off construction workers at the same time that we need new housing. So, again, if either of these rebates were to last more than a year, it would actually spur the construction of new homes and we would actually be able to get construction workers back to work doing what we need them to and employing.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

Mr. Will Bouma: I listened with attention to the members opposite talking about the budget—actually, it seemed to me that they spoke about everything except the budget. I know when the opposition does this, they're actually in support of what we're doing, so I would ask both members if they would be willing to tell us here in the House if they'll be supporting our budget.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I guess when we raised issues of affordability; access to housing and housing actually being built in Ontario; access to health care in a timely fashion; access to post-secondary education and students not going into debt; and our students having teachers in class, papers and books in class, not having lead in the drinking water, and the member stands up and says, "We didn't talk about their budget at all," then you have the answer for yourself, Speaker, about what is and is not in this budget. I think it's very clear, then, why we will not be supporting this budget.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

Mr. Ted Hsu: When I speak with my local press in Kingston, they try to ask questions like, "What do you like in the budget?" They want to know both sides and they want to know that I'm thinking about both sides.

One of the things in the budget that's good is a cut to the small business tax, but what's, I think, not adequate is that that cut is smaller than the amount proposed by my colleague the member for Don Valley West and the finance critic for the Ontario Liberal caucus. It's about 40% smaller than what was proposed by the Liberal caucus. Also, our proposal was several years earlier, and if it had been supported by this government, we would have had small businesses investing more and creating a stronger economy.

I'm wondering what the NDP thinks about that and whether they would have supported the small business tax cut proposed by the Liberals—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you.

Member from Ottawa Centre to respond.

MPP Catherine McKenney: Thank you for that question. I don't remember your private member's bill, so you'll excuse me.

There were also things in here that I think were okay. I think AMO said the sum of the capital funding that's in here for supportive housing—I think they politely put it that it's a good start. I've said the HST funding is good, and it just needs to be extended. The development charges just need to be extended. We can go through the budget line by line, and we can pull out pieces that, of course, are okay, to be polite—less polite, maybe, than AMO was.

But there are a lot of things in this budget, as my colleague from Ottawa West–Nepean just pointed out that, if you go through it, are not going to make life more affordable for people in this province. We've got a duty to ensure that we are taking care of everyone in this province, and this budget does not protect all Ontarians.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

MPP Paul Vickers: Ontario's growing population means growing demand for long-term care, housing and community infrastructure, and families expect government to deliver without compromising fiscal responsibility.

That is why our government introduced the Building Ontario Fund, an innovative model that allows Ontario companies to partner with Canadian institutional investors to deliver projects that might otherwise not move forward, including long-term-care homes, student housing and affordable housing. This approach leverages Ontario's strong balance sheet and credit rating to build, not stall, the projects people are waiting for.

So, through you, Mr. Speaker, will the member opposite support this budget and the Building Ontario Fund that helps deliver long-term-care beds and housing for Ontarians, or will they once again vote no and block the infrastructure communities desperately need?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: It's interesting that the member said that the people of Ontario want the government to deliver sustainable public services without going into debt because that's the opposite of what this government is doing. They're not delivering good-quality public services, and they are going deeply into debt.

The member for Ottawa Centre and I were at the pre-budget hearings in Ottawa where we heard again and again that it's \$700 a day to pay for somebody in a hospital, it's over \$200 a day to pay for someone in long-term care, but it's only \$100 a day to pay for someone to receive home care or community care. It's also much better for that person to receive that care because it allows them to stay in their own home longer, which is where they want to be, and yet that's not what we see in this government's budget whatsoever.

So I don't know what the government is talking about with actually spending smarter and not going into deficit, because their actions don't match their words.

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The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: My question is to the member for Ottawa West–Nepean.

I received an email from a parent earlier this month whose experience is, unfortunately, far too common in our city and across the province. She has a son who is seven years old, in grade 2. She told me her son has only been to school for a total of 10 to 15 days since September and sometimes he can only stay a half an hour because he simply does not have the appropriate EA support. Last year, he was able to attend school full days because he had a one-on-one EA. Now, there's only one EA for his entire class.

Is there anything in this budget that would provide this parent with some hope that her son is going to get the supports that he needs and deserves in our classrooms?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you very much to the member for London West for that very powerful question. Unfortunately, the answer that you're going to need to give your constituent is no, the government isn't doing anything that will help families like that.

And it's an incredibly shocking story. I wish it were very uncommon, but the problem is, Speaker, that it's not at all, that this is happening to thousands of families on a daily basis across Ontario, that their children are being told that they are not allowed to come to school because they don't have the resources to keep the child safe, let alone to support the student in any way.

There are many other cases where students are at school and they still don't have the resources to keep them safe. So one teacher will be overseeing a class of 28 kids that has a number of kids who are runners, who they know will try to leave the classroom. That one teacher has to try to keep an eye on each one of those children that might leave the classroom while trying to teach all of the children. What are they supposed to do if one student does leave the classroom? Are they supposed to go running after that student or are they supposed to stay with the other 27 students?

Speaker, this government is completely failing our children with disabilities and special needs. They're completely failing their families. Every child in Ontario has the right to an equitable education and that is not what's happening. And it's not what's going to happen in the next year unless the government comes to its senses and starts properly funding education, but that's not what this budget does.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further debate?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: It's my pleasure to rise in this House and speak on behalf of beautiful Beaches–East York residents, but also Ontarians in general. I'm sharing my time with the amazing member from Kingston and the Islands.

There's a lot to discuss and so I will just touch on a few things before I get to my favourite topic of all time: conservation authorities. So we'll first start with schedule 7.

Oh, before we do that, I want to just talk overall about this budget—how it doesn't address the issues that are plaguing Ontario and Ontarians right now as far as affordability, the housing crisis—I mean, I'll say the climate emergency, but you don't believe in that so that's a waste. But it's doing nothing to address housing, education, the autism wait-list, schools with a backlog of disrepair. Life is harder for Ontarians; it's more expensive thanks to this government, and this budget does nothing to address it. There are crumbs here and there, but I think Hansel and Gretel actually had more crumbs for them.

Schedule 7, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act—why is this even in here? You've got to ask. What kind of government is destroying something that is transparent for Ontarians? Wouldn't you be proud of what you've accomplished and what you're trying to do? Why would you need to hide and why would you have to retroactively hide that information? If you think Ontarians aren't paying attention to this, they are.

So you're permitting an institution head to request a second extension for an FOI timeline, previously only one extension, and you're creating a framework for the institution head to propose a plan for staged release of records. You're shifting the power from the Information and Privacy Commissioner. You all read her scathing, scathing comments about how wrong this is. It's just a blanket exemption for all the records from the minister and the minister's offices. If the tables were turned, you would be screaming from the rooftop over this. If you are conducting business on your personal cellphone, maybe you want to think about what you're doing.

