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31 mars 2026

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Tuesday 31 March 2026

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Mardi 31 mars 2026

The House met at 0900.

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

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)

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): Questions?

Mr. Matthew Rae: Good morning, everyone. My question is to the minister from Peterborough–Kawartha.

Interjection.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Maybe I'll give you a promotion this morning.

Basically, he talked at length about the importance of the small business tax cut. I was wondering if the member could elaborate on some of the additional cost-saving measures our government has brought in with this budget and previous budgets, building upon the affordability we're providing Ontarians.

Mr. Dave Smith: What an excellent question. It gives an opportunity to talk about some of the great work that we've already accomplished here in Ontario.

What we are trying to do is ensure that people have more money in their pocket to decide how they want to use that. It really comes down to this: Does the government know more about how you should spend your money or do you know more about how you should use your money?

What we have done is a ton of measures to put money back into your pocket. We reversed the poor decision on tolls on the 412 and the 418, giving money back to people, and on things like One Fare, saving commuters more than \$1,600 a year travelling back and forth between different communities into Toronto, making sure that if you get on the GO train and then leave the GO train for the Toronto

subway, you're not paying multiple fares. These are all things that are putting money back into people's pockets.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further questions?

Mr. Chris Glover: The member opposite just talked about people know how to use their money themselves. This is often used as a code by the right wing because they want to get rid of public education, they want to get rid of public health care. So you'll be able to go to get the medical services that you can afford. You can go be able to get the education for your children that you can afford. But we're not going to actually have a public education or public health care system. And we see this government eroding our public schools: \$6.5 billion cut from an already strapped system since this government got into power.

So, my question to the member is, when you talk about people know how to use their money, are you talking about privatizing our public education and our public health care systems?

Mr. Dave Smith: This is the difference between NDP math and Progressive Conservative math. In 2018, the education budget was \$28 billion. This year it will be over \$40 billion. But according to that member, it is a \$6-billion cut. Add \$12 billion plus to the budget, but that's a cut to them.

Our health care system: \$61 billion in 2018, \$101 billion this year—a \$40-billion increase. But according to the member opposite, adding \$40 billion is a cut.

The people of Ontario have the ability to read the budget. Perhaps the NDP should pick the budget up and read it as well.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further questions?

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you to my good colleague from Peterborough for that presentation.

The dream of home ownership is well and alive—the announcement of the initiative by Premier Ford, Minister Flack and Minister Bethlenfalvy through this budget. We achieve, by removing the full 13% HST on newly built homes in Markham—I know Markham residents can get a house, a townhome for under \$1 million. They're saving over \$100,000. It's almost like a 15% down payment.

Can the member please tell us the message this government has put into place to provide so much needed relief to Ontarians through this 2026 budget, especially removing the HST?

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you to the member for that question; it's an excellent question. Let's take a look at the

math on it. I know math is sometimes hard for the NDP; they just showed that in the last question that they asked.

If we take a million-dollar home and remove \$130,000 from it, that brings it down to \$870,000. What does that do? It changes your monthly mortgage payment from about \$4,400 to about \$3,600. If you take an \$800,000 house and you remove the HST from that, now you're down into just a shade under \$700,000 for it. What does that do? It brings your mortgage payment down to about \$2,200 a month.

It is real affordability issues for people. It means that first-time homebuyer, that young couple with two incomes, will qualify for the mortgage and will be able to carry the mortgage. It means that that senior who wants to downsize from a three bedroom or a four bedroom to a two bedroom has money left over after their sell their house and purchase a new one.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): A quick question.

Mr. John Vanthof: I often disagree with the member on the other side, and I don't think there is such a thing as NDP math or Progressive Conservative math or, quite frankly, Liberal math—he gets really excited about it, but math is math.

If you look at the education system, if there is less money per student, that actually means a cut per student. Would the member agree that if there's less money in the system per student and the number of students rises, the math says that is a cut for the education system?

Mr. Dave Smith: I'm going to turn that back to the member opposite and say that when we have less students next year than we had last year and the Grants for Student Needs increases per student, is that not an increase in it? The fact of the reality is, there is more money in the Grants for Student Needs this year per student than there was previously.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

M. Guy Bourgouin: C'est toujours un plaisir de me lever pour les gens de mon comté, mais surtout je veux parler des usines de sciage aussi, puis des routes, puis les feux de forêt qu'on a subis.

This government says this is a budget for uncertainty. The minister told this House that the world has changed—that we face global trade tension, supply chain disruption and shifting markets. He's right: The world has changed. But this budget did not change with it.

At a record of \$244 billion, this budget has every opportunity to make strategic investments to stabilize our economy, protect jobs and build long-term security for northern Ontario. Instead, this budget ignores what communities, municipalities, chambers of commerce, hospitals and industry asked for in their pre-budget submissions. Stakeholders came forward with practical recommendations, and this government ignored them—as usual.

Nowhere is that more clear than in forestry and northern highways. The Ontario forestry sector is facing one of the most difficult moments in decades. Forestry workers are dealing with a 45% tariff on lumber and there is no future trade agreement on the horizon. Workers, industry and communities need certainty, but there is no certainty in this budget.

For years, this government has underinvested in forestry. Instead of making the investments needed to keep mills operating and keep people working in the field that they have worked in for 10, 20, 30 years, this budget offers a \$500,000 unemployment support centre for one sawmill in Ear Falls.

0910

Workers do not want unemployment programs; workers want jobs. The government's answer is not to protect employment in forestry. It is to help forestry workers leave the sector entirely. This is not a forestry strategy. It is not any strategy.

And this program does not even reflect reality on the ground. At the Ear Falls sawmill, many workers are employed under closed work permits. They are tied to their employer. They cannot simply move into another job in another sector. So this announcement doesn't help them or their community. It shows that this government does not understand the workers it claims to support.

At the same time, it is not just Ear Falls but Gogama, Terrace Bay and Kap Paper. Unifor Local 89 appeared before the government's own pre-budget consultations in January. They warned that the combination of a softwood lumber dispute and new tariffs was creating record job losses across the Ontario forest sector. They told this government that when one mill closes, it does not just affect one workplace; it causes a spinoff of job losses in the entire community, from trucking to the local business to downstream manufacturing. Unifor called for a real industrial strategy for forestry, a plan that coordinates government, industry and labour—sorry, Speaker; I will split my time with the member for Niagara—to keep people working and keep mills operating. They called for support to transform the sector, not abandoning it.

Perhaps the clearest example of this government failing to understand forestry is biomass. Anyone who knows anything about forestry knows that biomass revenue is essential for modern lumber manufacturing. Biomass supports mills. It supports jobs. It supports clean, affordable energy. And it supports Ontario's long-term economic competitiveness. The Ontario Forest Industries Association has been very clear: There is room for growth. Biomass is not a side issue. It supports the entire economy that manufactures the wood used to build homes and hospitals. It can provide combined heat and power.

As our NATO allies increasingly invest in biomass as a clear, renewable and affordable source of energy, Ontario should be leading. Two thirds of this province is a forest, and we are not even harvesting 50% of our sustainable cut. Instead, this budget contains no commitment to fund the Forest Biomass Action Plan beyond 2027.

This is not just my concern; the Ontario Forest Industries Association told this government exactly what it needs. OFIA called on this government to provide long-term bilateral power purchase agreements for biomass facilities so mills and communities would have certainty and could attract investment. They warned that without long-term agreements, biomass facilities cannot survive, and without biomass revenue, mills cannot stay open.

OFIA also called for the expanded funding for the Forest Biomass Action Plan, because biomass is not just an energy issue—it is a forestry issue, a manufacturing issue and a community issue. If there is no long-term funding, then there is no expansion and there is no certainty.

Think about this: There is a mill in Chapleau that has wood chips. The government did not mention in their budget that the wood chip program will continue. Chapleau has to bring their chips being trucked all the way to Trois-Rivières, Quebec, because there is nowhere left to process them in Ontario. Think about this: Ontario communities produce the fibre, Ontario workers are doing the work, but because this government has failed to support local processing, the economic benefits are leaving the province.

Ontario should be in a position of strength. Ontario is a forest province. Because of the Crown Forest Sustainability Act, Ontario has stable and sustainable harvesting. While other jurisdictions are clear-cutting and over-harvesting, Ontario has protected a long-term future for our forests. In a world where, increasingly, irresponsible harvesting has depleted supply in other countries, Ontario has a competitive advantage.

The government also claims that this budget supports home construction. The Associate Minister of Forestry celebrated the removal of the HST on homes under \$1 million. But seriously, that is the government's plan to support the lumber sector? Where is the plan for actually building the homes? The government promised 1.5 million homes, but the budget itself shows that Ontario is falling further behind. In fact, we're the worst in Canada.

Wildfires: I'll just say a couple of words on wildfires. We haven't seen the investment. In fact, the government cut \$121 million in their major firefighting funding, yet other provinces are investing, realizing that fires are getting more and more critical. We saw that last year in Ontario, but yet Ontario, in its wisdom, is cutting \$121 million from the budget.

Let's talk about roads. I've just got a couple of minutes to talk about roads—time flies. Time and time again, we've seen road closures. In 2024, Highway 11 closed 364 times and Highway 17 closed 886 times. I asked the minister: How many times did it close in 2025? Either he didn't have the answer or he was ashamed of the answer, because we know the road closures are even worse in 2025. Northern MPPs on your side know that. I asked how many people died in this year alone. He knows the number, but he doesn't want to share it because he's ashamed, and you should be. Just in February this year, we were up to 10 people who died on Highways 11 and 17—shame. That's the reality we live in northern Ontario.

In conclusion, Speaker, this budget had a choice. It could have listened to workers, municipalities, hospitals and industry. It could have invested in forestry, biomass, wildfire protection and safer highways. It could have built certainty in uncertain times. Instead, this government ignored the people who know northern Ontario best, and northern Ontario will pay the price.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I recognize the member from Niagara Falls.

MPP Wayne Gates: Thank you very much for allowing me to say a few words this morning. The budget last week was tabled on Thursday. What happened in the province of Ontario after the budget was done is very unique. It hasn't happened, quite frankly, Speaker, since the Rae days—or, sorry, the Harris days and the Rae days.

But here's what happened from everyone—and everybody on that side had better listen. I know you're playing on your phones and doing what you do; I understand that, but this is important. For the first time in eight years, you had rallies in communities you represent, almost every one of you. And from that, there were tens of thousands of people there, and what's interesting is, they've organized another rally on April 26. Why is that? Because your one member from Peterborough, to a question from—I'm not sure of his riding—a question was asked, and he said, "You know, people want to spend their money. We're giving them more money. They can spend it where they want. They can go and spend it where they want."

You're not listening out there. Do you know where people are going after they work 40 hours a week? Do you know where they're going? Food banks. That's where they're going. They're going to food banks in my community, and I'm sure they're going to food banks in your community. So when you talk about a budget, you want to make sure that you're taking care of all Ontarians. And if you were, you wouldn't be having rallies in almost every community in the province of Ontario.

They had one in St. Catharines, just down from Niagara Falls—not far, 10, 12 miles. Most of you guys have been there. I know you've all been to Niagara Falls about 47 times. So I know you guys know where Niagara Falls is, but it was in Niagara. Thousands of people were there. And what are they upset about? They're upset about affordability. And I understand that. I don't know about you guys, but I've got three daughters. I've got five grandkids. They're struggling. They're struggling to pay their rent. Quite frankly, they're struggling to find a place to rent because rents are so high in the province of Ontario. And how did that happen? It happened because in 2019 the Conservative government brought in that they took all the rent controls off new builds. What that did is it drove the rents through the roof.

0920

As my kids—I'm sure your kids are looking for a place to rent to start out—you know what it costs them in Niagara? It's \$2,200 to \$2,500 a month. How can you pay your rent when you're working a minimum wage job? We have a lot of tourist jobs in Niagara where they pay minimum wage, they pay a little more than minimum wage. Some of the tourist jobs pay a lot more, but the entry level ones, how do they afford to rent? So they work 40 hours a week—and I'm not agreeing with the member from Peterborough—they're going to food banks because they've got to feed their kids.

And it's not just my kids. It's not just my grandkids. My grandkids are going to school, going to college, and you cut down on the grants to college. You know who the first call I got was from when that came out when you guys

decided that OSAP—when you attacked young people, our future? You know who the first call I got was from? My granddaughter Priscilla, who's going to university. She says, "What are they doing? Why are they doing this? I won't be able to continue my school because I won't be able to get a loan." Do you know what I had to tell her? "Don't vote Conservative." What am I going to say?

My granddaughter deserves an education—she's smart, she gets 90%, 95%—but this government took that away from her—not just her. They took it away from other kids. It makes no sense to me. I wish you guys would look up and listen, honest to God. It makes no sense to me because your kids are going to go through the same thing. Some of you are maybe a little younger than me, maybe you don't have kids who are going to university, maybe you don't have grandkids yet. That just shows I'm a little older than most of you guys. I've been around a while. They're going to need that hand up to go to university or to college.

In Niagara, we have Niagara College. You know that school—if it wasn't for Niagara College, we wouldn't have a tourist sector in Niagara. That's where they get all their workers from. They graduate. They go work in the wine industry. They go work in the tourist sector. They become winemakers. They open up small businesses. That's what happens from Niagara College and Brock University. You attacked those young people. It makes no sense to me.

The affordability in this province: I would challenge anybody—anybody on that side, anybody on this side—eight years ago, when you came into office, I was already here for four years. It's my fifth term here. I've been here for a while, though I have no grey hair. I know you guys are all surprised at that, but I don't have any grey hair.

Hon. Steve Clark: I'm not going to say something you can use against me.

MPP Wayne Gates: Somebody who has no hair shouldn't say anything. That's just my thought on that one, I'm sorry.

There wasn't an encampment in the province of Ontario—not one—when you guys came into office. I don't know how hard it must be to live in an encampment when you have family because you can't afford rent. You can't afford to buy your groceries anymore in the province of Ontario. And nobody can argue with me. Even eight years ago, you'd go get groceries and you'd get two bags at the grocery store. Today, it's one bag, if you're lucky.

The affordability—I already talked on the rents. Hydro bills are going up. We know that. We know you're subsidizing hydro bills. I just had a manufacturer come and see me last week saying that they're struggling to pay their hydro bill now in the province of Ontario—300 employees. Affordability is a real challenge.

It's tough for me to do only 10 minutes.

Health care: I can't stand up here and talk about the budget without talking about health care. In Niagara, we're in a crisis in health care. I'm sure it's like that right across the province. I think one of my colleagues talked about, "What are budgets about? They're about choices." I'm not going to deny that the Progressive Conservatives

are investing record numbers in health care. But you know what the problem is? You know where that money's going? It's not going to a publicly funded, publicly delivered system; it's going to a private system because they want to take all the money out of the public system and give it to their buddies in the private system.

The day that they announced layoffs, you think about this, in the health care sector, where they're having cuts in the health care sector in Niagara—in our hospitals in Niagara, which right now are short-staffed. Our wait times in our ERs are through the roof. Hallway medicine is worse than ever. The very day that they said they're cutting a hundred people out of the health care system in Niagara, do you know what was announced, Speaker? I know you're interested in this, because you're looking right at me and I'm glad you are. This government gave \$150 million to a private surgery clinic—a private surgery clinic, as we're laying off people in our publicly funded, publicly delivered system. Do you know what that means? That means that we're moving down in the same way as the Americans do. They don't have a publicly funded, publicly delivered system there.

Do you know what the number one reason is for bankruptcies in the United States? Does anybody know? Yell it out.

Interjections.

MPP Wayne Gates: What is it?

Interjections.

MPP Wayne Gates: I don't hear any of you guys yelling it out. It's health care. Because when you've got to pay for your health care, it's got to come from your wallet or a credit card. It's the number one reason.

Why would we—again, priorities—

Interjection.

MPP Wayne Gates: It is in the budget. It's right in the budget. Health care is in the budget, just like education is in the budget. Just like when you attack schools, colleges and universities, it's in the budget.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Through the Speaker, please.

MPP Wayne Gates: I was up all night last night doing this one page for the speech. I know what's in the budget.

What I'm saying, you cannot continue to say that you're investing in health care, and you're stealing it from the public system. It makes no sense. You've got to invest in our publicly funded system.

In my area, I've got Fort Erie—driving me nuts; I'm glad you guys are all coming to Niagara, because, you know what, everybody's coming to Niagara. Everybody has found out Niagara is a great place to live. It's a great place to raise your kids. And what do we do? We're shutting down our urgent care centres in Port Colborne and Fort Erie.

In Fort Erie, we used to have an urgent care centre that was 24 hours, seven days a week. This government decided, "No, we're going to stop that." So what they did is, they cut the urgent care centre down to 10 hours a day, seven days a week, and shut it down sometimes on weekends. You know, Fort Erie has got 40,000 people that now live

in Fort Erie—because you're coming to Niagara, and that's a good thing. And then in the winter, you end up shutting down.

He talked about highways in the north. You don't have to go up north to have bad highways. I hate to break it to my member from the north. We have terrible storms here. As a matter of fact, when they did their tour, we had the biggest storm we had in years here, just in Toronto. I remember you were doing that thing.

Fort Erie needs their urgent care centre open 24/7—seven days a week. We need to take the pressure off our ERs, because the ERs are 10- to 12- to 14-hour waits to get in. And then when you get in, it's all hallway medicine.

The way to invest is you invest in the urgent care centre in Fort Erie. That takes the pressure off our hospitals in Niagara Falls and in St. Catharines—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Questions, please?

Mr. Lorne Coe: My question is for the member from Mushkegowuk—James Bay—interesting presentation, particularly when taken in contrast to the work we've done on critical minerals and the Ring of Fire. You will know, Speaker, that we're accelerating approvals, advancing mine development and moving forward on infrastructure like the roads to the Ring of Fire. We're doing that in collaboration with First Nations.

After decades of delay under the previous Liberal government supported by the NDP, this budget takes real steps to unleash the potential and bring prosperity to the north.

So through you, Speaker, will the member opposite support this budget and responsible critical mineral development, or will he once again vote no and keep northern Ontario and his riding waiting?

Mr. Guy Bourgoïn: Thank you for the question.

I'll tell you what my constituents talk about: It's highways. How many people died? I lost three constituents between Hearst and Longlac in the new year. While we were doing the road tour, guess what, sir? We lost another constituent close to Smooth Rock Falls. So you want to know what my constituents feel? They're disgusted. They're tired of not being listened to. Their families are dying on our roads. They're afraid of driving on Highways 11 and 17, sir. Wake up and smell the coffee. In 2026, people are dying on Highway 11, when we have the technology, we have the people that can do better. We ran out of salt in the middle of the winter. How do you explain that, in the winter that we've had? Unacceptable—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further questions?

0930

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I have a question for the member from Mushkegowuk—James Bay. Again, it was on roads, because I followed the tour you did with some of your colleagues up on the roads up north. I was just wondering: What should be in this budget for roads, for road safety in the northern part of Ontario?

Mr. Guy Bourgoïn: What should be in the budget? Anything that would help keep our roads safe. I tabled Bill 49. We debated it, keeping our scales open a minimum 12

hours. We said to bring back the licensing of truckers to the MTO because we know the fraudulent—what's happening in the trucking industry. We know that the government knows that.

And also, bring back to the MTO for northern highways the managing of winter maintenance. That has to be brought back to the ministry, because we're seeing too many times contractors talking to a subcontractor, with plow drivers telling us: "Beware, our hands are tied, because the general contractor said that we can't do this, we can't do that." So that has to change. And more investments on our highway to keep them safe.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further questions?

MPP Lisa Gretzky: It's interesting that the government side is dismissive of the fact of the conditions of northern roads, but also the number of people that are dying. I think that tells you all you need to know about this government, that they would be dismissive of something like that.

When my colleague from Niagara Falls was talking about health care in his community and the closures and the layoffs that are happening, and how that deeply impacts his community and the health care they receive, the member from Brantford—Brant yells over, "Not listening," which also tells you everything you need to know about this government. It's clearly reflected in the budget that this government is not listening.

We're seeing this government paying for a luxury spa in downtown Toronto, buying up the waterfront with their fantasy island project, their fetish with the Toronto waterfront. Meanwhile, my colleague is talking about health care closures in his community.

I'm wondering if the member from Niagara Falls can tell me where in this budget does it reflect the health care needs in his community when it comes to reopening urgent care in his community?

MPP Wayne Gates: I appreciate that. I started my speech, going back a ways, saying that it's about priorities, about what you think is important for the people of the province of Ontario. I do not think—and I may be wrong—that the majority of the people who live in the province of Ontario think it's a great idea to spend \$200 million on a spa and an underground garage, when we have health care—nurses, PSWs being laid off. That makes no sense to me.

You can't say you don't have the money for health care, you can't say you can't open up the urgent care centre 24/7 in Fort Erie if you're spending \$200 million—and the cost is going to be more than that for that entire project. Take that money and put it back into health care. Take that money, quite frankly, and put it back into our schools, where class sizes are through the roof.

There are lots of things we can do with the money that's in this budget. It's just being directed to the wrong place.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further questions?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: My question is for my wonderful critic sitting over there.

I'm wondering if he can tell us how much the health care budget was back in 2017 and how much is the health care budget today, because I think it's in triple digits today? We have increased health care spending a lot, but I wonder if he knows by how much exactly we've increased health care spending.

Also, can the member tell us how many more OHIP-insured Ontarians we have today versus how many we had back in 2018? I can tell you, because you probably don't know: We have 1.5 million more OHIP-insured Ontarians.

And so just a very simple question to the member: How much has the health care budget increased in the last eight years?

MPP Wayne Gates: I thank you for the question, because it falls into what I've been saying for the last 12 minutes. It's not about the money that you have put in health care, it's where you're putting the money in health care. If you're telling me that you're proud that you put more money in health care—as in Niagara, where we're laying off nurses, PSWs. They were announced Monday of this week, and we had some announced just a few weeks ago.

My point isn't how much money you're putting into health care, it's where you're putting it. What I'm saying is, and I think most of the people in Ontario are saying: Put it into a publicly funded, publicly delivered system so we don't have to lay off our nurses, we don't have to lay off our PSWs, who are also very, very important, as you know, in the long-term-care file.

It's not about the money; it's about where you're directing the money. When you direct the money to a private system instead of to a publicly funded, publicly delivered system, that means that people aren't getting the health care they need and it ends up hurting people in Fort Erie, who have their urgent care centre closed instead of running 24/7, seven days a week. They're running—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further questions?

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Moi, j'ai une question pour mon collègue du Nord.

Vous avez des enfants. Vous avez une petite fille. Qu'est-ce que vous voulez avoir dans ce budget qui n'est pas là pour leur futur? Parce que moi, je trouve que le futur pour les enfants, avec les coupes—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Through the Chair, please.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: —à OSAP et les coupes partout, c'est vraiment, vraiment difficile.

M. Guy Bourgouin: Merci pour la question en français.

Je suis très concerné pour ma petite fille, ma petite Livia, qui va avoir huit mois bientôt. Puis on voit qu'il y a des étudiants, comme c'est là, avec les coupures qu'on a eues dans l'OSAP, qui se disent : « Bien, où est-ce qu'on va aller? »

Puis il faut réaliser que, dans le Nord, ça nous coûte beaucoup plus cher. Parce qu'on est à distance, il faut voyager plus. Il faut se rendre, faut louer parce qu'on ne peut pas juste vivre—les étudiants qui vivent à Toronto, qui vivent dans les grands centres, ils demeurent à la

maison, fait que ce sont des coûts qu'ils n'ont pas besoin. Mais pour nous, les gens du Nord, les étudiants du Nord, ce sont des coûts additionnels aux familles. Ça veut dire qu'il y a beaucoup d'enfants qui ne sont pas capables d'aller aux études.

C'est très concernant quand on voit qu'on attaque la nouvelle génération. Puis cette nouvelle génération, c'est la génération qui va nous remplacer. Ce ne sont pas les minéraux critiques qui sont important. Ce n'est pas notre plus grande richesse. La plus grande richesse, c'est notre avenir, ce sont nos enfants. Puis ça, le gouvernement ne le comprend pas. Parce que couper dans l'avenir des étudiants futurs, ce n'est pas la bonne direction à aller.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): With only 15 seconds left, I'll move to further debate.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I'm pleased to rise today as the member for Etobicoke–Lakeshore to speak on Bill 97, An Act to implement Budget measures, to enact, amend or repeal various statutes and to revoke various regulations.

After eight long years, life in Ontario has gotten harder for families and this budget is not focused on them. This is a spend more, get less budget that fails to deliver in every way that matters to Ontarians. It demonstrates just how out of touch the Conservatives are with everyday people out in our province.

The people of Ontario are facing a growing affordability crisis—the cost of housing, food, fuel prices are up over 40% in the last month. But there's no acknowledgement of the precarity that people are feeling right now, and there are no measures that offer stability for the people of Ontario, at a time when the ground is shifting and no one knows what is next.

It is as if the Minister of Finance and the PC government are living in their own world, where tunnels under the 401 or a \$400-million parking lot at Ontario Place and a convention centre on Lake Ontario—pet projects that benefit few but are paid for by the rest of us—are priorities over the world that the rest of us live in, where measures that make life more affordable, and basic education and health services that only the province can provide, are ignored.

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As I've travelled across many of the corners of this province recently—Windsor and Sarnia, up north to Kapuskasing and Thunder Bay, Belleville, Kingston, Brockville, Ottawa—people are confused and frustrated. They need the province to provide the services that they are responsible for, to be a partner at the table. People are hearing “austerity” and “belt tightening” from the government and more than half of the ministries are seeing cuts. Meanwhile, the government's executive offices have grown by 243% since 2018 and hundreds of millions of dollars for government's propaganda, self-promotion advertising.

Issues important to people: We heard an impassioned plea to think about the roads in the north; access to health care and keeping emergency departments open; our kids' schools, where class sizes are ballooning. These issues matter to people every day. The cost of a dozen eggs has

gone up. We know it's gone up, and it continues to go up, and people are facing that every day. I had hoped we'd see a budget that would be in touch with the everyday needs of people.

Let's just talk about some of the ministry cuts that we have seen. Over 50% of ministries received cuts to their budget in this budget:

The agriculture, food and agribusiness budget—down \$92.8 million; less money for farmers at a time, again, when they probably need our support.

The Attorney General budget—down by \$118.9 million. How much discussion in this Legislature do we have about the backlog for trials, the courts, the need for more capacity? Our overburdened correction facilities—I know in the south detention centre in my riding, people are sleeping, I think, four to a cell now. The last update I gave this Legislature was three. But we're going to cut that budget right now. Rather than dealing with the issue head on, we're going to blame others for the issue they could solve.

There's \$33.5 million less for families in children, community and social services.

Colleges, universities, research excellence and security—down \$69.2 million. This one I find really fascinating, given the discussion of OSAP that we've been having in this Legislature. Now that we have the budget, we know exactly how this has been managed. We took over \$470 million out of the OSAP budget, we moved it across and we've given it to the universities—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I'm sorry to interrupt, but pursuant to standing order 50(c), I am now required to interrupt the proceedings and announce that there have been six and a half hours of debate on the motion for second reading of this bill. This debate will therefore be deemed adjourned unless the government House leader directs the debate to continue.

I recognize the Minister of Agriculture.

Hon. Trevor Jones: Please continue.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I return to the member from Etobicoke–Lakeshore.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you very much, and I appreciate the opportunity to continue to comment on this because I care a lot about what we're seeing in front of us right now as a province.

I was talking about OSAP and what we're seeing in the overall cut in the investments that we're making in Ontario colleges and universities. I think what's important in that decision is that we've actually put the financial burden on young people and their families, right now, at a time when life is just so unaffordable, at a time when unemployment for that demographic is the highest it's been since the 1970s. Now we're just going to actually add more financial burden to them.

Education: The education budget is down \$147.9 million. I don't know about you; I've got teenage kids. I have seen them come through the system. I've seen their class sizes grow with the transition to this government in 2018, and it's continued to grow—class sizes well over 30 now in high school to learn science, to learn all the issues that, actually, we sometimes hear from this government are

important. But why are we not valuing it in our young people at this critical moment?

There are not enough EAs for students with special needs or disabilities. Teachers are having to manage these large class sizes in infrastructure that is also crumbling.

The government just seems seized on actually just centralizing power. We're all waiting with bated breath to see where the Minister of Education plans to go on school boards. But could we not be actually focused on our kids and their classrooms? Could we not be focused on making sure that that money that we invest, that we see it as investing in the foundations of our future, of our kids?

There are so many other areas. I could name all the 50% of ministries that were cut, but I think that when I look overall at where we're heading with this budget—I think my colleague the member for Don Valley West has produced some excellent analysis that shows that Ontario real-GDP growth has stagnated in per capita terms since the PCs were first elected. This is long before Trump, long before the tariffs or the war in Iran, and it is not the case across Canada, Speaker. Other provinces, including BC, PEI and Nova Scotia, have experienced GDP per capita growth of 3.5 to four times over that same time period. We have to go back to the early-1990s recession to find an economy that grew GDP per capita as slowly as under this government.

The deficit has also almost doubled this year from the 2025 projections, while the debt is approaching half a trillion dollars. People are worried about putting food on the table. They're worried about job loss. Unemployment, as I've said, is at a record high, with youth unemployment at 16%. New grads are struggling to find their first job to establish their careers.

The homelessness crisis is hitting every community: big cities, small towns. Working families are turning to food banks in record numbers. Last year, close to 25% who accessed the Daily Bread Food Bank here in Toronto were families with young kids—kids that are likely going to school hungry.

Liberals believe in using taxpayer funds to meet people's needs, to ensure a strong economy. We believe public services, housing, education and health care are investments in our kids, in our communities and in our prosperity, and the government has a duty to get the very best value for those dollars and to be transparent about how it spends it.

And right here in this budget bill, of all things, the measures are reducing transparency. This bill includes legislation that will amend the 40-year-old freedom-of-information legislation, that will now exempt ministerial staff and make it harder and take longer to get any freedom-of-information requests answered. Let us never forget how the greenbelt scandal came to light—a scandal that is still under investigation by the RCMP, and it started through FOI requests. It does really feel like the timing is just too perfect for the government to be able to ensure that these things are not going to be readily available to the public—a time when they're under scrutiny for the decisions that are being made.

The legislation actually goes back in time as well. It's retroactive, meaning that FOI requests by media and

members of the public that have already been filed involving ministerial staff will never see the light of day. It does make one wonder: Who are they trying to protect? The bill is not about protecting the people of Ontario; it's about protecting those in power and those close to them.

It's been amazing to see the response on this issue in my own riding. The number of constituents that—it just feels that this move is the last straw. Really? At this time, this is going to be the moment when we're going to actually try to hide more things from the public?

We can and we must do better. There's no investment in the critical services people expect the government to protect; no investment in the people who hold health care and education together. It's a critical moment in health care, but there is no new funding for mental health care. This decision will hurt so many people and families struggling to get real support for mental health and addictions.

There is some funding for hospitals—it's better than nothing—but the investment falls well short of what the Ontario Hospital Association says hospitals actually need to cover true costs. We know that over 100 hospitals are in deficit—they've been squeezed and squeezed for years—and the budget is not enough to keep emergency departments from closing, not enough to reduce hospital overcrowding and not enough to bring down the growing wait times.

There is no plan here to ease the strain on front-line professionals, a strain that's driving nurses and PSWs out of the professions that they love. The primary care action plan funding that was reannounced is needed, but it's too little, too late on that one. They've had eight years to fix the situation in primary care, and they're now playing catch-up on a crisis of the government's own making.

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If you go back to the data from 2018, we were doing okay on attachment to primary care, if you looked at the curve, and it just fell off after this government was elected. Boy, wasn't it ironic that there was a big announcement of a plan that we planned to implement on the eve of the election? As I say, a little bit too little too late. Millions of people don't have a family doctor or a nurse practitioner, and we need to make sure that that changes.

Under mental health, addictions and homelessness, I will say out of all of the schedules amended, there was nothing that new on mental health. What's more is that instead of outlining its plan for HART hubs in the health care section, because that's where addictions and mental health fits—it actually fits in the health care section—instead, it seems to be lumped into protecting public spaces, implying that people with addictions and mental health are the people to be afraid of as though they are a threat to those public spaces.

To me, this is very troubling. About one in four people in this province will need mental health care in their lifetime; one in two will need it before the time they turn 40. If we can address mental illness and support people's mental health early, we will actually prevent further illness. When I read that, I just shuddered. I thought, this is this is how our Ministry of Health sees addressing mental health and addictions in this province?

Speaker, I went to Belleville last week to understand the reality of mental health and addictions and homelessness in that community. What I saw of this community to support its most vulnerable populations was incredible, but it was a painful reminder for myself of how much the Conservatives have neglected rural towns like Belleville. During my visit, it was clear that what this city needed most, it will not receive in this budget.

Community leaders shared the need for support on homelessness; mental health and addictions; post-secondary education; and real, tangible measures to make life in the province more affordable. That was not reflected in this budget.

I had the opportunity to meet with community leaders and those working on the front lines. They were looking for help. They were looking for support. They were looking for a partner. What struck me was, it was regular people filling in those gaps because government is failing to do their part.

There were a few good ideas—I've always said it's important to mention things that were good ideas—in this budget; I will say many of them were ideas that the Liberals have proposed before. Certainly, cutting the HST on primary home purchases was good to see, but it is only for one year instead of until 2031, like the previous HST cut for first-time home buyers. There was the cut to small businesses down to 2.2%; I think that we had suggested going a little further than that. We had also proposed that we needed to work with the federal government to reduce development charges instead of eliminating them—and ticket sales, of course. That was legislation that this government actually removed in 2018 and now is putting back to where we had done it.

These are good things. Again, I'm not sure they all get at the root of the most important issues to people, but it's good to see that those things were in there for small businesses especially.