Schedule 9, the Liquor Tax Act, is a step in the right direction. I'll give you that. I'll throw you, as I do, a little teeny, teeny bone on that. But it doesn't go far enough, as usual.

You all have craft breweries in your ridings. They are good manufacturing jobs. You talk about them a lot. Ontario craft brewers create 11,500 full-time jobs, adding \$685 million annually to our GDP, liveliness to our streets and, of course, provide us something that we desperately need to cope with your antics in the House, as I mentioned the other day.

But you don't go far enough, right? The current beer tax system is outdated and unfair, with 90% of craft breweries in Ontario paying the same tax as microbreweries that are bigger and more established. They pay a \$78 tax on the first hectolitre of beer they produce versus \$10 in Alberta. I'm not saying anything that you don't already know, so why wouldn't you address that? That's what they desperately, desperately need. The smaller breweries should not be paying the same as the larger ones.

Now we'll get to—because this will take a while—schedule 3, conservation authorities. Just to take a trip down memory lane, do you know who brought in the Conservation Authorities Act in 1946? What colour stripe was that amazing Premier who had the foresight? He was a Progressive Conservative—progressive Conservative.

He was modelling that after the Tennessee Valley Authority and Ohio conservation districts, and it was

based on three key principles: watershed-based management, local initiative and provincial-municipal partnerships. As I always say to you, why do you choose to mess with things that are working well and not fix things that are not working well? It's like sport for you. It just defies logic.

You've slashed and cut down the 36 conservation authorities to nine. Now, it's great that it's not seven, which it was. And one of your members wrote you a beautiful love letter to get their conservation authority saved. We would all love to do that. I will write you an effusively beautiful letter too if you would help the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority as well as the other ones.

But you're not looking towards the future with all these cuts. You think it's an efficiency. Well, when the Premier cut the city of Toronto in half—the councillors—looking for efficiencies, it didn't show. It didn't pay off. There weren't—the same as this.

We know the high cost of inaction with not providing the proper infrastructure preventatively. We know that flooding is the number one public emergency in Ontario. We know that for every dollar invested in climate action, there's \$3 to \$8 in cost avoidance. But I don't know; you just want to cut all these protections, and then what? Leave it to some other government to clean up the mess? Like, in BC, it was a \$9-billion price tag for the flooding there, and Alberta was \$5 billion.

1650

I think you have kids. Many of you have grandkids—at least you look like you should have grandkids.

Last week, the Watershed Conservation Coalition—a broad coalition of civil society organizations—was at Queen's Park, calling on the government to reverse this. I still implore you to please, please, please reverse this. Ontario Nature was there; the National Farmers Union-Ontario—I think farmers are usually your base; and the Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Associations. I think many of you have cottages.

The government claimed that they received tens of thousands of comments on this consolidation, which they used to inform their final process as seen in the budget. My question is, whose comments did you listen to? Whose comments? Because some of them said this proposal is totally rubbish. A mayor from Ontario says, "I am totally against this."

This proposal is "a huge step in the wrong direction." You've been told over and over again, but you're not listening. We know this consolidation would undermine local expertise. I'm not sure—maybe you studied geography; maybe you studied geotechnical infrastructure and investigation; maybe you are water experts—but this is absolutely the wrong move, consolidating the conservation authorities.

Last year, they prevented over \$150 million in flood damage and disruptions. Every year, they do that, actually. They're protecting over 10 million people with quality and critical water sources. And here's a key: They're the

second-largest landowner in Ontario, with more than 150,000 hectares of natural areas. So that is a little key.

We'll be watching this in the future, this land. I don't want it to be greenbelt 2.0. These are flood plains; these are areas that should not be built in. Do you want to build housing? Get a backbone and upzone all the arterials, all the avenues, as-of-right. You want to have housing? Then have Metrolinx mandated to put in affordable housing when they sell off their land. There are many ways that we can address housing.

And now, I'll just have to share my time, even though I could go on for a long time. But at the end of the day, I'm not impressed with this budget.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): The member from Kingstons and the Islands.

Mr. Ted Hsu: There are many things in this budget bill, so I'll dive right into it.

Schedules 2, 10 and 14 remove protections that make Victoria Day and Family Day holidays where workers will be able to get a day off with their families without any direct or indirect pressure from their employers.

I believe in protecting holidays. Keeping statutory days of rest shows that, in our society, strong families are more important than 24/7 commerce. I also believe that workers need that day of rest protected from any pressure, even indirect pressure, like how they might be viewed by their employers.

Schedule 3 addresses the amalgamation of conservation authorities. Now, maybe you can improve how conservation authorities work, but don't make people have to get something or somebody in a faraway place to understand local details. The government should understand this.

Conservation authorities were created to manage flooding risk, and it's one of the main risks we're looking at in the years to come—one of the main risks to property—and it comes from climate change and it's already here. The risk is only going to increase from here on out.

After meeting with the Cataraqui Conservation Authority, my local conservation authority, I've learned that there will be staggering costs associated with the amalgamation. The government may be trying to speed up development by avoiding the time it takes conservation authorities to process applications, but the Cataraqui Conservation Authority has been very good at meeting ministry targets for responses over 90% of the time.

This government likes to centralize power, and that means there are a couple of things to worry about. Local knowledge may be lost in the new regional organization. Studies often have to be done by visiting the site because maps are not accurate, and there's a lot of local knowledge needed to properly assess flood risk.

Here's another strange example: The Mattagami Region Conservation Authority, around the city of Timmins, is the only one where the water flows north up to the Arctic. So why should it be lumped together with the other regions where the water flows into the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River?

It's unclear how governance for the new amalgamated regions will work. There are just many, many more municipalities in each amalgamated region, except for the one in Toronto. Giving each municipality a voice, which has been the practice and has been working, will be very cumbersome in the amalgamated regions. If the board of directors of a region is trimmed down, they won't have good knowledge of all the local communities. So I don't see the justification for the Conservative government's actions. I see costs and risks but not benefits.

Schedule 7 and schedule 11—that's the controversial one which exempts ministers and their political staff from freedom-of-information requests. FOI requests are a vital tool for ensuring transparency and accountability. Ordinary citizens can submit their own FOI requests to find out more information about which people with money did the government talk to, what they talked about, who got government funding and why, who is responsible for what in the government, and more.

For example, I've submitted an FOI request to the Ministry of Transportation to better understand the cause of the four-year delay in constructing the new Kingston ferry dock. But if the proposed changes go through, my request could be nullified. All of this is happening while the government is centralizing power and stripping MPPs of their ability to fight for and represent the needs of their communities. Sitting time at Queen's Park has been reduced, committee consultations are being skipped, debate on legislation is being shortened and the government publishes less and less of the data I need to make informed decisions about legislation and projects.

Bill 5, which was introduced and rushed through the legislative process last year, let the government override any law through the creation of special economic zones, and that can be done by decree, without coming to the Legislature. Everything from locally accountable school trustees, conservation authorities to judicial appointments is being centralized and controlled from the cabinet table. All of this at the same time they are closing the curtains on how the people's government works by curtailing freedom of information. That's why we need freedom of information right now.