Perhaps this means too at some point they will accept other good ideas. We've been proposing a jobs program for young people that could be funded out of the \$4-billion fund to protect the economy, or maybe we could even revisit what we had planned for in Bill 28, the Homelessness Ends with Housing Act.

I have to say, I find it hard to believe that my colleagues across the aisle in the government caucus are not getting the same messages that I'm getting in my inbox and witnessing some of the same hardships and deep and growing anxiety about the future in our own communities. These are very serious times that require serious leadership. The truth is that governing is a privilege, a great responsibility. We work for the people, and public funds are not the government's money; they're the people's, earned through hard work.

When I was the leader of a hospital, I never lost sight of how hard-earned public funds were entrusted to us, and I invested those dollars as if they were my own, getting the very best value for dollar, focused on the health outcomes that were a public benefit and that would stand up to transparent public scrutiny. I'm not sure that this budget hits that mark.

Now, I want to touch on a few important local issues in my own riding. Probably the issue I hear the most about in our riding relates to transit. It relates to the accessibility of the Mimico GO station. It relates to the promise of a GO station at Park Lawn, which is an area down by Humber Bay Shores in Etobicoke–Lakeshore where we have seen huge growth. In fact, the business case for that Park Lawn GO station was based on certain density numbers, which we have now exceeded.

That business plan was approved in 2018. In 2019, the government made the decision to ask private developers to build that public infrastructure. There's no mention of it in this budget. There are no signs of any movement, and now the area is overcrowded. Kids are being bused out to schools, and the provincial government has failed to support the community in the way it promised. I'd hoped I might see mention in this budget, but, unfortunately, there really was no mention of that at all.

There are so many other areas I could spend time talking about. I do want to go back to the hospital situation again. We know the Ontario Hospital Association had already warned that the province's hospital sector was facing a mounting financial crisis that included a \$1-billion structural deficit, but what's worse is that we know to actually meet the full operating needs of that sector we needed \$2.7 billion.

The government is going to try to praise itself for increasing the health care budget by 3%, but we know from last year's Financial Accountability Office report that the sector would need at least 4% per year just to keep up with last year's service levels or inflation, population growth and an aging population. While the government will say, "We're putting more money in"—sure, we are, but the truth is the population is growing and health needs are growing. All you have to do is visit hospitals. I've visited so many in all the ridings across this province recently, and people are being cared for in hallways.

The solution has been to just stop measuring and reporting publicly on that. It's not good enough. We need to get serious about how supporting health, how supporting health care is actually enabling our province. It's keeping people well so they can contribute as well.

Speaker, personally, I wake up every day thinking about how we can make life better for the people of Ontario. I wake up every day thinking maybe today there will be some breakthroughs for how we can ensure the success of our education system, ensure the success of our health care system, ensure that those who need jobs—including the 700,000 who are without a job today—are going to be able to find a job. I would have liked to have seen an expression from the government through this budget that they take the same approach every day as well.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Questions?

Mr. Will Bouma: I listened with interest to the member's speech, and I was curious. At the Speaker's reception last week, I saw a representative from the Ontario Home Builders' Association. There were other people there too, and what Mike Collins-Williams said was that this is the

most significant thing that's happened in the housing industry ever by a government in the province of Ontario. I appreciated hearing that. Of course, that's a partnership with the federal government that we're doing to enable new construction of homes with the HST credits and new purpose-built apartments.

I was wondering if the member could tell us—because it sounds like she won't be supporting the budget. Does she support her federal cousins and our government in this effort to reduce the HST on new construction of new homes?

1000

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you very much to the member opposite for the question.

You know, I highlighted in the debate actually that we've been asking for this change on removing HST for some time. I think we'd even encouraged that there be this collaboration with the federal government to make that happen. So thank you for doing that. I think I acknowledged that in my response.

But I guess it's kind of on the theme of the whole budget to me: It's all a little too late. It's been eight long years, and life is harder for people in this province. You've had a target that you've been trying to reach on housing for years. I think that more could have been done prior.

Here's another move—we'll see if it actually plays out: I'm very keen to see, as well, the level of engagement with municipalities, and which municipalities are actually going to see—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further questions?

MPP Lisa Gretzky: Listening to the government side talk about how they're bringing down the cost of housing and getting rid of the tax on buying homes—fantastic; not arguing that.

Interjections.

MPP Lisa Gretzky: You should probably stop applauding and listen to what I'm about to say.

We have record, historic numbers of people experiencing homelessness under eight years of this Conservative government—historic, because I know you like the word "historic." Historic numbers of people are experiencing homelessness.

It's historic numbers of people going to food banks. We're talking from young children right through to seniors. Historic numbers of people are going to food banks. And this government is spending hundreds of millions of dollars on a private luxury spa on Toronto's waterfront, and funnelling hundreds of millions of dollars, if not billions, to private shareholders in health care.

I'm wondering if the member from the Liberal caucus can explain: What does this budget tell you—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I recognize the member from Etobicoke–Lakeshore.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you to the member for that question.

You're right: We're seeing historic levels of homelessness—85,000 people in this province right now are homeless, up 5,000 from last year.

The most troubling thing is actually that the largest-growing number are seniors—seniors losing their homes after years. In fact, if I remember, I drew a parallel on this: I think in the budget, the word “alcohol” was mentioned 74 times, and “seniors” was mentioned three. So maybe if we actually focus our minds on how we can be supporting people, we could get a little bit further with this budget.

I also mentioned that affordability is really becoming an issue. Three in five people worry about losing their housing if their financial situation were to change tomorrow. We need to think about these issues and invest—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further questions?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: To the member from Etobicoke–Lakeshore: Thank you for your great speech. You have extensive experience in the hospital sector and the health care sector—more so, I think, than many people here.

We're in a health care crisis. If the government was serious about helping people, especially when they're most vulnerable, when they're at their sickest, what should the government be doing to invest and improve and actually start genuinely tackling the health care crisis in Ontario?

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you to my colleague for that question.

My first answer on it is to see it as a priority for the health care system to be successful. It was an afterthought in the budget speech last week. I think I heard the words “health care” mentioned very, very few times, and only in the context of being a health care worker—which is important. But boy, given the proportion of this budget that goes into health care, I was shocked at how little attention the government seems to want to pay to it.

The first thing I would do is say, shift the attitude. Let's see this as an investment, and as an investment in people and keeping people well.

The next thing is that we have so much catch-up work to do on primary care, and it will make a difference. The way we can care for people in community needs to be our priority. The way we can care for people and keeping them at home needs to be a priority. But until then, the hospital system has been squeezed so far, there's just insufficient funds for the overcrowding that we're seeing.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further questions?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: I was listening carefully to the member opposite, and she's very passionate about health care, and so am I. That's why this budget has \$1.1 billion in dedicated funding for hospitals, which includes a 4% increase in base and targeted hospital funding.

I remember during the previous Liberal government's rule, I was a young nurse working in the emergency room. I remember hospital budgets being frozen—frozen, Speaker—for years. When we came into office, we recog-

nized the need to invest into hospital infrastructure and into our people. That is why today's health care spending has increased by \$37.2 billion. And we are also building hospitals across this province. We have spent \$60 billion to build more hospital infrastructure.

So my question to the member opposite is, will she be supporting this budget and voting yes for—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I recognize the member from Etobicoke–Lakeshore.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you for the question from my colleague across the aisle. I do think we share the same passion for making sure that people have the health care that they need. It must be frustrating to you in the caucus, actually, because the challenge is—I think you know—what's in here for hospitals is not sufficient for what they needed.

We know that there has been mounting structural deficits. I would say we know that that has been happening quite consciously, while we've been paying private providers a whole lot more money for some of the same work. And so, I would have liked to see a change in gears. I would have liked us to see how we could actually fill the gap.

This budget, although it is an increase, it's not sufficient. And we know that the Ontario Hospital Association and those hospital leaders are still going to be squeezing. We're still going to see layoffs issued.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further questions?

Mr. Chris Glover: I recognize the member from Etobicoke–Lakeshore is a former hospital administrator. The budget does not provide hospital funding at the rate of inflation; it does not keep up with inflation. I'm wondering from your perspective as a hospital administrator, what is that going to mean for patients at hospitals across Ontario?

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Thank you for that question.

Certainly, what we see is that the increases aren't keeping pace with inflation, nor the growth in the volume that we're seeing and could have been predicted. What this will mean is that people will be waiting longer in emergency departments. They'll be waiting in hallways.

Again, I'll go back to my colleague from Kingston and the Islands's question this week—I couldn't believe it, walking around Kingston General Hospital recently, the number of patients waiting in hallways. It's going to mean that we will have the lowest amount of staffing we possibly can have to still deliver safe care, but that means more on the backs of front-line workers to be able to do that. And my worry is, we are seeing people leave this profession because, at a certain point, people hit a breaking point.

I think that this is a start, but it is certainly insufficient to address the needs for care that people are experiencing right now.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Good morning, everyone. I am pleased to rise on behalf of the people of Haldimand–Norfolk to speak to Bill 97 this morning.

In my travels around my rural riding, people consistently tell me they are experiencing significant anxiety and worry

as it relates to the rising cost of living, food, housing, affordability and energy prices, just to name a few. Many families are struggling to cover monthly costs, and those who can cover those monthly costs tell me there is no money left over to save for a rainy day, to invest or, God forbid, take their family on a vacation.

And as my colleague from Etobicoke–Lakeshore said, we know the food bank demand in Ontario last year reached record highs, with over one million people—one in 16 Ontarians—relying on them. Food banks are becoming a primary source of food rather than a temporary helping hand. We also know that a significant number of families are using credit, including buy now, pay later services, so they can afford essentials like grocery and gas to get to work.

I will remind this government that not all of us live in Toronto or urban centres. Sometimes it seems the members opposite forget that we have to get people and the rural economy moving as well.

1010

I sit on the finance committee and this is the second budget process that I've been through as a committee member. I find the pre-budget consultations fruitful in one sense because as policy-makers here at Queen's Park, we are not the experts on very much. Having professionals, experts and passionate Ontarians come to the table is inspiring. However, when their concerns, when their ideas for a better Ontario are not heard or taken seriously, it's embarrassing and it's downright disheartening.

As a previous leader once said, we cannot be all things to all people all the time, and I wholeheartedly agree with that. However, there is not much in this budget that I heard around the committee table, and it certainly does not meet people during their time of need. As Ontarians continue to bust their hump to provide for their families, juggling all those costs that I spoke about earlier, working longer hours only to face a growing uncertainty, the only solace being offered by this government is that they're standing on the sidelines with the first aid kit in hand, handing out bandages instead of real solutions.

Most concerning is the projected deficit for the coming year, which has nearly doubled to \$13.8 billion. Just one year ago, Speaker, that figure was projected to be \$7.8 billion. For a government that brands itself as fiscally conservative, this is a very, very hard pill to swallow.

As a conservative wrote on my social media this weekend in response to the budget, "The age of the conservative has long since been over."

Another wrote, "Well we found out ... we are heading for a \$500-billion debt in the coming fiscal year ... the interest on this debt will be \$16 billion. This is not sustainable—debts have to be paid off."

Yet another comment: They govern on intent, not results. Until that changes, we'll continue throwing money to the wind.

And perhaps the most telling: This makes Kathleen Wynne look like a fiscal Conservative.

Some advice from another taxpayer: Cut the flood of provincial ads promoting how good of a job they are doing.

I was looking for items in this budget that would translate into real affordability measures for my constituents. I was hoping for items that would genuinely ease the pressure on household finances, but I'm hard-pressed to find anything that will bring costs down for Ontario families.

Representing a riding built on the backs of hard-working farmers, this government must make investments in agri-food processing. They must make this a priority. This would shield us from tariffs, strengthen local supply chains and secure Ontario's food sovereignty.

Any mentions of agriculture in this year's budget were, as far as I can see, recycled announcements. I heard the same from a group of farmers at a meeting this weekend. They are truly disappointed. I remain perplexed as to why this government does not show respect to our farm industry, because they are the largest and most diverse in this country.

As for expanding the homebuyer tax break, I'm convinced this is the clearest example of a bandage being pulled from the provincial first aid kit, where this government is offering a quick fix instead of addressing the deeper, systemic issues that are driving housing costs through the roof. Without knowing the full details, I cannot help but be suspicious that this is just a bailout for developers struggling to off-load small, undesirable and expensive condominiums in the city. For homeowners thinking of putting a for sale sign on their existing property, I'm concerned they will now be competing in an even hotter, artificially propped-up market.

In speaking with a home builder, the fear is real that in one year's time, this government will have decreased the equity in each of our houses by over \$100,000. Red tape is an issue; land transfer taxes are issues. Until these are addressed, when that bandage is ripped off in a year's time, the wounds may well be deeper than before that bandage was ever applied.

On the bandage note, let's quickly go to health care, where our province's nurse practitioners came to the pre-budget consultations. They made it clear that they need multiple funding models, flexibility across practice settings and a direct path to bill OHIP for medically necessary care. They were ignored once again.

On a positive note, I was heartened this government finally listened to those of us on the opposition benches calling for a reduction in the small business tax rate. Our small businesses need this boost, and they do so much more for our small communities than we ever give them credit for.

Ontarians are hard-working people, Speaker, yet the government we rely upon to support and reward them is missing opportunities, resting on its majority status and content to hand out bandages instead of real solutions. Thank you.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): It is now time for members' statements.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

HOUSING

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: The dream of home ownership is well and alive in Ontario. I am proud to highlight an important step our government has taken through this budget to make it more affordable for people and families in my riding of Markham–Thornhill and across Ontario.

Our government, under the leadership of Premier Ford, Minister Bethlenfalvy and Minister Flack, has expanded the HST rebate on new homes. This is achieved by removing the full 13% HST on newly built homes. Eligible buyers can now save up to \$130,000—this is a game-changer. Through this historic initiative, we will be able to fulfill our promises to Ontarians and stimulate housing activity, benefiting buyers, builders and many other sectors.

Speaker, we are giving hope and helping first-time home buyers, young people, low-income families and others move ahead. Working closely with the federal government, this initiative is expected to stimulate housing construction and support thousands of jobs.

I am proud that we continue to strengthen housing, affordability, boost the economy by \$2.7 billion and build a stronger future for people and families in our great province of Ontario.

EHLERS-DANLOS SYNDROME

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Speaker, I rise to bring attention to a critical gap in Ontario's health care system affecting patients living with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, or EDS, and craniocervical instability, known as CCI. EDS is a connective tissue disorder that affects collagen, the protein that provides stability to joints, ligaments and the spine. In some patients, this leads to CCI, a serious condition where instability at the base of the skull provides dangerous pressure on the brainstem and the spinal cord.

Without timely and appropriate treatment, patients can experience severe neurological symptoms, including chronic pain, loss of mobility, difficulty breathing and swallowing, and progressive and irreversible damage. Many become bedridden. Many lose the ability to work, study or live independently.

Patients are told that treatments exist in-province, but no specialist can be identified. At the same time, they are unable to access out-of-country care because the application process requires support from those very specialists who experts say do not exist in Ontario. The result is a system that leaves patients stuck, deteriorating while navigating a process that offers no real access to care. Some are now turning to MAID because they have given up on the government to provide the care they need.

Tomorrow, patients and advocates will be hosting a breakfast reception here at Queen's Park to share their

experiences. We'll hear directly from individuals who are forced to pay out of pocket for treatment in the United States, and how that care allowed them to regain their independence and return to being active members of society. I encourage all members to attend and learn about how our government can help.

HIGHWAY IMPROVEMENT

Mr. Stephen Blais: Two years ago, the Premier came to Ottawa and made a promise to the residents of Orléans. He promised that the province would upload Highway 174. By taking responsibility for the highway, there would finally be resources to make it safer and fix the gridlock that families in the east end face every single day.

People believed him. The mayor believed him. City councillors believed him. In their foolishness, the city of Ottawa took Highway 174 out of their transportation planning, and two years later, nothing has happened.

Anyone who drives on Highway 174 knows the reality. Every morning and every evening, traffic backs up for kilometres. Parents miss time with their kids. Workers spend hours every week stuck behind the wheel. What should be a short drive home becomes an hour-long commute and, tragically, people continue to have accidents, suffer injuries and die on the unsafe stretches of Highway 174 to Cumberland, Rockland and beyond that need to be widened and divided. The highway has not been uploaded. There is no funding. There is no plan.

There was not one mention of Highway 174 in last week's budget. After eight years in government, these problems are no longer someone else's responsibility; they belong to this government. The people of Orléans are not asking for special treatment; they're asking for the government to keep the promise it made to them.

Two years ago, the Premier promised to upload Highway 174. Today, the people of Orléans are still waiting.

1020

ARJANPAL HUNDAL

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: Today, I rise to recognize an outstanding young athlete from Brampton, Arjanpal Hundal, who has made our community proud on the national stage. Competing at the Canadian national championships in Calgary, Arjanpal secured a gold medal in the 55-kilogram under-19 division, earning the title of Canadian champion. This remarkable achievement is a testament to his discipline, perseverance and unwavering commitment to excellence. It is inspiring to see a young individual dedicate himself to sport at such a high level and succeed through hard work and determination.

Speaker, Arjanpal's success also highlights the importance of investing in youth sports, which not only promotes physical well-being but also builds confidence, character and leadership skills that extend far beyond the ring. He serves as a role model for young people across Brampton, proving that with focus and dedication anything is possible.

On behalf of this Legislature, I congratulate Arjanpal on this incredible achievement and wish him continued success in his athletic journey.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: Illegal building in Ontario is a big problem, and people are paying the price for a system that isn't doing its job to protect them. Instead of fixing the problem, starting tomorrow, April 1, the government is burdening new home buyers with even more fine print. Now they'll be required to register their purchase within 45 days with Tarion, just to get the deposit protection they used to receive automatically. Most people don't even know what Tarion is, let alone that they now have to register to get the protection they deserve and expect. This protection exists to ensure people get their deposit money back if a builder decides they can't or won't finish the home they promised to build.

Deposit protection should be automatic, reliable, and the government should be doing its job to go after bad builders who are defrauding people out of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

So, today, I again call on this government to reverse this bad decision and restore the automatic deposit protection rights that they have now taken away.

ICE STORM

Hon. Laurie Scott: I rise today to mark the one-year anniversary of the devastating ice storm of 2025, which profoundly impacted the communities in Haliburton–Kawartha Lakes–Brock and to express my sincere gratitude to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing for its significant financial support in the aftermath. In response to this unprecedented event, more than \$26 million in funding has been allocated to municipalities across my riding.

The storm caused widespread damage, downed power lines and put a significant strain on emergency services, leaving a lasting impact on residents and local infrastructure alike.

In the days and weeks that followed, our municipal partners demonstrated remarkable resilience, considering that we were all in the ice storm. The first responders, hydro crews and dedicated volunteers worked around the clock to protect public safety, restore essential services and support those in need. Their efforts exemplify the strength and unity of our communities in time of crisis.

You can imagine, Mr. Speaker, the recovery came at such a considerable cost and was very unplanned. Municipalities absorbed significant expenses related to debris, infrastructure, emergency response measures. It placed an added burden on our municipalities.

So I just want to state my appreciation again to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing for recognizing the urgency of the situation and standing with our municipalities during the recovery.

RYAN BENOIT

RYAN HUTTON

MPP Jamie West: Speaker, I always say that Sudbury is a community that cares. I want to tell you about two Ryans who care about Sudbury.

The first is Ryan Benoit, who is the founder of Positive Inception. That's a Sudbury-based clothing brand. They have a seed as their logo, and that seed is a reminder to always spread positivity and encourage self-confidence for growth. Ryan started Positive Inception as a student at Laurentian University. He was selling clothing out of his backpack at the library. Now he has a 1,200-square-foot store on Lasalle. Through Positive Inception, Ryan is able to support various organizations, like mine rescue, the northern cancer foundation and ALS. His positivity is contagious. Ryan has won a Community Builders Award, a young entrepreneurs award and, recently, a Paul Harris fellowship award.

I also want to tell you about another Ryan who cares in Sudbury: It's Constable Ryan Hutton. He's a veteran Sudbury police officer. He was recently nominated for a Police Association of Ontario award for being a community role model. For over 25 years, Ryan has gone above and beyond, supporting his fellow officers through peer support, raising awareness in the community and leading initiatives that remind people that it's okay to ask for help.

Ryan Hutton is a local champion for the CMHA push for better challenge, the Ride for Mental Health, Wounded Warriors, World Suicide Prevention Day and PTSD awareness, and in January, Ryan was selected to join the Greater Sudbury Police Service's mobile crisis rapid response team, and so he's paired up now with a mental health professional, and together they respond to individuals in crisis.

I want to thank both Ryan Benoit and Constable Ryan Hutton for demonstrating that Sudbury is a community that cares and for being two Ryans that care about Sudbury.

CHARLOTTE ELEANOR ENGLEHART HOSPITAL FOUNDATION

Mr. Robert Bailey: I'm pleased to share with the House that, effective April 1, Charlotte Eleanor Englehart Hospital Foundation in Petrolia will amalgamate to further strengthen the long-term fundraising capacity in support of Bluewater Health and its two campuses in Sarnia and, of course, Petrolia.

First opened in 1911, the Charlotte Eleanor Englehart Hospital has a long and proud history of serving the residents of Petrolia and central Lambton. Recognizing the hospital's significant local impact, the CEE Hospital Foundation was founded in 1985 by dedicated community members seeking to preserve and enhance health care access in rural Lambton county.

As an entirely volunteer board, the CEE Hospital Foundation has made a remarkable impact over the last four decades. Thanks to its community leadership and

generosity, the foundation has raised and donated over \$4 million in support of programs and services at the hospital.

Today, CEE Hospital is a key provider of health care services in rural and central Lambton, and is embarking on a major redevelopment program in the emergency department with the support of the government of Ontario.

None of this success would have been possible without the vision and effort of the Charlotte Eleanor Englehart Hospital Foundation. I want to share my sincere gratitude, on behalf of all the residents of Petrolia and rural Lambton county, to all the volunteers, past and present, of the foundation. Their dedication to our cherished hospital will continue to make an impact for generations to come.

LORIEN SMITH

Mr. Dave Smith: Today is March 31. If the members in the House will indulge me a bit, and with apologies to Adam Sandler, I want to take this opportunity to recite the lyrics from a song for someone very special to me:

I wanna make you smile whenever you're sad
Carry you around when your arthritis is bad
All I wanna do is grow old with you.

I'll get your medicine when your tummy aches
Build you a fire if the furnace breaks
Oh, it could be so nice, growing old with you.

I'll miss you
Kiss you
Give you my coat when you are cold

Need you
Feed you
Even let you hold the remote control.

So let me do the dishes in our kitchen sink
Put you to bed when you've had too much to drink
Oh, I could be the man who grows old with you
I wanna grow old with you.

Happy birthday, Lorien. Thank you for growing old with me.

Applause.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): That was lovely.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I rise today to offer a heartfelt thanks to non-profit housing and social service agencies who are working so hard to successfully build affordable homes in Guelph. I commend you for building partnerships with people and organizations, private and public, as well as all three levels of government.

Recently, we cut the ribbon on Stepping Stone's 23 Gordon Street location. The long-time drop-in centre was renovated to build emergency shelter beds and transitional

housing to help people experiencing homelessness to have access to services and begin their journey to stable housing.

1030

Last week, I was pleased to welcome the MPP for Wellington–Halton Hills and the MPP for Perth–Wellington to Guelph for the groundbreaking of 18 affordable homes being built on Fife Road in Guelph.

I recently toured the construction of a supportive housing project for youth in Guelph, a vital project on our community's path to ending youth homelessness. I look forward to an announcement on this next week.

I want to thank the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Minister of Health for your support for these projects. We need more money for housing and health care in Ontario, and Guelph demonstrates what we can accomplish together to improve people's lives when we work across party lines and across jurisdictional lines.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

Hon. Kevin Holland: Joining us today from the township of Ear Falls is Mayor Kevin Kahoot. Welcome to the Legislature.

Hon. Caroline Mulroney: I am pleased to introduce Mike Waddington from my riding of York–Simcoe. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Hon. David Piccini: I am pleased to extend a warm welcome to representatives of the Mechanical Contractors Association of Ontario, including executive vice-president Jeff Spitzig, who are joining us in the chamber together. They're just on the south side.

MCAO plays such a vital role in supporting Ontario's mechanical contracting industry. Colleagues, you have a little bit of information about the important work MCAO does on your desk today.

Welcome to Queen's Park, your House.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I'd like to make a warm welcome to Joshua Smith, Andrew Macklin, Jason Stahl and Priyanka Anand. Thank you for the wonderful, informative meeting this morning. Welcome to your House.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I'd like to offer a warm welcome to the CUPE Ontario Workers with Disabilities Committee, in particular the chair, Brenda Cervantes, and member Stacyann Williams. I'd also like to welcome CUPE president Fred Hahn.

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: I'd like to welcome the members of the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies here in Ontario. I look forward to meeting with Josh Smith, Stephanie Speroni, Andrew Macklin, Jason Stahl, Mike Collins, Olaf Kaminski and Priyanka Anand.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: Today we have Selena Ferreira, Emily Edwards and Kristine Galvan from Ignite at Humber College in my riding.

Also, from the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies of Ontario and from my riding, we've got Peter Chackeris, Lisa Brown and Don Cleghorn.

Welcome, and I hope you enjoy your day at Queen's Park.

Mr. Robert Bailey: Madam Speaker, I'd like to thank you for the use of the Speaker's dining room this morning and recommend all members take advantage of it at some time. I had the mayors from Lambton–Kent–Middlesex, Sarnia–Lambton and Huron county—the minister's own mayors—here today. They enjoyed it very much. Again, thank you, Madam Speaker, for making that room available for us.

Ms. Marit Stiles: I have a bunch of people to recognize that are here with us in the chamber: from the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario, Cyrielle Ngeleka, Rawan Habib, Adaeze Mbalaja and Kayla Weiler; from the Ontario Student Trustees' Association, Carter Peios; from McMaster Students Union, Steven DeCordova and Piper Plavins; from the University of Waterloo student union, Remington Aginskaya-Zhi, Damian Mikhail, Rory Norris and Samir Sharma; from the Ontario Medical Students Association, Olivia Kim and Trisha Chibber; from Ontario Student Voices, Arvin Baradaran-Rajabzadeh, Christian Dave Evangelista and Rajveer Singh; and from the Centennial College Student Association, Logan Routhier.

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: I would like to introduce some very special visitors today: my oldest daughter, Vanessa Sarrazin, and her boyfriend Xavier Sauv . Vanessa is a paramedic with Prescott-Russell paramedic services, and Xavier is an MTO transportation enforcement officer in our region. I want to tell them that I'm very proud of them, and I want to thank them for the service that they provide to the people of Glengarry–Prescott–Russell.

Mr. Rudy Cuzzetto: It's my pleasure to welcome the Canadian Propane Association to Queen's Park today, and I want to welcome everybody to a luncheon in room 228.

As well, I'd like to invite people to the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies and invite them to room 228 for a reception this evening.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Good morning, everyone. I'd like to welcome two high school students to the chamber: Arun Rajakumar and Asim Kandel. They're here and they're curious about what we do here, so let's try to behave.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I'd like to recognize Gerry Chaput, Hanna Hartenthaler and Richard Morales from Arcadis Professional Services, a company based in Toronto–St. Paul's, here today as part of the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies' Ontario advocacy day. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: I would like to welcome Professor Rajendra Surenthirakumaran, dean of the faculty of medicine, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Welcome to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

MPP George Darouze: I'd like to welcome my former colleague, councillor Tim Tierney from the city of Ottawa. He's here on FCM business visiting Queen's Park and Good Roads. Welcome to your House.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): That's all the time we have for introduction of visitors.

I recognize the member for Etobicoke–Lakeshore on a point of order.

Ms. Lee Fairclough: I seek the unanimous consent of the House to immediately move private member's notice of motion number 67, requiring the Ontario government to stop any plans or expenditures for building a new Toronto convention centre on Lake Ontario until the average length of a wait time in an Ontario emergency department is less than four hours.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Etobicoke–Lakeshore is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to immediately move private member's notice of motion number 67, requiring the Ontario government to stop any plans or expenditures for building a new Toronto convention centre on Lake Ontario until the average length of a wait time in an Ontario emergency department is less than four hours. Agreed?

Interjection: No.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): It is now time for oral questions.

QUESTION PERIOD

ONTARIO BUDGET

Ms. Marit Stiles: Good morning, Speaker. The government tabled their budget last week. They are projecting nearly a half-trillion dollar debt. In fact, the interest on the debt alone is going to cost \$16 billion this year. That is more than this government has budgeted to spend on post-secondary education all together. Young people are facing higher debt, fewer opportunities and an increasingly unaffordable province, Speaker, and that is the real cost of this government.

So can the Premier explain why they are choosing to make life more unaffordable for young people in this province?

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

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I know the member was just in Winnipeg this last weekend, and I'm sure she spoke to the leader in Manitoba about their grants-to-loan ratio, which we're pretty well in line with. The BC NDP government as well—we're actually at higher grants-to-loan ratios than them as well.

But that member doesn't like to give the full picture of facts; she likes to just cherry-pick the ones that really suit her narrative. We are aligned with the federal government as well in their grants-to-loan ratio.

We'll continue to be there for the students. We want to ensure we have sustainability for OSAP, not just for these students but for the next generation of students behind them as well.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, young people are being squeezed by all sides in this province. They are looking at

higher student debt today, and they are looking at a growing provincial debt tomorrow. They are the ones who are going to shoulder the weight of this government's irresponsible, wasteful decisions. Long after this government and this Premier are gone, it is going to be the young people of this province today—the next generation—who are going to be paying off their debt.

Why won't the Premier give young people in Ontario a fair shot at their future?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I know the Leader of the Opposition won't tell young people this, but we just made a historic \$6.4-billion investment, the largest investment in Canadian and Ontario history. Part of that investment is to ensure that high-priority programs that are needed to drive our economy are felt and they are funded properly; \$3.3 billion is going to high-priority funding.

Another thing she will not mention is the \$1.7 billion that's going to add another 70,000 funded seats to ensure that we have accessibility, not just for today's students but for the next generation of students as well. In budget 2025, we added 20,000 new STEM seats to our funded seats in the corridor. That's almost 100,000 new seats that we've funded in both colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes.

1040

But I know that member will not share that story, Speaker, because on top of all of that, we've increased operating funding from \$5 billion to \$7 billion this fall, which is a 30% increase in operating funding, to ensure that we continue to have world-class institutions across Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Final supplementary?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, those are college and university programs that students in this province will no longer be able to afford because of your government's choices. These are the same young people that had to suffer through class sizes growing out of control because of this government's cuts to per-student funding. Now, they are facing cuts to OSAP grants. As they get older, they're going to face the consequences of this government slashing programs and making choices that leave them out.

Budgets are a choice. So I'm asking the government, sacrifice the luxury spa in downtown Toronto, sacrifice this fantasy tunnel under the 401, sacrifice the island convention centre. But for goodness' sake, invest in providing the grants and opportunities that students need. Will you do that?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: The changes we have made to OSAP and the grants-to-loan ratio are ensuring sustainability. If you don't want to believe me, believe the Auditor General. In 2017, when a desperate Liberal government hiked the grants-to-loan ratio to try to stay in power, the Auditor General made it very clear it was unsustainable for the taxpayers and the people of Ontario.

But if that member wants to talk about affordability, let's talk about affordability. We are the government that froze and cut tuition in 2018, Speaker. We are saving the

average university student over \$1,800 every year since we cut and froze tuition, but the sector has changed.

But I know she will not remind them of Rae days, and I know it gets them really upset when I talk about the Rae days. But if they were in power, Speaker, tuition would have gone up three times the rate of inflation.

Interjections.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: They really don't like to hear that, but when the Bob Rae government was in power, tuition went up over 50%, which was three times the rate of inflation, Speaker.

If they were in power or the third party was in power, tuition would be over \$14,000—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Question?

HOSPITAL FUNDING

Ms. Marit Stiles: This government's story is going to be one of irresponsible, wasteful spending on vanity projects for this Premier. It's outrageous.

Now, Speaker, our hospitals are struggling. We are all feeling it. They've been very clear about what they need to improve services and deliver the care that Ontarians deserve. They asked for a 6% funding increase from this government. But that's not what they got in this year's budget. What they're getting is more of the same—the same funding that has led to overcrowded emergency rooms, that has led to hallway health care and burned out health care workers. The status quo is not working. There are nearly 2,000 patients a day now being treated in hospital hallways, Speaker. This government was elected to end hallway health care.

To the Premier: Why have they let things get so much worse under their watch?

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

Hon. Sylvia Jones: A 50% increase in hospital base funding since Premier Ford came into government suggests to me that, in fact, we are actually a very willing partner to our hospitals.

With Thursday's budget, of course, we have signalled another \$1.1 billion to our hospital sector. We are also working very closely with them to make sure that that money is being spent directly on front-line patient care. That's where the impact is, and that's where we want our focus to be.

But are we funding hospitals? The \$1.1 billion in the budget last Thursday would suggest we are.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: Maybe the minister has missed this, but health care is about people. It is about people. And there are a thousand more people being treated in hallways now than when this government was elected.

So maybe the minister can answer this: Are there or are there not almost 2,000 people a day being treated in Ontario's hospital hallways?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: We have programs in place now, Speaker, that didn't exist before our government took into

effect—dedicated offload nursing programs where individuals are stationed in emergency departments to specifically look after and triage patients in our communities.

We now have 911 models of care where paramedics working with patient consent are actually able to take individuals to different forms of treatment because that is the appropriate pathway.

Of course, \$3.4 billion in primary care expansion—why does that make an impact in our hospitals? Because people are going to their primary care provider, to their multi-disciplinary team, to talk to their nurse practitioner, their nurse, their dietitian, their mental health worker, instead of showing up in an emergency department.