Now, this government is making these decisions with the hopes that voters will not care. But I believe that you deserve to know how the government does business and how and why they spend your money. These proposed changes raise serious concerns about what the Premier and his government are hiding from or will want to hide from. We can't stand by while this happens, and so I plan to fight for Ontarians' right to know.

Something not in the budget bill is the agricultural risk management program. Last fall—before the economics of farming was turned upside down—grain prices had already fallen, fertilizer prices had already risen, the drought had hit and tariff wars were raging. And that is why, back then, the Ontario Liberal finance critic and I called on the Ford government to immediately implement the full increase in the risk management program and not wait until 2027. Farmers face a lot of risk now this year.

Now, grain prices have gone up, but fertilizer prices have gone up much more. Not only has supply from the Middle East been cut off; production in some countries has been forced to shut down, and other countries, like China, have shut off their fertilizer exports. There are news reports from the United States of shutting off fertilizer exports to Canada. I don't know what this Conservative government is waiting for. There is no reason not to implement the full increase in the risk management program for farmers right now. But the budget failed to do that.

There's no mention in the budget of funding for phase 1 of our sorely needed new hospital serving southeastern Ontario from Kingston even though nine other hospitals are mentioned in the budget document. Everyone knows that it's not possible anymore to rebuild or restore Kingston's 188-year-old hospital. Some of the original buildings are still there. It's Ontario's oldest, and everybody knows that's hindering care for their loved ones.

1700

A site has already been chosen for a new hospital, and they've designed a phased plan that won't break a budget or overwhelm management while steadily improving care for patients. Phase 1 is ready to go now. I guarantee it will cost less to build a new hospital starting now rather than years from now, so this government should start investing in the Kingston Health Sciences phased plan today.

The last thing I want to talk about is, what did we get for all this debt this Conservative government has handed to us and our kids and grandkids? This budget plans for a large deficit next year, \$14 billion. It's almost as big as the deficit in the middle of the COVID pandemic, which was \$16 billion, and you add onto that another number: interest payments. How much interest are we, the people of Ontario, paying? It's up to \$17 billion next year.

All of this is without considering what's going on in Iran, which is starting to drag down the world economy. In the budget, they used \$59 a barrel for oil. I just looked at the financial markets before coming here. We're looking at \$80, \$90, \$100 a barrel in the futures markets from now until the end of this year.

Many Ontarians are struggling with cost of living, housing, health care or education, and they're worried about their future. You would think that with big deficit spending outside of a recession, people would be feeling good about their prospects, but they are not. So if you're watching this speech, ask yourself, "Does life feel more affordable?" and are your needs being met? No. The budget doesn't help much in these areas, and the government's priorities are elsewhere.

According to the budget, Ontario's debt is expected to be almost half a trillion dollars, or \$30,000 per person. That's enormous. So why does schedule 6 in this budget bill remove reporting on what strategies will be used to reduce the debt burden? That is bizarre. Why take your eye off the ball when it comes to our debt burden?

So I don't think I'll be supporting this budget.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): It's time for oral questions.

Hon. Sam Oosterhoff: I want to thank the member for his speech.

Earlier today, I asked one of his colleagues a question, and I didn't really get a clear answer, so I'm maybe going to ask it again. There's \$21.9 billion in tax cuts included in this budget in annualized savings. If you look at the savings, there's a couple of charts that detail that: \$10 billion for business; \$11.9 billion for savings.

They have a deep concern with the deficit. I appreciate that.

These tax cuts are in there, and one of the reasons we, I think, have the deficit that the member opposite spoke about is because we made a conscious choice to put money back into the pockets of hard-working families, of businesses to protect our economy, to grow the economy.

My question to him would be, if he has such concerns about these tax cuts, which of the taxes that are mentioned there would he increase? Which of the tax cuts would he cancel? Is it the small business tax cut, the accelerated capital cost allowance? I'm just curious.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Look, I think the answer really is, what are your priorities? What are your priorities?

You've got a debt—and let's look at OSAP, for example. Who are you asking to carry the greatest load in the changes to OSAP? It's the lowest-income households who relied the most on grants.

You could have done it differently. You could have made the changes to OSAP more progressive, but no. No, this government decides that it wants low-income households, who tended to get the larger grants—and forced them to take on more debt. It's a question of priorities.

If this government had made the right investments, we would be getting more revenue than we do currently, and we would have lower debts and deficits. So I would ask the assistant minister to look at what the priorities—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Thank you.

Member from Kitchener Centre.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: The member opposite said maybe the deficit is caused from tax cuts. I was wondering if that might be from subsidizing really wealthy people's energy, like Galen Weston and everybody here. We continue to subsidize energy costs for the most wealthy. Yes, we need to subsidize energy costs for low- and middle-income people who need that help to heat their homes, but I don't need my electricity subsidized.

How does the member from Kingston and the Islands feel about our tax dollars being spent to subsidize Galen Weston's energy?

Mr. Ted Hsu: I thank my honourable colleague for that question. So, if you look at the budget for next year, there's a piece of the Ministry of Energy's budget—in fact, it's almost all of the Ministry of Energy's budget. And it gets up to \$7 billion. It's a subsidy for electricity.

Now, there may be good reasons for that. But, as my honourable colleague mentions, there's no consideration of who is getting the subsidy and do they really need it and is this the best use of debt.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Can you please calm down? Thank you.

Further questions?

MPP Lisa Gretzky: I've listened intently to my colleagues next to us here. We know that there is record-high food bank usage under this government. We know that we have record numbers of people experiencing homelessness, youth right through to seniors. I don't see anything in this budget that's addressing any of that. We know that when it comes to unemployment, we have one of the worst unemployment rates under this government, specifically youth unemployment, and the OSAP cuts are certainly not going to help youth get educated to be able to get better jobs.

What we do see is a government that is building a fantasy island. We see them with this strange fixation with the Toronto waterfront, a fetish with the waterfront. What we see is a government who has slipped in something to protect themselves from freedom-of-information requests from the public.

Can you tell me why you think that the government would have these fantasy projects in the FOI legislation to stop them from being transparent, instead of investments into the people of Ontario?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much to the member from—I know you—Windsor West for that great question. When I was a kid, my parents took us on trips to Fantasy Island, Grand Island, New York, and it's just all coming back to me here with all these ideas for the tunnel, the spa, the convention centre—floating, is it—and everything on the waterfront.

Remember, I was a city councillor with both Ford brothers, including the Premier, and there was an obsession back then—this was 2010—with Toronto's waterfront and what could be done there. At that point, it was the Ferris wheel idea, which, fasten your seat belts, because that's coming. They are not investing on things Ontarians need. Instead, they are playing games like it's a Conklin circus down at the waterfront.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further question?