Those are the concrete examples that we are doing to make sure that the people of Ontario are getting the services—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Final supplementary?

Ms. Marit Stiles: What kind of fantasy is this? I mean, in January 2024, nearly 2,000 patients per day on average were treated in hospital hallways across this province. In June 2018, when this government came into office, there were about a thousand. That was bad enough, right?

The minister can hide the numbers or stop tracking hallway health care as they're about to do altogether, but we know the truth. The people of Ontario know the truth.

Why is this Premier and this Minister of Health denying that there are more people being treated in hallways now than when they came into office?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Speaker, we're talking about some of the programs that we've put in place that impact our hospital partners in a positive way.

Of course, the other piece that we didn't talk about yet is the capital investments. Whether it is in Niagara, whether it is in Mississauga, whether it is in Windsor, in London, we are investing in hospital capital projects—\$60 billion. Because we know that as Ontario ages, as Ontario's population increases, we also need the capital piece to be there.

I can look over at the investments that we made, whether it is the new hospital that we opened in Markdale, the new hospital that we opened in West Lincoln. Those are the investments that make a difference to people's lives in their community, and we will keep doing that because we see the impact it makes.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Mr. John Fraser: My question is for the Premier. We all know that life is harder in Ontario right now. There are 700,000 people out of work; 200,000 young people are out of work too. For all those people, the fact that they're looking for a job and they can't find one is soul destroying.

They're looking for hope from their government. They can't find it. They're looking for hope in the form of a plan. Eight years later, eight budgets later, there's no plan for the people who are out of work here in Ontario.

So, Speaker, I'll ask this question: Why doesn't the Premier do his job and help the 700,000 people in Ontario who need a job?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Peterborough—Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you to the member opposite for the question, because it gives me an opportunity to talk about the measures that Ontario has taken.

When we were first elected back in 2018, we started focusing on the economy, ensuring that we were doing things that were raising that economy. We took our GDP from just over \$700 billion to just over \$1.1 trillion this past year. And we've done it by investing in jobs.

The member opposite wants to talk about some of the challenges that we face. We fully admit that there are challenges, and that's why we've been working on it and there are more than a million people today working in Ontario that did not have jobs back in 2018.

There are other measures that we have been putting in place to bring those jobs to Ontario. And when we take a look at the budget, one of the things for our youth to take a look at is the work that we've been doing with the SBECs, the small business economic development groups, and starter plus is a perfect example. All of those young entrepreneurs who want to get ahead, who want to have a start with their own business—reach out to the SBECs because summer plus and starter plus are fantastic ways for those—

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

Mr. John Fraser: Speaker, there are 9,000 fewer manufacturing jobs in this province since when this tired, out-of-touch government took power.

Eight long years, Speaker, and all we've had from this Premier and this worn-out government is a lot of talk.

But I have to be fair. The Premier has created jobs. He's had record job growth, just in the wrong places—his office. His office salary budget was \$2 million in 2018. It's now \$8 million. That's record job growth. But if you're one of the 700,000 people out of work, that's not the job growth you're looking for.

1050

The gravy train in this government, it just keeps on rolling.

So, Speaker, I'll ask again: When is the Premier going to do his job and help the 700,000 people who need a job?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Bay of Quinte.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Thank you to the interim leader of the third party for that question.

Let's talk about some of the programs that we've put in place to generate good-paying, durable jobs for the people of Ontario. Take a look at our OVIN program. We invested \$56.4 million to support 770 small and medium-sized enterprises. The part suppliers are the lifeblood of our automotive industry. We created and retained 6,100 jobs through that program and leveraged \$850 million from the private sector—a 16-to-1 return for the people of Ontario.

Because of the measures that we've put into place over the last two years, we've attracted \$68 billion in foreign direct investment, creating over 80,711 jobs.

Take a look at our regional development programs. We've put forward \$230 million to support companies across Ontario, created over 5,500 jobs and leveraged \$2.6 billion from the private sector—an 11-to-1 return on investment for the people of Ontario.

That is how we're growing this economy and we won't be put off on it.

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

Mr. John Fraser: Perhaps they didn't hear: 9,000 fewer manufacturing jobs than in 2018.

We heard the Premier say, "Stop the gravy train" again and again and again. Maybe we just misunderstood what he was trying to say. Maybe he was saying, "Stop the gravy train so my friends and I can get on."

Speaker, here's another example. Executive offices in the Ford government in 2018: \$34 million. Anybody want to guess what it is now? It's \$82 million. If you're one of the 700,000 people out of work in Windsor or Amherstburg or Sarnia or any city in this province, when you see that, you say that they're not looking out for you. Where's the hope?

One last time: Will the Premier do his job and help the 700,000 people in this province who need a job?

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Thank you to the interim leader of the Liberals for that question.

You know, it's interesting, when you have a Premier that actually gets things done, you need some staff to do that. Your government was able to run with Kathleen Wynne, two interns and a fax machine. That's the difference between getting things done and getting nothing done.

This government has continued to build Ontario. We have \$210 billion in capital. We're building roads, we're building hospitals, we're building bridges. We're rebuilding all those schools that your government closed. We are continuing to attract investment in this province, continuing to grow our economy, and we'll do that with no help from the Liberals or the NDP.

ONTARIO BUDGET

Mr. John Fraser: He's really getting things done: record unemployment, record youth unemployment, the cost of living through the roof. That's really getting things done.

Speaker, back to the Premier. We all know life is harder these days. This is a tired, out-of-touch, out-of-gas Conservative government. We know that it's harder to put food on the table. Rent is going up, energy prices are going up, and life is just so much harder for Ontario families.

All they're asking for is just a bit of help, and this government, they're not getting it. This government is out of touch, out of ideas, out of gas. They're adrift. Speaker, why is there nothing in this budget to help families with their budgets?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Peterborough-Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you to the member opposite for once again giving me an opportunity to talk about this, because we have been embarking on things to make life more affordable.

We reversed the Liberal policy on electricity and lowered the cost of electricity. We reversed the tolls that the Liberals put in on the 412 and the 418. We reversed increases in taxes by lowering the gas tax permanently by 5.7 cents per litre, saving families \$435 a year, on average. We reversed the Liberal policy on transit. We put in One Fare to save families \$1,600 a year.

When you take a look at what we've done, we have spent so much time reversing the poor policies of the previous Liberal government to get us to the position where we are, and we can move forward now as a result of that.

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

Mr. John Fraser: Well, if this side believes that electricity prices went down, I think we're getting to the core of the problem. They've gone up. When I asked this question yesterday, a minister responded by saying—when I said, "What are you doing for families," they said, "We fixed ticket resales." It was like, "We fixed the thing we broke. Aren't you happy?"

The government is so clearly out of touch, because they're focused on nice-to-haves. They're talking about nice-to-haves, when families are focused on need-to-haves: food, housing, energy costs. They want a little bit of help. No HST relief on home heating or even electricity—you could've done that in the budget. That would've been a little bit of help. They're not getting help. This government is out of touch, out of ideas and they can't see what's happening in people's everyday lives.

So, Speaker, again, one more time—

Interjection.

Mr. John Fraser: You get to do a shot; maybe another one after this.

Why, in this budget, is there nothing to help families with their budgets?

Mr. Dave Smith: Thank you to the member opposite for the question. I'm not sure what world he lives in, but I do know that when we gave a \$200 rebate back to the taxpayers of Ontario, they objected to it—\$200 going right back into the pockets of the average person in this province. Now, that is real relief for those individuals.

Interjections.

Mr. Dave Smith: And when you listen to them heckling me on this, you can tell that they're bothered by the fact that we didn't reach into people's pockets to take the money out like they did. We enacted measures to make life more affordable for people.

And when we talk about things that have made life more affordable for individuals—let's look at our seniors and the advantage that they've gotten because of the changes that we made to the Ontario Guaranteed Annual Income System, or GAINS: More than 100,000 seniors are

receiving benefits now as a result of these changes. This is money that goes right back into the pocket of the average person in Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Final supplementary?

Mr. John Fraser: It's so apparent that they just don't get it. They don't understand the reality of the everyday lives of Ontario families. They've lost touch. This government—this Conservative government—is adrift.

So what are the priorities of the budget? What are the Premier's priorities? Buying Billy Bishop, a floating fantasy island convention centre in Lake Ontario, a luxury spa and, of course, I have to mention the tunnel that the Premier loves.

Speaker, this Conservative government isn't taking care of those things that are important to families. They're focused on the wrong things. They're tired, they're out of touch, they're out of gas, they're out of ideas and they're only out for themselves and their rich friends.

So I will ask one last time: Why is there nothing in this budget to help families with their budgets?

Mr. Dave Smith: Again, this really does differentiate between Liberal philosophy and real-life philosophy. When you take a look at what the Liberals had done and the hardship that they put on the people of Ontario, we have changed that. There was not a single investment in Ontario. What we have been doing is investing in industry, investing in transportation, investing in infrastructure, and all of those things have raised our GDP from \$700 billion to just over \$1.1 trillion.

When we talk about relief for families, I know that I have three kids who are under the age of 30. I know all of them want the dream of home ownership and I know that all of them are happy that we're reducing the cost of new homes by up to \$130,000. The difference in your mortgage on that alone is \$4,600 a month down to about \$2,400 a month, just in savings there. That means that homes will be affordable. People will be able to qualify for mortgages and have that dream of home ownership.

ACCESSIBILITY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

MPP Lise Vaugeois: Speaker, the government has been warned repeatedly that the lack of accessibility throughout the province is at a crisis level, yet we learned this week that the Human Rights Tribunal has dismissed 97% of its cases without holding any hearings. The requirements of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act are useless if there is nowhere to go for redress. The rights of people with disabilities are not being protected.

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So I ask: What will the government do to end this discrimination?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Under the leadership of Premier Ford, the AODA is driving change in Ontario

every day. Our government has made more historic investments into accessible infrastructure, transportation, subways and GO stations than any other government.

This includes 2,200 accessible buses we've delivered to municipalities. And \$275 million is being dedicated to making schools accessible this year alone. We built AODA standards into the Ontario building code. All new GO transit stations, train platforms, bus stations adhere to AODA. These investments are making Ontario more accessible every day.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member for Thunder Bay—Superior North.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: The failure to provide access to education for children with disabilities is a crisis that goes beyond the failure to implement the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. The kindergarten to grade 12 disability recommendations made in 2022 have still not been implemented and, shockingly, under this government's watch, parents have been given a survey suggesting that disability supports are optional in schools if there are more urgent needs for the money.

Will the Premier ensure that students with disabilities are not shut out and receive the supports they need to succeed?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): That is a stretch, but I will allow it.

I recognize the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility.

Hon. Raymond Sung Joon Cho: Ontario is meeting, achieving and exceeding the AODA standards each and every day. All 444 municipalities in Ontario have accessibility plans to meet the goals of the AODA in their communities.

In 2025, our government worked with more than 400,000 organizations across Ontario and has performed 1,349 attestation audits, 834 verification audits and 61 director's orders issued. I'm sure the member's happy to hear that 99% of audits conducted were resolved as compliant. With our work, Ontario is more accessible than ever before.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: After eight years of this ineffective Conservative government, life is harder here in Ontario: 700,000 people can't find a job, including 200,000 young people. This government isn't protecting Ontario; it's just pretending to. Today's unemployment rate is 7.6%; when this government took office, it was 5.9%. It's very clear: Workers in Ontario are worse off under this government.

Yet what is the flailing Conservative government doing to help? Putting billions more taxpayer dollars into their failed Skills Development Fund, which the Auditor General called not fair, not transparent and not accountable.

My question to the Premier: When will he stop giving taxpayer dollars to his friends and start doing something to help workers who can't find a job?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member from Bay of Quinte.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Thank you to the member for the question.

There are so many different ways that we are continuing to create jobs right here in Ontario. We just talked about the \$68 billion that we've brought in over the last two years, creating over 80,711 jobs.

I seem to remember that that member had an interest in small business tax cuts. Well, guess what? We've got a 30% small business tax cut in this year's budget. I hope to see you get out of your seat for that later on.

We have done incredible work with small businesses across Ontario, building more businesses. Just last year, 8,000 new businesses launched and 2,700 businesses expanded, creating over 15,800 jobs. Through our 17 regional innovation centres, we assisted 4,800 tech clients in creating over 49,000 jobs.

We continue to get it done for Ontario, continue to deliver high-paying, good-quality jobs, and we will continue to protect Ontario now and for generations to come.

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Speaker, the reality is this government is wasting billions of taxpayer dollars on the Skills Development Fund. It's not working. Just look at the numbers.

The government's broken promise budget shows that unemployment is going to be worse in the years ahead, not better. This budget shows 16,000 fewer jobs in Ontario compared to the 2025 budget—hardly a plan that is working.

So, Speaker, let's talk more about the Premier's delusions of grandeur when he talks about Ontario versus countries in the G7. At the end of 2025, Ontario's unemployment rate was only 0.2% better than the worst-performing economy in the G7.

My question to the Premier: When will he stand up, step up and admit his failing plan is failing the people of Ontario?

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

Hon. David Piccini: That member, Speaker, can explain it to the mechanical contractors who are here today, who are working at Northumberland Hills Hospital—my hospital in my riding—thanks to investments this government has made in infrastructure.

Explain it to those members and those workers that our plan isn't working, because it is. It's building new hospitals, it's building new public transit—the largest investment in public transit in Ontario's history that's sending men and women to work each and every day, Speaker.

Their record is clear: It's a record that saw the tail lights of manufacturing flee Ontario, that didn't build anything. They had an abysmal record on long-term care. They never got Campbellford hospital done; we did in my own community, under this minister's leadership. We're going to build new long-term-care homes. We're going to build

new homes in partnership with the federal government, Speaker.

They have no record when it comes to building, because they oppose the very things that put men and women in the skilled trades to work.

We're going to keep building a stronger Ontario.

NORTHERN TRANSPORTATION

MPP Billy Denault: My question is to the Minister of Transportation. For over a decade, residents in northern Ontario have been without passenger rail. The previous Liberal government cancelled the Northlander in 2012, cutting off communities like Huntsville, North Bay and Timmins from affordable, reliable service. Since then, residents in the north have faced higher costs and fewer options. Indigenous and remote communities that depend on this corridor have been hit hardest of all.

Speaker, our government made a commitment to restore passenger rail to the north, and we have been making real progress to back it up.

Through you, Speaker, can the minister update this House on the progress and the economic opportunity it will create for northern Ontario?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): I recognize the member for Hastings–Lennox and Addington.

Mr. Ric Bresee: Thank you to my friend the member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke for the question.

Speaker, unlike the previous government, who abandoned our north, our government is taking leadership and delivering for the residents of northern Ontario. The Northlander is on track for launch this summer—pun intended. The first train set has arrived, and it's being prepared right now for service, with additional train sets on the way.

The Ontario Northlander has acquired the Newmarket subdivision. By owning that corridor, we mitigate delays and expedite construction. This is good for jobs. This is good for the local economies and good for communities all along that corridor, who have waited far too long.

Our government made a promise to Ontarians, and Speaker, we are keeping that promise.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Back to the member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke.

MPP Billy Denault: Thank you to the parliamentary assistant for that response. Restoring the Northlander is about more than transportation; it is about economic opportunity for northern communities who rely on this corridor every day.

We know that a train is only as good as people's ability to reach it. That's why an integrated and efficient transportation network is vital, improving access for everyone, including rural and remote communities along the Northlander route.

Speaker, our government has spoken about a ride share pilot to address last-mile connectivity. Can the minister tell this House how that pilot will ensure communities can access this service and share in the economic benefits that it will bring to the north?

Mr. Ric Bresee: Thank you, again, to the member for letting me speak about this topic.

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Speaker, the member is absolutely correct: Getting people to the Northlander is just as important as the train itself. Our rideshare pilot will establish standards for operators and drivers and improve passenger access for communities all along the Northlander corridor. We own the corridor, we own the train sets and we're always learning and iterating to make better use of every tax dollar. This investment supports jobs and economic growth all across the north.

The Liberals cancelled this service with the stroke of a pen. Our government is restoring it with real investment and a real plan because northern Ontario deserves no less.

AUTISM TREATMENT

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Speaker, kids like Nico have been waiting more than five years on the wait-list for the Ontario Autism Program. That's more than half their lives—more than half their lives—waiting for support that could help them speak, learn and thrive. Parents like Nadine are still waiting to hear their child speak their first words and learn the social skills that they need in school.

Meanwhile, in schools without this early intervention, classrooms are under strain. We are seeing dysregulation escalate into crisis. We're seeing evacuations and lost learning for everyone.

Today, 67,500 children are still waiting. Why didn't this budget commit the funding needed to finally clear the wait-list and give children the services they need?

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

Hon. Michael Parsa: I want to thank the honourable member for the question. I guess maybe the NDP hasn't gotten around to looking at the budget and, in particular, the record investment that was announced in the budget for the Ontario Autism Program. The funding of this program has increased by 232% since we formed government in 2018, including that recent investment of \$186 million. I want to thank the President of the Treasury Board, I want to thank the Minister of Finance and I want to thank the Premier for continuing to support this important program in this incredibly important ministry so that we can improve outcomes for children and youth across the province.

Earlier today, the leader of the official opposition said budgets are about choices. I agree with her. I hope that after voting against the doubling of the budget in 2019, after voting against an increase of \$60 million in 2024, after voting against \$175 million last year, they come around and actually support this increase this year.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Parkdale–High Park.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Indeed, budgets are about choices, and this government is taking a spoon to empty a bathtub while the tub is still running and filling.

There are 67,500 children waiting for help—and families are not just waiting; they are navigating a system buried in red tape. They tell us the determination-of-needs process is time consuming, costly and delays access to the actual care their children need. Too much money is being spent on outsourced administration and not enough is reaching the children. The pillar programs are not solutions. They're a bandage on a growing wound.

Speaker, will the minister commit to cutting the red tape so that every single dollar goes directly to core clinical services and every child gets help now, not years from now?

Hon. Michael Parsa: Again, I thank the honourable member for the question. Of course, with the NDP, they know best, not the families.

Madam Speaker, the program that the NDP is knocking was developed by the autism community. That's the program that they're knocking. This is a program that was developed by clinicians, experts, family members, those with lived experience. But of course, the NDP knows more than them. That's the NDP, right? They always know more than them. This is a program that they developed. And if the member would like—she knows I do: I talk to families every single day. Why don't you call some of the families and ask them about the impact of entry to school? Ask them about the impact of Urgent Response, a program that was developed by families, by experts.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: We'll continue to support these important programs with or without the support of the NDP, Madam Speaker.

UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE FUNDING

MPP Tyler Watt: My question is for the Premier. Last week, this government tabled their so-called Protect Ontario budget, but there is nothing protective about turning your backs on students and their futures. Over the weekend, George Brown College filed for massive layoffs: 51 employees laid off, all while student enrolment is down 30% and courses continue being cancelled across this province.

Let's ask ourselves: Why is student enrolment down? Why are courses still being cancelled today? Perhaps it's because this government has starved post-secondary for eight years and this last-minute funding is too little, too late. Perhaps it's the cuts to OSAP that are forcing more debt burden onto students.

Speaker, my question for the Premier: After eight long years, how can this out-of-touch Conservative government continue pretending to protect Ontario, all while shutting the doors on students and making their lives more unaffordable?

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

Hon. Nolan Quinn: The member actually stated enrolment is down 30%, so I'm not sure if he wants us to keep empty classrooms that the students aren't actually enrolling into.

But, Speaker, ultimately, they broke OSAP. The leader of the interim party—third time’s a charm—he said, “They broke OSAP,” but the reality is, we are fixing OSAP. In 2017, the Auditor General made it very clear: a desperate Liberal government trying to hang on to power increased our grants to an unsustainable level of 85%, which was not in line with any other jurisdiction across Canada. We have aligned our grants-to-loan ratio, right in line with every other jurisdiction across Canada, including the federal Liberal government.

I know sometimes on TikTok he meets with the Prime Minister. Maybe he should suggest to the Prime Minister all the unilateral decisions they made on international students have decimated post-secondary, not only in Ontario, but right across Canada.

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

MPP Tyler Watt: I’m so glad the minister follows me on TikTok. It’s a great way to talk to young people; I suggest that you do the same.

You talk about OSAP as unsustainable and that’s why you have to do this? You are forcing them into more debt. You are preventing people from getting into a workforce where we desperately need people to get into colleges, to get into universities, to get into training. You’re stopping them from doing that and you stand proudly here today, saying that.

But why don’t you tell that to Sabine from Nepean? This is a high school student who wants to go on to become a psychotherapist in my riding. But with these cuts to OSAP, she doesn’t know what her future is going to look like. It’s now uncertain. Does she take on all this debt and pursue this dream of hers, or does she have to do another path? She should be celebrating this milestone in her life, but you guys have ripped the carpet out from under her.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Through the Speaker.

MPP Tyler Watt: Speaker, this isn’t just Sabine’s story. This is the reality facing students and families across this province because of this government’s direct cuts to OSAP and post-secondary. How can this government claim to be looking out for students like Sabine when your choices are forcing them to take on more debt just to access the education and training they need?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: There you have it, Speaker; that’s Liberal math. Cuts to post-secondary—\$6.4-billion investment into post-secondary and he’s calling it a cut. It’s challenging and frustrating on this side of the House, because ultimately, we have a more generous grant-to-loan ratio than the whole time the Liberals were in power. They were very desperate to cling on to power and to stay in government, so they hiked the grants to an unsustainable level. The Auditor General clearly articulated that they were desperate and made unsustainable moves with OSAP.

We are ensuring OSAP will continue to be sustainable, not just for today’s students but for the next generation of students, Speaker. We are the government that cares about affordability. We cut and froze OSAP in our first year in

office, because over the last two years of a Liberal government, tuition went up over 12%. That’s why we cut OSAP by 10% and froze it since 2018.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: My question is for the Attorney General. As a former settlement worker and Canadian, I’m proud to be from a place where anybody is free to express their religion, anywhere, any time. That’s why it offends me so much that this government goes out of its way to intervene in the Supreme Court case over Quebec’s Bill 21 and the use of the “notwithstanding” clause.

Bill 21 bans people from wearing religious symbols, like a hijab, a turban or a kippah in the workplace, and it is ruining people’s lives. This Attorney General is intervening in support of this bill because he wants to hold on to power to use the “notwithstanding” clause whenever he wants. This is an attack on religious minorities, using an authoritarian tool in a way that has no place in Canada or anywhere.

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My question to the Attorney General: How can this government stand in front of our Muslim, Sikh and Jewish neighbours and say you believe in religious freedom while actively lobbying against it?

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

Hon. Doug Downey: I thank the member from Kitchener Centre for the question.

We were very clear in our legal filings and our factum that we do not support Bill 21, we do not support that, and we would not support it in this Legislature. But we have to respect the history of our charter, Madam Speaker, and the deal that was made was for the provinces to be able to operate in their uniqueness. That is the beautiful thing about this country, is that we have uniqueness across the country for different things.

Madam Speaker, I expect it from the Liberals and I expect it from the NDP, but I didn’t know where the Greens stood on selling out the Ontario jurisdiction to the federal government. That is exactly what is being proposed, is that we do not protect either the division of power, section 91, 92—we constantly have to remind the federal government about that—or the ability for the province to use the “notwithstanding” clause in the interest of Ontarians.

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

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Back to the Attorney General: That’s a word salad. By supporting this use of the “notwithstanding” clause, he is supporting Bill 21, he is lobbying against religious freedoms, and he is saying that it’s okay to violate people’s charter rights.

The truth is, this government and this Attorney General are okay with banning a Muslim woman from teaching or a Jewish man from practising law as long as they have absolute power to violate our charter rights whenever they want, like violating the right to collective bargaining.

When religious minorities are facing an unprecedented rise in hate, we need them to stand with religious communities against this attack. We need them to stand with the World Sikh Organization, the National Council of Canadian Muslims and so many others and say no to Bill 21.

So again to the Attorney General: How can you look these communities in the eye while actively lobbying for their charter rights to be violated?

Hon. Doug Downey: I could debate all day about the charter and try to inform the members opposite. Section 33 is in the charter, and so you're not violating the charter, you're using the charter in exactly the way it was designed to be.

But you know, Madam Speaker, that becomes an academic exercise, and I'm not sure how much of that the public is really interested in. I think what the public and our constituents are interested in are things like the \$58 million that we have put into anti-hate grants for those in our communities.

We will take no lessons from the party over here that introduces the likes of Fred Hahn up there, and we will take no lessons from individuals who are suggesting that we should stand up when we are standing up and we are putting our money where our mouth is. We will not apologize for that.

HOUSING

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: My question is for the great Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Across Ontario, families are working hard to achieve the dream of home ownership. But the biggest challenges remain limited housing supply and the high cost of building new homes.

In my riding of Wellington–Halton Hills, builders and homebuyers both consistently tell me the same thing: It takes too long and costs too much to build a home in Ontario, and those costs are ultimately passed on to families looking to buy. Our government has been clear that increasing supply and supporting the growth of the market housing is essential to improving affordability.

Can the minister share how our government is taking action to reduce the cost of building new homes so more families can afford to buy a home in Ontario?

Hon. Rob Flack: Thank you to the member for Wellington–Halton Hills for a great question that I look forward to answering.

As the member from Carleton has said and as you said in your opening question, it does take too long and does cost too much to build housing in Ontario, and we are changing that. So let's talk a little bit about that.

Bill 17, Bill 60 and now Bill 98 before the House today are changing how we get homes built. It's ending duplication. It's standardizing things like official plans, the building code. It's eliminating duplicative and waste projects, like studies that make no sense to getting homes built. They're just getting in the way of getting shovels in the ground.

But this week, in the last number of days, we've had transformative change, historic action. We've eliminated the HST on new homes. We've ended DCs. We'll be ending DCs with \$8.8 billion of historic funding from the federal and provincial governments. We're lowering the costs, we're lowering the time it takes to build houses in Ontario. We're going to keep on that path, Speaker.

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

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you to the minister for sharing that great news.

Speaker, we know that lowering costs is an important part of the solution, but we also know that time is money when it comes to building housing. Delays in approvals, excessive studies and complex planning rules can add years to projects, significantly increasing costs.

Our government has already advanced legislation to modernize the planning system and cut red tape.

Speaker, can the minister outline how our government is continuing to streamline planning approvals and building on previous reforms to make it faster and easier to build housing in Ontario?

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

Ms. Laura Smith: Speaker, the member from Wellington–Halton Hills is exactly right: Cost is only half the battle, so that's why our government has been focused on speeding up approvals, fighting delays and now improving municipal planning processes. We're doing this by continuing to build on the success of Bill 17 and Bill 60 by making further changes to the Planning Act to reduce unnecessary requirements and streamline approvals.

The minister has said quite clearly the code is king, and we promised to address delays rooted in the misuse of site plan controls and enhanced Cadillac design standards. That's exactly what we're doing with the bill the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing introduced yesterday, along with other historic actions that we've taken in the last week.

These changes are focused on making the system simpler, more predictable and faster from start to finish so that when projects can move from application to construction more quickly, we can get the job done and so you can move into your new home faster.

Our goal is simple: planning a system that supports housing, supports growth, supports jobs and supports families by making it faster, easier and more affordable to build a home across Ontario.

UNEMPLOYMENT

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Among the 700,000 job-loss stories in Ontario is that of my constituent Nolan, who lost his job last year. He attended over 30 job interviews but can't find employment in his field. He has two kids, and his wife has been financially supporting the family now on her own.

Nolan wants to see job investments from this government, but he knows that nothing is coming. This is the eighth consecutive budget that this government has tabled.

How much longer must Nolan and his family wait until the Premier admits that he is a jobs disaster and simply out of ideas and solutions?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Bay of Quinte.

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: Thank you to the member for the question.

This couldn't be further from the truth. Since we took office, we've created over a million new jobs in the province of Ontario, including over 50,000 jobs in the last quarter of 2025, as well.

We've already talked about the foreign direct investment story—over \$68 billion, over 80,000 jobs for the people of Ontario—but in this budget, we also have a \$4-billion investment fund geared towards Ontario- and Canadian-based companies that will help build them from the ground up and ensure that they are capitalized, commercialized and that the employment numbers that they generate are made right here in Ontario in communities across Ontario. This is absolutely critical, because over a period of time, we've noticed that the intellectual property that comes from our great publicly funded research institutes, hospitals, colleges and universities too often has to go the United States and other markets in order to be able to scale up. Because of this investment fund—public and private—we're going to be able to grow those companies right here and create more jobs, just like for that constituent that you mentioned.

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

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I'm sure Nolan will find that response just as patronizing and insulting as I do.

I have another constituent. My constituent Kenneth has recently graduated with a PhD in cognitive science. For over a year, he's been sending out hundreds of applications before finally landing a job well outside of his field, his education and his expertise, leaving him demoralized, undervalued and underpaid for his skills and education.

The Premier's budget, released last week, continues to leave skilled workers like Nolan and Kenneth out in the cold.

Speaker, how is building an Austrian luxury spa at Ontario Place or a Ferris wheel at Niagara Falls going to help Kenneth, Nolan and the 700,000 other families who are waiting to put food on the table?

1130

Mr. Tyler Allsopp: I'm glad that that member is so concerned about job creation and investment attraction, because apparently it doesn't show up in your voting record. Every time that we put forward a program, whether it's the \$30 billion in tariff relief, whether it's the Ontario Together Trade Fund, whether it's the Ontario Made Manufacturing Investment Tax Credit, the members on that side of the House sit down. I'm starting to wonder how comfortable the chairs are over there, because we don't

seem to be able to get them to stand up for absolutely anything.

We have an opportunity with this budget to invest in greater job creation, greater job attraction; to continue to fund our incredible research institutions to bring in those investments of the future, like: Massilly: \$85 million, 50 new jobs in Brantford; Sandvik: 60 jobs in Sudbury; and AtomVie: \$138 million, 70 jobs.

These are highly paid, highly skilled jobs that are durable and will make sure that the people of Ontario can put food on their table, pay their bills and live the Ontario dream that this party believes in.

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: When I talk to families in my riding, they're worried about making it to the end of the month with money in their pocket. They're worried about their mortgage renewal. They're worried about property tax increases that are being driven by this government's policies. They're worried about everyday costs like groceries.

But we don't see anything new in the budget to help families with their expenses—nothing new for laid-off workers; nothing to take the HST off home heating and hydro. What they did see was a tired and out-of-touch Conservative government with the most expensive Premier's office in our province's history, all while regular families are being left behind.

So, Speaker, can the Premier explain why he thinks people should pay more to get less in return?

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): The member for Peterborough-Kawartha.

Mr. Dave Smith: It's actually the opposite: This Premier believes that people should be paying less. This Premier believes that people should be paying less taxes.

And the people of his riding of Ajax, I'm sure, have taken the benefit of the fact that they don't have a toll on the 412 and 418, that they don't have a toll on the 407 east any longer. I'm sure that the people in his riding of Ajax have enjoyed the fact that they've saved over \$435 a year on gas tax alone. I'm sure that the people of Ajax have really enjoyed the fact that they received a \$200 rebate cheque last year from the Ontario government, giving them back their own tax money.

These are concepts that are foreign to the Liberals. The only time you see their hands in their own pockets is when the temperature is minus 40.

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

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: That answer was a little bit interesting, because this was a government that went into the people's pockets to give them back their own money.

But here are a few things that this government could have done if they had listened to Ontario Liberals: They could have cut taxes for middle-income earners, like the Premier promised eight years ago. They could cut the HST on home heating and hydro. They could upload services

that property taxpayers are footing the bill for, or they can just stop the waste and manage our money responsibly.

Per-person debt in our province is at \$28,000, almost half the average salary of \$64,000, which only went up 3% last year. Meanwhile, average salaries in the Premier's office went up 11% last year. Young people are struggling to find work. Layoffs are happening all across our province, and families are falling further behind.

This is a government that's tired, out of touch, out of ideas and out for themselves. Speaker, when can the people expect this government to finally start managing their money responsibly?

Mr. Dave Smith: To the people of Ajax: The Ontario government invested in a long-term-care home to be built in Ajax, to serve the people of Ajax. That is an investment in those people, and that is something that I'd like to point out that the member opposite voted against in budgets.

So when we talk about the investment that Ontario is doing, when we talk about the things that are making positive differences, it is the investment in the economy; it is the jobs that are being created—more than one million jobs in Ontario today, compared to 2018 when we were first elected.

We reversed the disastrous Liberal policies around tolls. We reversed the disastrous Liberal policies around licence plate stickers, saving eight million car owners \$120 a year.

There are people in that member's riding who have direct benefit—

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): Question?

SMALL BUSINESS

Mr. Anthony Leardi: My question is for the Associate Minister of Small Business. Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, and they represent approximately 98% of businesses in Ontario. In fact, small businesses and entrepreneurs together are responsible for approximately 3.5 million jobs in our province. They work hard, night and day, to serve their local communities, donating to local charities while contributing new ideas and resources to our economy. However, global economic uncertainty, rising costs and US tariffs have placed disproportionate burdens on small businesses here in Ontario.

Speaker, can the associate minister please share how our government is helping Ontario's hard-working small business owners weather economic uncertainty and stay competitive in today's economic climate?

Hon. Nina Tangri: I want to thank the member from Essex for his question and for his very important advocacy for the businesses in his riding.

Speaker, as the member alluded to, small businesses and entrepreneurs are the backbone of Ontario. However, many small business owners I have met with these past few months have shared the pain they're feeling due to trade pressures and rising costs.

That's why, through the 2026 Ontario budget, we are cutting Ontario's small business corporate income tax rate by over 30%. That means up to \$5,000 in savings for small

business owners every single year so that they can reinvest in their businesses, hire additional staff and grow our economy.

In the face of global economic pressures, our government is ensuring small businesses can remain competitive, create jobs and build a stronger, more resilient Ontario.