Mr. Ric Bresee: I really have appreciated the presentations made from the members from the third party. I recognize that it's within their role to point at things that aren't in the budget, point at things that aren't actually on the floor today as things that they wish could be there.

But I would like to speak about some of the things that are in the actual budget. It is a very large document. There are a number of wonderful initiatives brought forward by this government. But I'm going to pick on one—not “pick on,” but identify one in specific, because it was the Liberal Party that, as they came to the end of their terms in 2018, had an autism program that was broken. And in the last eight years, we have raised the funding to that autism program from \$300 million to \$600 million and this year, with the inclusions in this budget, to \$965 million.

Will the Liberals stand up and say that this is actually a good idea and we need that funding for the people with autism?

Mr. Ted Hsu: Okay, I will challenge the member to do this: I will challenge the member to ask for a public answer from parents of kids with autism whether they are satisfied with this government's policy. Let's take it outside and go to the streets and ask that question.

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The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

MPP Jamie West: Thank you to my colleagues from the Liberal Party. During both their debates, they talked about environmental protections and conservation. One of the things talked about was flooding. I know that the Conservative government, they love to talk about how mining is important. It is something I believe, as well. But one of the things that's really important in mining is removing water from the mines. In the riding of Sudbury, for example, we had a massive storm. We had about three feet, overnight, land on us. Now today, it's seven degrees, so a ton of that snow is going to melt and end up in the water.

I'm wondering if the members can talk about how important it is to have planning for flooding zones so that we don't end up wrecking our local mines?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: At public accounts the other day, this government refused to acknowledge the Auditor General's amazing report on greenhouse gas targets. So like everything we've known here, since I got in in 2022, they're allergic to the words. The only time you hear and see "environment" in the budget is when they're talking about work environment, not the actual environment.

To the member from Sudbury: You have a valid point. They're not investing in prevention, so then it's going to be more expensive to clean up the mess.

What they're doing with the conservation authorities, who protect our areas, is deplorable. So naturally, Ontario is going to flood, thanks to this government.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I'm just wondering, and I'm hoping that the member from beautiful Beaches–East York can help me understand, why conservation authorities are in this budget. Do you know of any sitting MPPs opposite whose conservation authority is spared?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I cannot even imagine being in the minds of the members across from me, because I don't know what's going on there. But it's very curious why the conservation authorities are in this budget. Maybe it has to do with land, and the obsession or fetish for land that they should not be building on. That's what I would say, with this government.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further debate?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I'm honoured to rise to speak to Bill 97 today, the government's budget bill. I just want to put this bill in the context of what's happening in Ontario right now, because all of us had a number of weeks to travel the province and meet with our constituents during the winter break—14 weeks, as a matter of fact. It's a long time.

What I heard from people over and over again, Speaker, is that people are tired. They're tired of struggling every month to be able to pay the rent. They're tired of wondering if they're going to make their mortgage payment next month. They're tired of working so hard and seeing grocery bills shoot up to over \$300 every time they go to the store. And they're wondering why everyday, middle-class, working-class people are working harder and harder and not getting ahead, while the wealthy keep getting richer. That's the context this budget has been introduced under.

This budget will not solve that challenge of rising inequality in this province that's making life so unaffordable that so many people can't afford to live in Ontario.

This budget is obsessed, in a bizarre way, with spending money on an island airport, a fantasy island with a floating convention centre, a ridiculous tunnel under Highway 401 and subsidies for a mega spa on Toronto's waterfront. As a matter of fact, none of these items even have dollar figures attached to them because either the government doesn't know how many tens or hundreds of billions are going to be spent on this, or they're too embarrassed to tell the people of Ontario how much money is being wasted on these projects. When you have communities all over Ontario, rural communities in particular—well, they don't have the money to keep their bridges and roads open. They don't have the money to keep their emergency departments open. They don't have the money to deal with the fact that homelessness is rising faster in rural Ontario than in urban Ontario. The government's budget is silent on all those big issues outside of Toronto, but they sure talk a lot about spending billions in Toronto.

Now, Speaker, what is driving the affordability crisis? What's driving it is the worst housing crisis in Ontario's history. Housing starts are at all-time lows; housing prices are at all-time highs. As a matter of fact, the housing starts in the budget, once again, are downgraded this year to an estimated 64,800 housing starts. Do you know how many minimum housing starts the government needs to reach the goal of 1.5 million homes? Some 150,000 a year. Less than half of that is projected this year, and even over the course of the three-year budget projection, the government admits that we're barely only going to get to half of their target.

The biggest item in the budget for housing is a cut to the HST, which is something the Greens have been calling for. But the government admits that's only going to lead to an additional 8,000 homes being built, still putting them far below what's needed. Why is that happening? Why does Ontario have the worst housing crisis in the entire country and in the entire history of the province? The government says no to their own housing task force recommendations to legalize multiplexes and mid-rises.

I was just meeting with rental providers earlier today, saying that if we could legalize six-to-11-storey buildings as-of-right on major transportation corridors in Ontario, it could cut their building time in half or more. That's the fastest way we can build homes that people can afford in the communities they know and love, but this government continues to say no to it. They say no to protecting renters,

which is partly why we are in a situation in Ontario where there is no community in Ontario where a full-time minimum-wage worker can afford average monthly rent.

And that is partially what's driving the fact that we are experiencing the worst homelessness crisis in the history of the province. Over 85,000 people do not have a place to call home. And do you know what the budget proposes, Speaker? Some 425 supportive housing units over three years, 141 new ones a year. Now, we certainly don't want to say no to that, but is that even going to come close to the scale of the problem of 85,000 people experiencing homelessness in the province of Ontario?

And I hope the government listens to the fact that the Association of Municipalities of Ontario has raised the alarm that even though the federal government now is going to get back into building deeply affordable homes—and if Ontario gets their fair share, that would be 1,200—that will not happen if the government doesn't commit to the health care supports needed for supportive housing.

So I would ask the government—we have to put health care money in and housing money in to build supportive housing with wrap-around, 24/7 mental health and addiction supports if we're going to have any hope of addressing the homelessness problem in the province of Ontario.

The other thing driving up costs for people is energy prices in Ontario. Electricity prices jacked up 29% last year alone. IESO projections are they're going to continue to go up. Do you know why that's happening, Speaker? Because this government says no to the lowest-cost sources of electricity: wind, solar and storage. The budget makes it clear they're going to ramp up SMRs and new nuclear investments and they're going to ramp up gas—both expensive, both going to lock us into more dependency on fuel supplies from the US.

As a matter of fact, the cost difference between the SMRs—which were budgeted at \$4 billion, now almost up to \$22 billion—is seven to 15 times more expensive than wind, solar and storage. That is why \$2.3 trillion globally last year alone was invested in the green energy transition, creating millions of jobs around the world, generating low-cost energy. And Ontario is saying no to all of that. What a great opportunity: What a great opportunity to diversify our economy, create good-paying jobs and lower people's electricity prices if we got our fair share of that \$2.3 trillion the global investors are pouring into the green energy transition, but Ontario is missing in action.

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Now, I will give the government credit; we have put money into supporting electric vehicle manufacturing. But I hope the government listens to the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, the Ontario Greens and others saying if we're going to build supply here, we have to support demand. That means investing in expanding our electric vehicle charging infrastructure and bringing back rebates so that low- and middle-income people can afford to buy electric vehicles and have the cost savings—one third to one half of what it costs to drive a gas-powered vehicle. That's even going to get worse now as we see fuel prices going up.

Now, a lot of people have heard from this government that there might be some increases in health care funding. But if you actually look at inflation-adjusted funding for core public services—and I'm going to look at the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services: a slight increase this year, and the budget projects a 2.4% decrease in 2027 and a 1.3% decrease in 2027-28.

Post-secondary education: The government says we're making historic investments. Inflation-adjusted dollars for colleges and universities are down 3.3% this year, will be down 1.9% next year and a whopping 10.6% down in 2027-28.

Health care: There will be a slight increase this year of 3.2%, a slight increase next year of 0.5% and then a 1.6% cut. As a matter of fact, the 4% increase that went to hospitals isn't even enough, according to the hospital association, to meet bare core needs, to meet payroll and continue existing services.

Education: a 0.6% increase this year, a 3.6% cut next year and a 0.9% cut the following year.

This is why front-line education and health care workers are struggling—struggling with overcrowded classrooms, overcrowded hospitals. This is why emergency departments, especially in rural communities, are struggling to stay open during all their hours.

But I want to zero in on colleges and universities because we know how critically important post-secondary education is to our economic competitiveness at a time when we're facing global economic challenges. Post-secondary spending as related to GDP: In 2018, when this government was elected, it was 1.41%. Today, it's 1.12%, and by 2027, according to the budget, it will be down under 1%, to 0.92%. That's why our colleges and universities are closing programs, laying off staff and denying entry into certain programs for students. Then, to make it worse for students, this government cuts the OSAP program, piling more debt onto young people.

Speaker, I have to take a moment to point out—I think one of the colleagues did here—the word “environment” wasn't in the budget anywhere, at a time when we're facing increasing severity and frequency and costs of climate-fuelled unsafe weather events. As a matter of fact, the forest firefighting fund in this budget gets cut, along with the MNR, Ministry of Natural Resources, base budget. Even the Ontario Chamber of Commerce has pointed out that they are deeply concerned about the risk associated to businesses due to increasing unsafe weather. Those floods in Toronto, for example, cost \$1.3 billion an hour two summers ago. The Ontario chamber is saying, “Why aren't we investing in protecting Ontario from unsafe weather, floods, droughts?” Firefighters—we know that every dollar invested saves up to \$8 in savings. But no, it doesn't happen.

As a matter of fact, schedule 3 of this budget bill decimates our conservation authorities. A decade ago, an analysis of CAs showed that Ontario spends about \$9 per person responding to emergencies; Alberta, by contrast, \$427; Manitoba, \$598. The study indicates that it's because of what conservation authorities have done to

benefit this province, and this government is gutting them, putting our lives, livelihoods, properties and communities at risk, Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): It's time for oral questions.

Hon. Michael S. Kerzner: My friend across the aisle is somebody I respect. In his community, he stands with his police service. I want to thank him for that.

Mr. Speaker, in our budget, we looked very critically at how we envisioned energy growth over the next generation. If we are going to be an economy that's harvesting the natural resources from the north, from the Ring of Fire, if we're reimagining our economy, we have to have the power to do that.

Simply put, the member from Guelph doesn't realize that you can't generate sufficient power in this type of climate with solar. Will he understand that the demand is so great we have to have reliable power?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I do appreciate the member's question. I appreciate your visits to Guelph Police Service and our fire and emergency front-line workers' services.

Here's the bottom line, Speaker: We need a diverse energy mix of the lowest-cost power. That's exactly why the Ontario Greens have supported the rebuilding of Darlington and Bruce: because we know nuclear power is going to be an important part of Ontario's energy mix. We support water power. We've supported the rebuilding and refurbishment of Niagara Falls. We support the expansion to take advantage of the 5,000 megawatts of water power we have available in Ontario.

On top of that, we support what is the lowest-cost source of power: wind, solar and storage. This government says no to the lowest cost; we say yes to a diverse mix because that's how you have a reliable, affordable electricity system.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: You didn't talk about the government's acts to exempt all the PC Party, pretty much every PC member—talk about a gravy train—everybody who is a cabinet member, everybody who is a parliamentary assistant and their staff, from participating in any freedom-of-information request. How does that make you feel?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I appreciate my colleague's question. Yes, I'm very concerned about schedules 7 and 11 in this bill.

We know the \$8.3-billion greenbelt scandal was partly revealed due to freedom-of-information-act requests. We know that the \$2.5-billion Skills Development Fund scandal was partly exposed due to freedom-of-information requests. This is a basic part of honest government, of democracy, to know what the public servants, who are elected to work for us to serve us, are doing, the decisions they're making.

I call on this government: Remove schedule 7 and 11, and let's have honest government in Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

MPP Wayne Gates: It's always a pleasure to rise in the House.

I'm going to agree with you on the conservation authorities. It's absolutely disgusting, what they're doing down in Niagara and amalgamating us with Toronto. It makes absolutely no sense.

But I am going to disagree with you on giving the PCs credit for EV vehicles, because the reality was, it was the PCs that stopped the rebate for EV vehicles, took out all the charging stations and threw us way behind. It wasn't until the union, quite frankly—Unifor—bargained it in their collective agreements that we got the EVs back into Canada. So I'm going to disagree with giving any credit to the Conservatives on that one.

My question is, can you speak to what you're hearing from renters in your community about the lack of real rent control and affordability measures in this budget?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: Yes. I appreciate the member's question. I do want to be really clear: This government has utterly failed to generate demand for electric vehicles in Ontario by ripping up charging stations and getting rid of the rebates. If we're going to invest in supply, which we have done, we should invest in demand as well.

Renters are being crushed right now. It is so tough. There's no city in Ontario where a full-time, minimum-wage worker can afford an average monthly rent. The number of renovictions, AGI increases and other ways in which rents are being jacked up on people, pushing them out of their homes, especially seniors, is heartbreaking. It's downright dangerous when it comes to safety in our communities.

So I would say, let's protect renters and let's ensure people have a human right to housing.

1730

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further questions?

MPP Paul Vickers: My question is for the member from Guelph. You're a great advocate for saving farmland and making sure our land is used for actual production of food. But you continuously talk about wind, solar and storage. How do you feel how much pressure that will put on farmland, to use farmland up to try and generate the power from solar, wind and storage?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I really appreciate the member's question, and I appreciate your role as a farmer in Ontario.

We have lots of roofs. Have you ever been in the air above the GTA? Hundreds and hundreds of roofs to put on solar panels—it will actually make the roof last longer. It's so smart.