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

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I thank the minister for that response and for sharing the important actions that are being taken to support small businesses through the 2026 Ontario budget. We know that supporting the growth of our small businesses and entrepreneurs is critical to job creation and a stronger economy.

However, small business owners are concerned about their future due to evolving trade pressures and inflationary costs. It's critical that they have a government that has their backs and understands the realities they are facing on the ground.

Speaker, can the associate minister please share what actions our government is taking to support small businesses in my riding of Essex and across the province of Ontario?

Hon. Nina Tangri: Since being elected, our Premier has time and time again stood up for Ontario small businesses, ensuring our government is keeping costs down and creating the right conditions for entrepreneurs to remain competitive.

Unlike the parties opposite, our record speaks for itself, whether it's by cutting the gas tax by 5.7 cents per litre, removing red tape to the tune of \$1.2 billion, fighting against the federal Liberal carbon tax until it was scrapped, or reducing the small business tax rate by nearly 38% since we took office, from 3.5% to 2.2%.

It's this Premier and this government that has never raised a single tax on the backs of hard-working people and businesses in Ontario, and we will always stand—

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

CORRECTION OF RECORD

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

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I'd like to correct my record in response to the member from Nepean. I misspoke; in fact, it was the Liberals that increased tuition. We cut tuition by 10% and froze it.

The Speaker (Hon. Donna Skelly): There being no further business, this House stands in recess until 3 p.m.

The House recessed from 1139 to 1500.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I would like to welcome several student trustees: Kenneth Yanto from Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board, Ahnaaf Hassan from Toronto District School Board, Daunte Hillen from Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board and Carter Peios from

Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board. Welcome to your House.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I'd like to welcome students from the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association, WUSA: Damian Mikhail, the president; Rem, the vice-president; Rory; Samir; and Rida Sayed, the current director. Welcome to your House for this important debate.

MPP Catherine McKenney: I'd like to welcome the students here today from the University of Ottawa student centre. Welcome to your House. Thank you for being here.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I'd like to welcome Amontaye Mullings. Accompanying him are a number of friends who are here for this very important debate.

I also want to extend my thank you and welcome to all the students from colleges and universities in my community—University of Toronto as well as Ryerson/TMU and George Brown College.

Mr. Chris Glover: I won't be able to name everybody, but I want to welcome Rob and Michelle from the Spadina–Fort York riding association; Amontaye; Marianne from OCAD; and a number of other students I see up in the galleries there, and also people here to see the OSAP opposition day motion.

PETITIONS

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: This is day three of the Ontario Liberals bringing petitions on behalf of students in our ridings who know that the changes to OSAP will negatively affect Ontario post-secondary students. Especially at this time, with rising unemployment, cost-of-living and housing challenges, it's going to hurt young people.

It calls on the Ford government to immediately reverse the announced changes to OSAP and to conduct comprehensive consultations with students and institutions and advocacy groups before any future changes. Fix OSAP ASAP.

I'm happy to support this petition and give it to page Eleanor.

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

Ms. Chandra Pasma: It's my pleasure to rise on behalf of my constituents to table a petition entitled "Save OSAP—Fund Education Now."

In the present scenario, things have never been so challenging for our young people, with record high unemployment, the cost of housing being increasingly out of reach, the price of groceries super expensive. And yet our budget tabled last week by this government didn't even mention the words "rent" and "groceries."

Now our students are going to be paying even more in tuition, but with less financial support from the government. The government is changing the nature of OSAP so

that students are going to have to pay more of that OSAP back as debt.

At a time when students already can't afford to pay housing and grocery costs, they're worried that they're never going to be able to afford a home in Ontario or start a family.

This is not the way that we should be treating our young people. It's not the way that we build for the future of our province.

So the petitioners are calling on the Legislative Assembly to demand that the Minister of Colleges and Universities reverse the OSAP cuts, stop Doug Ford's tuition hikes and provide colleges and universities, like Algonquin College in my riding, with the funding that they need so Ontario's young people can get ahead.

I fully support this petition. I will add my name to it and send it to the table with page Lily.

GO TRANSIT

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I am always proud to rise in this House on behalf of the great residents of beautiful Beaches–East York. I have a petition from them with a whole slew of signatures on it about the Lakeshore East rail corridor expansion project, from the Don River to Scarborough GO station. Although we all see the need for transit, absolutely—we should have been building more a long time ago—we need to do it right when we build it.

The residents are petitioning the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to enhance the noise and vibration mitigation—to direct Metrolinx to do this; to assess all existing rail switches; to check the vibration levels; to think about planting green buffers; to, of course, electrify—in 2026, we want electrification; and to modulate the train speeds.

I will wholeheartedly support this, add my name and send with page Liam.

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

M^{me} France Gélinas: I have this petition called "Save OSAP—Fund Education Now."

It is becoming more and more expensive to go to school in Ontario—the same thing with the sky-high rent—with fewer opportunities and higher costs at every turn, especially for younger people.

Ontario has the highest youth unemployment rate in all of Canada, yet this government is making life even harder by hiking tuition fees to go to post-secondary education and gutting the grants within the OSAP program. Gutting the OSAP grants means that students will have thousands and thousands of dollars of debt before they can even apply for their first job, forcing many of them, especially in northern Ontario, to choose between an education and a lifetime of debt. We are seeing careless cuts by this government that put Ontario's future at risk.

The people who signed the petition ask to direct the Minister of Colleges and Universities to reverse the cuts to the OSAP grants, to stop the tuition hike and to provide

colleges and universities with the funding they need so all young people in Ontario can get ahead.

I fully support this petition, will affix my name to it and ask my good page Ronald to bring it to the Clerk.

EDUCATION FUNDING

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: I'd like to present this petition on behalf of 120 residents of my riding and surrounding areas highlighting that the government has cut \$6.5 billion from public education since 2018, resulting in larger class sizes, increased violence, and inadequate special education and mental health supports for students.

It calls on the government to commit to making the necessary investments in public education to lower class sizes, increase student supports and ensure that students have the kind of schools they need.

I'm happy to support this petition. I will give it to page Jungwoon to bring to the table.

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

Mr. Chris Glover: This "Save OSAP" petition is particularly poignant. We've got students from universities and colleges from across Ontario, and I see members of the Canadian Federation of Students here. They are here because of the opposition day motion, but, right now, I'm reading this petition about how, under this Premier, young people are facing an incredibly vicious cycle of additional costs: sky-high rents, fewer opportunities and higher costs, and also the highest youth unemployment rate of any province in Canada.

On top of all that, this Premier is gutting OSAP and converting grants to loans so that students will have to take on an additional \$3,400, on average, in debt for each year that they're an undergrad.

This petition is calling on the government to reverse the gutting of OSAP, to stop the tuition fee increases and to provide colleges and universities with the money that they need to provide programs so that students can succeed.

I fully support this petition. I'll be adding my signature and passing it to page Liam to take to the table.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I have a petition today in memory of a woman named Mary-Rita, who died on the street in my riding tragically in the winter.

1510

The caring residents who signed this are imploring the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to increase funding for mental health supports, for housing—and not just housing, but affordable housing, housing with wrap-around supports and which essentially makes the world a better place.

I'm happy to sign my signature to this, and send it with page Avish.

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I have a petition here, signed by a number of individuals, calling out the fact that cuts to OSAP are going to hurt young people, and especially hurt low- and middle-income young people.

The fact that so many young people are graduating into an economy with 16.5% unemployment, the fact that rents are sky-high—young people are struggling to put groceries on the table; they cannot afford more debt.

So the signers of this petition are asking the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to immediately provide 100% grants for low- and middle-income families at all public colleges and universities to ensure that education is a right. And they call for the reversal of OSAP cuts and an increase in provincial funding for colleges and universities, at least to the national average.

I fully support this petition. I will sign it and ask page Amanda to bring it to the table, Speaker.

ONTARIO ECONOMY

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I would like to thank the Miceli family in my riding of Essex for sending me this petition.

This is a petition that talks about putting Ontario first. It makes reference to the fact that Ontario is the number one, best customer for 15 states from the United States. It talks about that the US House of Representatives and senators have voted against Donald Trump's tariffs. It talks about the fact that the US Supreme Court has ruled Donald Trump's tariffs to be illegal. And it calls upon the Legislative Assembly of the province of Ontario to issue directives and impose regulations that would prioritize Ontario-made goods and prioritize the public sector procurement for Ontario-made procurement.

I fully support this petition. I thank the Miceli family for sending it in. I will affix my name to the petition and hand it over to this fine page, Avish, to bring to the Clerk's table.

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Ahead of today's very important debate on OSAP, I'm here to rise and present once again, as I have done for the past two weeks, along with my colleagues, a petition to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to save OSAP and to fund education now:

—recognizing that this government has created an expensive vicious cycle of high unemployment for youth, sky-high rents, fewer opportunities and higher costs at every single turn;

—recognizing that Ontario now has the highest youth unemployment in Canada, and yet this government has done little to address this—instead, what they've done is hike tuition and they've slashed OSAP grants; and

—recognizing that both Liberal and Conservative governments consecutively have left Ontario ranking dead last in per-student funding in Canada, and that this govern-

ment's careless cuts continue to put Ontario's economic future at risk.

Ontario's youth should not have to pay for the price of this government's policy failures, and they deserve a government that will invest in their future. Therefore, the undersigned petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to direct the Minister of Colleges and Universities to immediately reverse the cuts to OSAP grants, stop the government's tuition hikes, and provide funding to colleges and universities so that young people in Ontario can get ahead.

Thank you very much, Speaker. I'm proud to sign this petition and to return it to the centre table with wonderful page Devlin from Scarborough Southwest.

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: This is "Save OSAP," asking the government to fund education right now.

This government has created an expensive vicious circle for Ontario youth, with sky-high rents, few opportunities and higher costs at every turn they take. Ontario now has the highest youth unemployment rate in Canada—that's all of Canada.

I had 200 students at my office, and there are thousands across Ontario asking for this. They are telling this government that cutting OSAP grants means students will be buried in thousands of dollars of debt before they can even find their first job and force these young people to choose between education or a lifetime of debt. Nobody deserves that, Speaker.

Also, they are calling on this government and the minister of colleges and universities. They want to reverse the cuts of OSAP grants. They want this government to stop tuition hikes and provide colleges and universities with the funding they need so Ontario young people can get ahead.

I'm going to fully agree with this petition. I'm going to affix my name to it and send it down to the table with Lily.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: I'm happy today to present a petition on behalf of concerned residents who are concerned that the Ford government has not raised the rate for Ontario Works since taking office in 2018 and that the rates for the Ontario Disability Support Program are also very low. Considering the rates of inflation, the small increases to ODSP have still left many citizens living below the poverty line. They're calling on the Ontario government to double social assistant rates for Ontario Works and ODSP.

I'm happy to support this petition and give it to page Ibrahim to take to the table.

HEALTH CARE WORKERS

Mr. Mike Schreiner: I want to thank the Ontario Nurses' Association for bringing forward this petition,

which outlines the fact that understaffing in our health care system of nurses is creating a crisis and that understaffing is leading to lower patient care and burnout among front-line health care workers.

They're calling on the government to take action immediately to save public health care by mandating staffing ratios for nurses and health care professionals across all systems of our health care system; developing staffing ratios in consultation with nurses through their unions; and to use public health care funding for public health care, not private health care, in order to ensure that people get the care they deserve in the province of Ontario.

I support this petition, will sign it and ask page John to bring it to the table.

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

MPP Catherine McKenney: I rise today to present this petition called "Save OSAP"—probably one of the easiest collections of signatures that I've ever gotten as an MPP. Students are worried. They're worried about their future, and rightfully so. They've got record high unemployment, housing is almost impossible, rent is almost impossible for students, and now this government is burdening them with even more debt into the future.

This petition directs the Legislature to direct the minister of colleges and universities to reverse the cuts to the OSAP grants, stop tuition hikes and provide colleges and universities with the funding they need so Ontario's young people can get ahead.

Thank you for being here. I fully support this petition and will send it down with page Else.

OPPOSITION DAY

STUDENT ASSISTANCE

AIDE FINANCIÈRE POUR LES ÉTUDIANTS

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms. Marit Stiles: We're going to debate the following motion, Speaker. The motion reads:

Whereas the Ford government has proposed reducing the proportion of grants available from the Ontario Student Assistance Program from 85% to 25%; and

Whereas previous McGuinty and Wynne Liberal governments allowed Ontario tuition fees to become the highest in the country, while providing colleges and universities with the lowest per-student funding in Canada; and

Whereas one of the Ford government's first actions in 2019 was to cut approximately \$700 million from OSAP; and

Whereas shifting OSAP from grants to loans will leave students buried in long-term debt and unable to build a future after graduation, or force students to reconsider attending college or university; and

Whereas young people in Ontario are facing a dual crisis of sky-high unemployment and rising unaffordability; and

Whereas one out of three Ontario families with student debt are living paycheque to paycheque; and

Whereas interest has been removed from Canada student loans as well as provincial student loans from Newfoundland and Labrador, British Columbia, Manitoba and New Brunswick;

Therefore, the Legislative Assembly calls on the Ford government to immediately restore the maximum proportion of Ontario Student Assistance Program grants to 85%, and remove interest from all new and existing Ontario Student Assistance Program loans.

1520

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): MPP Stiles has moved opposition day motion number 1. I go back to the member.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Thank you very much, Speaker. It has been over a month since this government made more devastating changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program, and since then, thousands and thousands of students have rallied on the grounds of this Legislature demanding the government change course. They've been walking out at high schools. They've been rallying at colleges and campuses across the province.

Today, we are giving the Premier and his government the opportunity to change course: Save OSAP; stand with students; build a better future because the future is what's at stake.

I'm a mother of two young adult women. It is a personal issue to me, the way that it is personal to so many families out there, to so many students, to so many young people.

Of the many students I've met with over the past month, one of the first folks I had a chance to speak with was a York University biology student. She came here to the people's House to try to convince this government to reverse course. Her mother had passed away a few years before, and now she is the financial provider for her siblings and their education. As a biology student it was her dream to further her education with a master's degree, but now that future is at risk. She said to me, "I would like to pursue health care, but the costs for that are exorbitant.

"So many of us are working several jobs. So many students are suffering from food insecurity. So many students are suffering from housing insecurity. At the end of the day, OSAP was the only reason I was able to access education."

These cuts, Speaker, attack vulnerable people. They put a future out of reach. I have been talking to so many post-secondary students, high school students and their parents. So many families are having their plans upended, if not completely destroyed, by the callous move by this heartless Conservative government. High school students are cancelling their plans. They are turning down their offers right now. Parents are considering remortgaging their homes, drawing down on their RRSPs, just to follow through on the promises they made to their kids so many

years ago. Even then, they're not sure it's going to be enough.

Just the other day, last week, I was going for a walk on the University of Toronto campus, and I couldn't get a couple of feet at any one time because I kept having students come up to me, thanking us for the work we're doing, but mostly to share their stories. I was very struck by two young women who came up to me, both of them studying neuroscience. One of them said to me, "You know, I need to change my plans now to continue with this important degree and my future, my ambitions, because I have siblings, brothers and sisters, who are also going to need an education. It doesn't seem fair that I'm the only one."

Can you imagine? How do these caucus members sleep at night? That's what I want to know. How do they explain to families that they believe that some people deserve a shot at a future and some people don't? This government has campaigned on championing the working class. This is a betrayal of everything that was promised, and for what? What is this government sacrificing a generation's future for? Not to lower the province's debt—well, we sure know that. Half a trillion dollars is the financial hole that this government has dug for taxpayers in the province of Ontario: \$16 billion in interest alone this year. That's more than this government will spend on post-secondary education altogether.

So this sacrifice isn't about balancing a budget because this government will surely never balance a budget. This has become very clear. They are quite happy to have led Ontario down a path of being a have-not province, and they have absolutely no plan to turn that around. We don't have to tear up families' hopes and dreams to balance the ledger. No, it's about this government's priorities because this government doesn't value education or the hard work of young people. They don't value the hard work of anyone.

This Premier has decided to make Ontario a province of winners and of losers. We hear in his comments his disdain and contempt for students. We hear it in his divisive, Trumpian rhetoric. But let's not forget where he comes from, this silver-spoon Premier. This is a guy who was born at the top of the ladder, and here he is today giving people lectures on how to climb. You know what he cares about at the top of that ladder? Luxury spas—that's right—fantasy islands, convention centres, disruptive private jets at the Toronto waterfront—totally out of step with the reality of Ontarians today, Speaker.

When thousands of students showed up here to the people's building, the Premier refused to step out. He refused to come out and meet with them. He refused to look them in the eye and explain himself. No, instead, he accused them of buying fancy colognes and luxury watches. What? What? The man behind the luxury spa is accusing food-insecure students of buying luxury watches. It's a bit rich, Speaker.

Honestly, you cannot make this stuff up. Just because the Premier and his finance minister are spendthrifts doesn't mean that he gets to paint students with the same

brush. Just because he and his finance minister are dragging the government into generations of debt doesn't mean he has to drag students along with them.