You want to talk about the threat to farmland? Let's talk about Highway 413: 2,000 acres of farmland are going to be paved over. I just met with a grain farmer. They farm 2,500 acres of land right next to where the 413 is going to be built. They're going to lose their family farm. They're going to be one of the one in nine family farms that are lost every week in Ontario because we're losing 319 acres of farmland each and every day in this province.

So let's have a conversation, and let's agree to work across party lines to pass my bill and the member from Haldimand–Norfolk's bill to protect farmland in Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further question?

MPP Jamie West: Thank you to my colleague from Guelph, on this budget. I'm trying to understand what part of the budget seems the most broken to you, because there are problems with post secondary, school, housing affordability. Where do they go the most wrong in this budget?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: You know, if you want to just highlight where they've gone the most off the rails, this budget does nothing for everyday people, low- and middle-income folks just struggling to get by. It does a lot for the wealthy and well-connected, giant corporations, especially those who are in Toronto.

So sometimes the government says, "Where's the money going to come from?" Well, hundreds of billions of dollars for a ridiculous tunnel under the 401; \$2.2 billion for the luxury mega spa; I don't know how many billions for this fantasy island for the convention centre; \$10 billion to \$12 billion for Highway 413—that's real money that could go to health care, could go to housing, could go to education, could go to making life affordable for everyday people.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further question?

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to my neighbour for his comments. I don't think it will surprise anybody that I have a slightly different take on the budget than he did. I also spent the last few months speaking with residents about their concerns. Not only that, but I also, as a member of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, went all over Ontario to listen to folks' feedback. What I heard was, I heard from families with children with autism looking for more supports. In this budget, we have nearly \$200 million more in supports for those families. I heard from small businesses looking for tax relief, and we have a 30% reduction in the corporate income tax for small businesses in this budget. I heard from people looking to buy a new home but were nervous because of the economic situation we find ourselves in. Now we have a rebate of the HST on all new homes. I heard from municipalities looking for more recreational space. We have \$300 million for recreational space.

So my question to the member: What do you approve of in this budget? We heard a lot of negative. What are the some of the positives?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I always appreciate questions from my neighbour in Wellington–Halton Hills. I will say that the small business tax cut is something I find positive in this budget, something Ontario Greens have been calling for.

Now, I wish the government would listen to small business owners who also would like to see an additional increase in the employer health tax exemption. It's at a million dollars in payroll now; they would like to see it go to \$1.5 million or \$2 million. I can tell you this as a small

business owner myself; I see some other small business owners here. You pay that whether you make a profit or not, and a lot of small businesses in Ontario don't make a ton of profit. So let's work together to support small businesses further by raising the employer health tax exemption.

The member talked about the HST cut on housing. I support that. That's something I've been advocating for. Then let's help make builders take advantage of this by having the member convince the Premier to say yes to legalizing mid-rises and multiplexes in Ontario, so those builders can quickly build homes that people can afford and even take more advantage of the HST rebate.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Further debate?

Mr. Dave Smith: It's getting late in the day. We've got 25 minutes before we adjourn for the day. It means I'll get my speech in, but I won't get all of the questions and answers in.

Interjections: Aww.

Mr. Dave Smith: I know. It's unfortunate.

I want to point something out because it is near the end of the day. You'll notice my glasses are on my eyes; they're not on my forehead. I've joked that people recognize me when my glasses are up here, but they don't when they're down here. So this is Clark Kent. This is Superman. This is Clark Kent.

But the reality is, it is late in the day, and my eyesight is very affected by my diabetes and my blood sugar levels. I can't see the members opposite without my glasses right now. And I think that when we get to the question-and-answer time, I'm probably going to want to put them up so that I don't see the members opposite for it.

Today what we're talking about is Ontario's budget. What does this mean? Now, there has been a lot of conversation about it so far. There has been a lot of debate, and there have been some interesting things that have been brought up. One of them in particular—I like to laugh about this, because we have the members of the opposition and the third party who have all stood up and said how terrible it is that the deficit is \$13 billion. I'm a fiscal Conservative; I want to make sure that we're using money as effectively as possible. I don't like the idea of debt. But then in their very next breath, they'll talk about, "We need to increase spending here. We need to increase spending over there. We need to increase spending here and there." In their increasing spending, we probably would be at \$100 billion as a deficit if we were to listen to what they have to say.

So I want to address the deficit spending on there. What we have been doing consistently is we have been investing in infrastructure in Ontario, and that is a long-term investment in the province. If I pull that back and I talk about it in terms of what the average person would do—we all recognize that when you're renting, that's not really an investment in yourself. But when you purchase a home, it is.

I don't have empirical numbers to show this, but I would hazard to guess that better than 95% of the people

in Ontario do not have enough money in their back pocket to go out and buy a home with cash. They borrow for a mortgage because that is an investment. It is an infrastructure investment, and it is part of their long-term strategy, and it will benefit their family owning a home.

It is the same thing when we take a look at it from the perspective of the government. We know that there is an infrastructure deficit when it comes to things like water and waste water. We know that. We know that municipalities struggle with coming up with enough money to put that infrastructure in the ground. So what does the Ontario government do? They invest in that. They invest in the future for all of the people of Ontario.

We have an investment in public transit. We know that subways in Toronto are a very effective way of mass transportation, and we have embarked on the biggest expansion of subways, not just in Ontario's history, but in Canada's history. That is an investment in the future. That is an asset that will pay for itself over 50, 70 years. When you look at the subway that we have in Toronto, it was built in the 1950s. We're talking about 70 years ago, and it is still functioning today. That is a long-term investment that pays off. When we stop doing those kinds of investments, we actually stifle the economy.

Now, for those of you who don't know—and I don't want to sound like I'm bragging; please don't take it this way—I'm currently working on a PhD. My PhD is in corporate income tax and how it affects the jurisdictional GDP and the economy. We know that when you're investing in the economy, when you're investing in that infrastructure, you're also creating jobs. We know that the more jobs that are created, the more people that are out there working. And the more people that are out there working, the more money that they have.

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We will receive some income tax from that, but more importantly, the more people who are working—the more people who have that disposable income—the more consumer products that they're purchasing; the more services that they're purchasing. And that means our small businesses are succeeding, and our small businesses are growing and our manufacturing is growing. And all of that leads to the next part of it, which helps the economy. And we know that if we don't have a strong economy, then we don't have the revenues to do the other things—the social safety network that we need.

So the opposition has been talking about not spending enough in this area and not spending enough in that area, but I want to point out our health care budget in 2018 was \$61 billion. This year it will be more than \$100 billion. That's a \$40-billion increase over the course of eight years. That is significantly more than what the cost of living is. And the reason that we're doing that is the people of Ontario expect that they will have high-quality health care. And Ontario right now is leading all provinces and territories in health care. We have more primary care in Ontario than every other province or territory. We have more people attached to primary care than every other province and territory in Canada.

But that's not good enough, and that's why we're continuing to invest in it. That's why we have the \$1.1 billion that's going to home care and community care. Now, why would we do that? Well, I'm going to take a step back a little bit. The reason I'm going to take a step back is we're in the process of building 30,000 new long-term-care beds. We're also adding an additional 28,000 redeveloped beds—so it's 58,000 new long-term-care beds.

We heard loud and clear from people that there wasn't enough long-term care available for our seniors, for those who are ready to go to that. But we also heard all throughout SCOFEA, when we were travelling across Ontario—we heard loud and clear that there are people there who need a little bit of support. They don't want to go into long-term care. They want to stay in their home as long as possible. They want to still have that independence. They want to remain in the home that they raised their family in. And they should. If that is the choice that you want to make, we should be supporting you. And that's why we're investing \$1.1 billion in home care and community care, so that we can have more of that support; so more of those families—more of those individuals who helped build this province who need a little bit more support, they're not ready to go to long-term care; they want to stay in their home. They will continue to have that opportunity.

And all of that comes back to the economy. Because if the economy is not doing well—if we do not have those revenue streams—then we don't have the ability to do that. And that's why we're supporting businesses. We know that small businesses are the heartbeat of every community.

I've said it before here and I will stand by it: Every single youth sports team is sponsored. And when you look at the back of the jersey, you don't see Amazon; you definitely don't see Temu; you don't see Wayfair. You see: Windsor's Dry Cleaning; you see Bob's Electrical; you see the local pizzeria; you see PreeTel Communication. You see all of those small businesses in our community, who are investing back into the community.

That's why we've decided to do a cut to the small business tax rate, bringing it from 3.2% down to 2.2%. And the reason we're doing that is we recognize that all of those entrepreneurs—those are the ones who are employing your neighbours; those are the ones who are investing back into your community. You know that that dollar that you're spending at that local small business is the dollar that's going back into your daughter's or your granddaughter's soccer team. You know that that dollar is what's going back into the charities in your own communities and they're supporting everyone else in your community. So when you're putting that money back into those small businesses, you're actually supporting your community.

From my perspective as the parliamentary assistant to the Ministry of Finance, in our budget, we have a line for retail sales tax. I don't differentiate between where that sales tax comes from. I don't look at it and say, "Oh, it came from a large corporation in Toronto," or "That sales

tax came from a large corporation in Ottawa.” We don’t differentiate that; we simply look at the retail sales tax. So when you’re reinvesting in those small mom-and-pop shops in your community, that turns out to be the same dollar for me.

I’m going to put the request out to everyone right now on that. When you decide that you want to make that purchase, put your cellphone down for a minute and pause. Please consider that small business in your community and give them the support, because they’re the ones who are supporting you. They’re the ones who are supporting your community. They’re the ones who are supporting your families. I think it’s really important that we do that. That’s why we believe it was important for us to reinvest back into those entrepreneurs by reducing the tax burden on those small businesses.

It’s interesting as well because when we were in the SCOFEA consultations—I want to bring this one up in particular, and I will touch on something from the research on my PhD on it—one of the things that we heard was actually from Fred Hahn from CUPE, who said Ontario was “leaving money on the table” by not increasing corporate income tax on that, and he felt that we should be increasing corporate income tax.

It’s interesting because, during the research I have been doing on my PhD, one of the theories is that corporations actually don’t pay income tax. They pass that on as an input expense and it’s actually the consumer who pays for it, or the corporation uses other tools that they have to reduce their other input costs, primarily wages.

The reason I bring that up is, there’s a study from the European Union from 2008 to 2022 about this. What they showed was, in the 27 jurisdictions in the European Union where corporate income taxes were higher, wages were lower. When you think about that, if you’re reducing the wages and you’re increasing the consumer costs, you’re actually reducing the ability for taxation dollars to come in because the consumer has less money to spend because they’re not making as much, and the product costs them more, so they’re not buying as much.

It was interesting to hear a labour leader stand up and say that we should be implementing something that suppresses labour wages—very interesting to see that in that consultation.

We are continuing with our investment on infrastructure. I want to touch on a couple of other things on this in particular. The Bradford Bypass, the 413—those two things—I know the opposition and the third party have spoken against them, but look at what those are going to be doing for our province. Obviously, we have all the labour involved in it, the construction side of it itself. But more importantly, what it does is it opens up those transportation networks. Because if you can’t get the product from one place to another, you can’t sell that product. If you can’t get consumers from one location to another, you can’t sell that product.

Going back to the small businesses: Think about the soccer mom, the hockey dad, the softball team trying to

get to an event, but they can’t because they’re caught in traffic someplace. Mom and dad can’t get home from work because they’re caught in traffic. All of these things make a difference to us. By building the Bradford Bypass, by investing in the 413—these are things that will make a difference.

There’s also been some negative talk about Billy Bishop airport. Let’s look at that as well. What is Billy Bishop airport? It is a transportation network. It is a way for people to go from Toronto to someplace else, but it’s also a way for people to come into Toronto.

What happens when you have more tourists coming into a jurisdiction? They’re going out and they are supporting those small businesses in that area. They are spending money in that area. Making it easier for people to get into Toronto, making it easier for people to go to other jurisdictions in the province of Ontario by using that network at Billy Bishop airport—it’s something that’s going to be good for us.

We know Pearson international right now is very crowded. We know that there are delays because of the amount of traffic that there is. This will open up some of that. It’ll make it that much easier for people to move around this province. And you can use public transit to get there, so we’re reducing the number of cars that are on the road as a result of that.

1750

I’m going to touch on a couple of other things in this budget as well. One of them in particular is the community sport and recreation fund—\$300 million that we’re allocating to that. Why? Because we know that in those smaller communities, the community centre is the heartbeat of that community.

We know that there are a large number of smaller communities all across Ontario, whether it’s in rural Ontario or northern Ontario or even in the remote parts of Ontario, and we know that many of them have community centres that were built with Wintario money in the 1960s and the 1970s. They’ve reached their natural end of life, but this fund allows them to revitalize that. This fund allows them to put money back into it.

I’ll touch on two in particular from my area. On our last budget, we had the ice plant at Douro-Dummer and the ice plant in Ennismore replaced. Both of those facilities were built in the 1980s. When you built something in the 1970s or the 1980s, you didn’t build it to what the standard is today or what we need today.

In both of those cases, yes, they’re replacing the ice plant, yes, they’re putting new floors in, but they’re also renovating it so that we’ll actually have girls’ change rooms, because when they were built, girls and women were not playing what was considered a boys’ sport. Now they are. The fastest-growing hockey association in Ontario is the Ontario Women’s Hockey Association, the OWHA, because more girls are getting involved.

This fund is there so that those communities can continue to have that heartbeat of their community operating; to extend the life of it so we can have a couple

more generations of kids who get to experience that so that those communities can come together. Whenever there's something good that happens in a small community, it happens at the community centre. That's why it's called a community centre.

Further to the investments that we're looking at, how do we make things more affordable for people? What can we do through this budget to help the people of Ontario? We know that there is a housing crisis. We know that there are challenges in getting housing built. We know that housing has become very expensive. By removing the HST on all new builds, this is a massive savings.

The average home price in the city of Peterborough last month was about \$650,000. The average home price in the county of Peterborough was just a shade over \$700,000. We're talking about \$70,000 to \$80,000 in a reduction in price for a new home in Peterborough. That's the difference between qualifying for a mortgage or not for a lot of people. It makes a massive difference. It takes the strain off.

If you're a senior and you're living in that three-bedroom or four-bedroom home that you raised your family in and you need to downsize or you want to downsize, now you can move to a new build that suits your needs—have it built directly the way you need it, to have all of the supports for you, and do it at a price point that you can actually afford.

One of the last things that I do want to talk about also is the investment in health care. We have two in particular: \$1.1 billion for home care and community care and the support that will allow, but we also have a \$1.1-billion investment in the hospitals.

Primarily, one of the things that will be done with that money is hospital-to-home care. Now, what does that program do? When you're released from the hospital, you're healthy enough that you no longer need those supports and you're ready to go back home. But we want to make sure that things don't turn, that you don't get a little bit sicker and find yourself back in the emergency room. The hospital-to-home program does just that. It does that follow-up to ensure that you don't end up with a secondary infection, that you don't end up finding yourself in a position a week or 10 days later of having to go back into an emergency department because of a procedure that you had done.

This investment is an investment not just in the hospital itself—because yes, it will reduce the number of people who are going back in for care for those individuals. It will make a positive difference for them because they will have better results as a result of that.

Mr. Speaker, as we go through this budget process, as we have our discussion, I truly hope that the members of the third party and the opposition will see fit to vote in favour of it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): It's time for oral questions.

MPP Jamie West: Thank you to my friend from Peterborough–Kawartha. He started his debate by talking

about how we have said several times how terrible it is that the deficit is \$13 billion. Technically, it's \$13.8 billion, so almost \$14 billion.

The concern we have with the deficit is the decisions that are being made. When you talk about not having a lot of money and the Premier says, "I want to build a Ferris wheel and a luxury spa, and I want to build a secret island and a secret tunnel, and I want jets to land," maybe you don't have the money for that. Maybe when people are trying to figure out how to put food on the table and a roof over their heads, the luxury spa, the secret island and secret tunnel aren't as urgent as all of that. I feel like that's the part you're missing. When we talk about choices, the choices that the Premier is making in this budget are completely irresponsible—not all of them, but the high-ticket items don't match the moment of the time.

That is my question. How do you balance that?

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks to the member opposite for the question, because, really, this does differentiate between those who understand how business works and those who don't understand how business works. When you make an investment into something that generates more revenue, you have more revenue as a result of it. That's the revenue that you then use to do all of the other things that you need to do.

One of the shortfalls of this province over the last generation and a half has been that lack of investment back into the province to do things that generate more revenue for the province. When you have more revenue for the province, then you can do those things like investing in hospitals, investing in home care and community care. Where did that come from? A \$51-billion increase in revenue for the province over the time that we have been in power. That's because we've been investing in things that generate more revenue for the province.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Time for another question.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you to the member opposite from Peterborough–Kawartha for the budget breakdown.

About the small business tax cut—look, in my riding, I've heard over and over again about students having a real problem getting employment. I see the benefit of the tax cut for the small biz.

Is it too little, too late for the students? Last summer: no jobs. They were being told by the youth employment centres in my riding, "Listen, go volunteer, because there are no jobs right now." We know 200,000 young people are out of work right now. It's a tough, tough time.

Could there be more done more quickly to help those students who just can't even get a summer job to have that hope of that investment in that home in the future etc.?

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you to the member opposite for the question because there is hope in there.

One of the things that we're investing in is through the SBECs, small business economic centres. Starter Company Plus and Summer Company: These are opportunities for students—for young entrepreneurs—to start a business

for themselves and receive supports from the province of Ontario through the SBECs to make that happen, because we know that when you have that entrepreneurial spirit and you put your mind to it, if you have the supports behind you, you will be successful.

That's what we're teaching our youth today: Come forward on that, take that investment from us, build your

own business, learn how to be an entrepreneur and learn how to be very successful as you move through your life.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Deepak Anand): Ladies and gentlemen, it is 6 p.m. The House is now adjourned until 9 a.m. on Tuesday, March 31, 2026.

The House adjourned at 1800.

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Kernaghan, Terence (NDP)	London North Centre / London- Centre-Nord	
Kerzner, Hon. / L'hon. Michael S. (PC)	York Centre / York-Centre	Solicitor General / Solliciteur général
Khanjin, Hon. / L'hon. Andrea (PC)	Barrie—Innisfil	Minister of Red Tape Reduction / Ministre de la Réduction des formalités administratives
Kusendova-Bashta, Hon. / L'hon. Natalia (PC)	Mississauga Centre / Mississauga- Centre	Minister of Long-Term Care / Ministre des Soins de longue durée
Leardi, Anthony (PC)	Essex	Deputy Government House Leader / Leader parlementaire adjoint du gouvernement
Lecce, Hon. / L'hon. Stephen (PC)	King—Vaughan	Minister of Energy and Mines / Ministre de l'Énergie et des Mines
Lennox, Robin (NDP)	Hamilton Centre / Hamilton-Centre	
Lumsden, Hon. / L'hon. Neil (PC)	Hamilton East—Stoney Creek / Hamilton-Est—Stoney Creek	Minister of Sport / Ministre du Sport
Mamakwa, Sol (NDP)	Kiiwetinoong	Deputy Leader, Official Opposition / Chef adjoint de l'opposition officielle
McCarthy, Hon. / L'hon. Todd J. (PC)	Durham	Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks / Ministre de l'Environnement, de la Protection de la nature et des Parcs
McCrimmon, Karen (LIB)	Kanata—Carleton	
McGregor, Hon. / L'hon. Graham (PC)	Brampton North / Brampton-Nord	Minister of Citizenship and Multiculturalism / Ministre des Affaires civiques et du Multiculturalisme
McKenney, Catherine (NDP)	Ottawa Centre / Ottawa-Centre	
McMahon, Mary-Margaret (LIB)	Beaches—East York	

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
Mulroney, Hon. / L'hon. Caroline (PC)	York—Simcoe	President of the Treasury Board / Présidente du Conseil du Trésor Minister of Francophone Affairs / Ministre des Affaires francophones
Oosterhoff, Hon. / L'hon. Sam (PC)	Niagara West / Niagara-Ouest	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 (IND)	Sault Ste. Marie	
Scott, Hon. / L'hon. 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
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

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
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	
Vacant	Scarborough Southwest / Scarborough- Sud-Ouest	