He could do the right thing today. He and his government can acknowledge that this is one more way that they are making life more expensive for the people of this province. This is one more way that they are making life harder for everyday people. This is one more way that they have broken their word to the people of Ontario. But they could stand up today, they could support this motion and they could end the uncertainty of thousands of families, thousands of young people all across Ontario.

That's what we are focused on, on this side of the House. We are focused on making life easier. We are focused on setting our youth up for success. It's why we have been spending the last month meeting with students all across Ontario to hear directly from them. The NDP has stood with them on the grounds out front. We have stood with them in town halls. We have stood with them in press conferences. We have stood with them on college and university campuses all across this province. They are here today in the gallery. Thank you for being here.

We have listened to their voices when the government shut the door, and this is what we have heard: that the same issues—food prices, gas prices, rent; the issues that are impacting millions of people all across this country—are the same issues that are facing students, in most cases impacting them even worse; that they need a government who is willing to work with them, Speaker, listen to them and help them to build up for the future during a time when the future seems so uncertain.

Global unrest, senseless wars, tariffs, economic upheaval—stability is hard enough to come by these days, and people feel insecure about their plans for the future. It is our job as members of this House to do something about that. It is our responsibility as the adults in the room to give our kids a fighting chance.

So today, we are demanding that the government reverse course on these OSAP changes, on this absolutely terrible decision. We are demanding the government restore OSAP grants to students and we are demanding that the government remove the interest off of student loans like so many other jurisdictions have done.

On this side of the House, we want our kids to stay and build a future here in the province of Ontario. On this side of the House, we want to prioritize people, not vanity projects. That's where this government has made a mistake and has missed the mark. That's where this budget has shown who this government truly stands for.

I want to be clear: This motion is more than just an indictment on this government's poor choices. It represents the thousands and thousands of voices of students across this province who are simply asking that they not be abandoned. It represents the voices of parents who are simply asking the government not to break the promise that was made to their children years ago. It represents the voices of families—past, present and future—who believe in our province as a place to live and grow and dream.

It's a motion, Speaker. It's just a motion, but if this government stands up and supports it, if this government is willing to admit it made a mistake—just admit it—and that there is a better way forward, a way that doesn't leave so many people behind, then it can change, right now, the lives of millions of people in the province of Ontario.

1530

I really want to implore the government: Stand with us today. Stand with Ontario families. Do the right thing. Stand up for the future.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

MPP Tyler Watt: I'm proud to rise today to discuss this. It's kind of a full-circle moment for me, having first gotten into politics because of the cuts to OSAP back in 2019.

I do want to say as well I do support the ask in this motion, and I want to let everyone know here that I am tabling a similar motion that goes even farther that will include bringing back the free tuition program and includes a two-year grace period for your repayments.

I want to touch on my personal story as well. Like I said, I first got involved in politics when the Ford government first cut hundreds of millions of dollars to OSAP back in 2019. I was in my third year of nursing school, and I was a part of that free tuition program. I was a mature student, low-income, and I had the luck and privilege of being a part of that free tuition program. When this government came into power, that was axed. Grants were turned into loans. A lot was taken off of loans. I had student nurse colleagues in my own program who had to quit, who had to drop out, because they simply couldn't afford to live anymore and get through their education. And when you're in your third year of nursing, you are doing full-time lectures, clinical, lab work on top of—you know, like me, if you're working part-time still, if you could squeeze that in. So, it was really challenging, and that is what motivated me to start speaking out.

I remember going to those initial Save OSAP rallies back in 2019. I came up to Queen's Park and stood outside with students, demanding that this government reverse their cuts to OSAP. Hundreds of millions of dollars—that was one of the first things they did when they got in power, after getting rid of rent control as well. It was really just such a “screw you” to young people and to students. And—

Hon. Nina Tangri: That's unparliamentary.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I caution the member.

MPP Tyler Watt: Okay—withdraw.

I stand here today as an MPP. This has been part of the reason why I've been so motivated to get into Queen's Park and help advocate for these changes, not only what I do as a nurse and what I advocate for my patients in health care, but things like this as well.

I want us to support young people. I want them to feel like they actually have a chance and opportunity, because most don't feel that hope right now. Most are struggling—struggling to pay their rent, to maybe buy groceries that

week, maybe some Kraft Dinner if they're feeling fancy. Maybe they have enough money to pay their cellphone. They probably don't have enough money to buy textbooks. I remember going to the library and photocopying the chapter I had to read that night because I straight up did not have money. Actually, I looked up how much money I had after the 2019 cuts to OSAP. After my tuition was paid, I had \$420 per month left for the year. That's before rent—\$420. And we are expecting students to survive on this.

And by the way, the cost of living is 64% up since the story I'm telling you. OSAP has not kept up with that, so no wonder students are so furious right now, no wonder that they're fired up. I haven't seen them this fired up in a long time, and you guys should be listening. I have real stories for you to listen to.

I spoke today, actually, about Sabine, a grade 12 student in my riding of Nepean. She got an early acceptance to study sociology at Carleton University and aspires to become a psychotherapist. We desperately need psychotherapists in this province, and to stay in this province. But now, before setting foot on campus, she's already running the numbers: tuition, rent, textbooks and the added cost of graduate school. What should be an exciting milestone for her is instead filled with financial anxiety. She fears the level of debt required to pursue her dream career is simply not sustainable.

Mark, a first-year engineering student at the University of Waterloo: one of Ontario's most demanding programs, a schedule packed with lectures, labs and assignments. Engineering cannot be done part-time. Rising cost of living and limited financial support are forcing additional work hours just to cover the basics. This is the impossible trade-off: prioritize studies and fall behind financially or work more and fall behind academically.

Students training to become Ontario's engineers of tomorrow and our future workforce, who we desperately need to build up this province, shouldn't be having to choose between those two things. Students are just asking for basic support; they're not asking for the world.

I have Radhika, an incoming university student with a clear goal to become a doctor in Ontario. She's worked hard academically with a clear path forward, but her family has suddenly faced some difficult financial circumstances. Now far more reliant on OSAP to access post-secondary education, with cuts to financial aid and rising cost of living, this path is no longer certain. These cuts are not just increasing debt; they are closing the door on students with talent and drive to contribute to critical professions in this province.

And the students that I've mentioned today, these are not unique stories; these are stories that I'm hearing across the province. I've had the privilege of being able to tour and visit colleges and universities across Ontario. I did a southwest tour where I went to Guelph, Waterloo, Kitchener and London, and I got to meet so many incredible students with so many different, unique stories: the struggles that they face every single day, the things that

they're worried about, the dreams that they have—how brilliant these minds are.

Something that really sticks out in my mind is the McMaster University nuclear reactor facility, which plays a critical role in producing medical isotopes used in cancer treatment. This is revolutionizing the way that we treat cancer. To be able to move away from chemotherapy and radiation therapy into medical isotopes—and discovered in Canada, in Ontario? This is something that we need to be investing in, and keeping those minds, those passionate, brilliant minds, here in this province.

But you know what? When I talked to students at Waterloo—all those engineering students whose brains I wouldn't have a tenth of—they all want to go to the US. They all want to go work for Tesla; they all want to go work for Apple. They tell me that there's nothing here for them. They don't feel hope in this province, and that really speaks volumes.

Before I wrap up my time here: This government claims to have the best interest of post-secondary students, but everything they do, especially in this budget, tells us otherwise: record cuts to OSAP—\$500 million of cuts to OSAP coming in this next budget; cost of living through the roof; unprecedented rise in youth mental health crises etc.—let alone the changes that are coming through Bill 33 that could potentially annihilate student governments and associations on campus that literally are responsible for providing health care, things like bus transit to students, running food banks, running clubs. All these things that actually help with their mental health, those all may go away, depending on how Bill 33 is implemented. Students are worried, and this government needs to listen. It's not too late to back up and reverse your decision here.

I do want to address that one “whereas” in this, with the shout-out to the former Liberals. In my motion, I won't be playing that petty game. I will be supporting your motion. But if we're going to play that game of the government of yesteryear, I could throw something in there, but I won't be. I still agree with the motion here.

Interjections.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, thank you.

So, at the end of the day, students are just asking for a chance. They want hope. They don't feel that right now. It's such a struggle to get through college, university, whatever their training program is. The job market is not hot right now. They don't know where their future is going to be. So let's help them out a little bit. It is so hard to be a young person in this province, and if they want to contribute, if they want to become a part of Ontario's workforce, then we need to make sure that we're helping them and that we're investing properly into post-secondary education, that we're investing properly into students and that we are supporting our families so the burden does not fall on the student or the parents.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Good afternoon, everyone.

Speaker, I must say, I've been really looking forward to returning to the Legislature to clear up misinformation—

Interjection.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: —as I'm getting heckled from—thank you; I appreciate that—about our government's recent actions to protect and stabilize our post-secondary sector. So I'm honoured to rise today and do so.

Our plan is built on three pillars:

- preparing students for rewarding, in-demand careers that meet labour market needs;

- preserving students' ability to access high-quality post-secondary education while supporting their investment in their education and success; and

- providing Ontario's post-secondary sector with long-term sustainability while continuing to ensure funding for the sector is being used to further Ontario's position as a centre for world-class research excellence and workforce development.

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These changes come in response to the unprecedented pressures Ontario's—and Canada's—post-secondary sector is facing. Over the last two years, the federal government has made many unilateral changes—cuts to international student permits—decimating the financial health of Canada's post-secondary system. The federal Liberal government cut Ontario's permits by 30% in 2024, 23% in 2025 and 42% in 2026. This was not a minor policy shift; this was a direct hit to Ontario's institutions, amounting to a \$2-billion loss in annual revenue.

On top of that, the federal government also announced last fall that it would no longer offer grants to career college students, effective June 2026. Combined with the sharp increase in program uptake, OSAP was facing a \$2.3-billion pressure for fall 2026—a pressure that would rise to \$2.7 billion in the years ahead.

Our sector was at a crossroads, threatening our province's ability to keep producing one of the most competitive workforces in the G7. So our government did what we always have done: We protected Ontario. Let me explain just how we did that.

First, beginning this fall, we're launching a new funding model for our colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes. This new model is bringing an additional \$6.4 billion to our sector—the largest post-secondary investment in Ontario and Canadian history. This investment is on top of the \$5 billion we already provide the sector every year, bringing annual operating funding to \$7 billion—a 30% increase over last year. This model also includes \$1.7 billion to fund 70,000 more seats in economy-driving sectors like STEM, health care, teacher education and the skilled trades so that more students can prepare for successful careers in fields they want and Ontario needs. The new model also includes \$3.3 billion for the delivery of those in-demand programs, ensuring our schools keep producing graduates who are ready to lead and drive our key sectors.

We're also investing \$1.1 billion to increase per-student funding across the board, giving institutions the stable, predictable support they need to provide a world-class education. That's alongside the \$284 million that will be put towards the unique costs of offering higher education at small, northern, rural and French-language institu-

tions, and the \$57 million that will expand seats out of our Indigenous institutes and strengthen Indigenous-led education. Our historic investment has been called “transformational,” “a game-changer” and “an investment in Ontario's long-term prosperity” by the sector, just to name a few quotes.

Amid federal Liberal decisions that launched the sector into instability, our government has stepped up with record-setting, predictable funding that no government—NDP or Liberal—has provided before. In doing so, we're ensuring Ontario's students can keep receiving a world-class education that sets them up to meaningfully contribute to our province's workforce not just for today, but for decades to come.

Second: When we took office in 2018, Ontario had the highest tuition in Canada. Under the previous Liberal leadership, tuition went up by 83%, while the rate of inflation was just 30%, Speaker. Let me say it again: Tuition rose by 83% under the McGuinty-Wynne leadership years. That's why one of our government's first orders of business was reducing tuition by 10% and freezing it in 2019, making higher education more affordable for hard-working students and their families.

But as I said earlier, the post-secondary landscape today is vastly different than it was eight years ago due to repeated changes made by the federal government. If we want to safeguard our future, we have to assess and respond to the realities of today. And the reality is that within this new landscape, our schools must be able to diversify their revenue in order to keep offering the world-class education that our province is known for. That's why we're allowing our publicly assisted colleges and universities to increase tuition by up to 2%, Speaker. For the average college student, this works out to 18 cents a day, and 47 cents a day for the average university student. That's less than a morning coffee or a monthly Netflix subscription.

This modest, controlled increase is also one of the lowest in the country—lower than NDP-led BC—keeping higher education affordable for students and their families. To ensure that no student gets left behind, the tuition increase will be fully covered for low-income students through our enhanced Student Access Guarantee. While the Ontario Liberals allowed tuition to nearly double during their tenure and the federal Liberals decimated the financial health of post-secondary institutions across all of Canada, this government is keeping tuition affordable for our students and enabling our schools to achieve financial sustainability.

As I mentioned earlier, if the many unilateral changes to post-secondary education by the federal Liberals were not enough, this fall we received another: Career college students would no longer be eligible for federal student grants. Coupled with increased uptake of OSAP over the last five years, this decision was the final straw that broke the OSAP framework, creating billions of dollars of pressure on the Ontario program. And let me be very clear, because this information is missing from their TikToks and their infographics: The OSAP framework that we

inherited from the previous Liberal government was not only dramatically out of line compared to other Canadian jurisdictions, but it was also not designed for long-term sustainability.

For years, under former Liberal Premier McGuinty, Ontario only offered up 15% of OSAP funding as grants, and a minimum of 85% as loans. Out of their 15 years in power, 14 years had a 15% grant ratio. But in 2017, under Premier Wynne, this ratio was flipped in a desperate move—a move which the Auditor General at the time called “unsustainable,” projecting to add billions of pressure to OSAP. And that is exactly the mess we are cleaning up. If we continued down that path, OSAP would have been destroyed—it would have been decimated—meaning the next generation of students and the generation after them would not be able to receive financial aid, and that’s something we could not accept.

To protect OSAP, protect student access to higher education and to protect the investment students make in themselves, we brought our allocation methodology in line with all the other provinces. Our new framework offers even more grants than NDP-led BC and is right in line with the federal Liberal government’s—

Interjection.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: —as I’m getting heckled by a Liberal member. It is right in line with the federal Liberal government’s approach to student financial aid.

While we’re on the topic of the federal government’s student financial aid framework, let me also point out, Speaker, that 60% of OSAP funding is federal funding, meaning it is subject to the exact same federal grant and loan framework, which is very similar to what we’re implementing in Ontario. Yet somehow, I’ve never heard the members opposite raise the issue about their federal friends’ grants and loans ratios.

But let’s get back to the students, because that is what it is really all about, Speaker. I’d like to clear up some misconceptions students have about OSAP loans. OSAP loans are not your standard bank loans. These loans do not accrue interest while the student is at school. When the student is working, interest rates are extremely low, at prime plus 1%. Furthermore, students have a six-month grace period after graduation before they need to start paying their OSAP loans. And we have a variety of payment plan options to ensure students are supported as they start their careers.

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As I said earlier, low-income students will continue to be supported through the enhanced Student Access Guarantee. This program requires institutions to set aside funding to support educational costs for high-need students if OSAP does not cover these costs completely. This government has never raised a tax on the people of Ontario, and we will continue to ensure students of all financial backgrounds can access higher education.

Which brings me to my next point: Apart from OSAP, our government offers many other programs to financially support our students. For example, through budget 2025, we invested \$10 million to create new scholarships for

First Nations students pursuing careers in resource development. These scholarships cover tuition, books and other educational costs, as well as another \$2,500 per student for other financial barriers. I’m proud to share that the first cohort of students supported by these scholarships just started their programs in January, well on their way to meaningful careers that build Ontario’s economy.

Another financial aid program I’m very proud of is our Ontario Learn and Stay Grant. This grant provides 100% upfront funding for tuition, books and other direct educational expenses for students in nursing, paramedic and medical lab technology programs. In return, students work in high-need communities after graduation, building stronger regional health care networks. Since its launch in 2023, the grant has provided over \$175 million to support nearly 13,000 students. That’s 13,000 students who had their post-secondary education completely covered by our government.

Beginning in the 2026-27 academic year, we’re expanding the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant to medical students. We’re investing \$160 million to cover 100% of tuition, fees and other direct educational costs for future family doctors who commit to practising anywhere in Ontario after graduation.

We also offer the personal support worker learn and earn program and the PSW to practical nurse learn and earn program. These programs provide financial support for long-term-care staff, including resident support personnel and dietary aides, to get the education they need to become PSWs, or for current PSWs to become registered practical nurses. These programs are currently supporting more than 1,300 workers across the province.

Another great initiative is Better Jobs Ontario. This program offers funding for training programs and educational courses that assist people in rejoining the workforce quickly, covering up to \$35,000 per person in costs such as tuition, transportation and child care.

These are just a few of the programs we offer to financially support Ontario students. Whether it’s through OSAP, OLSG or one of the other programs I just highlighted, our government continues to break down barriers to ensure students of all financial backgrounds can get the skills they need to land in-demand jobs in careers that drive Ontario’s economy.

Speaker, this government was elected for a historic third mandate under a promise: a promise to protect Ontario. And that’s what the actions I have outlined are doing. We took a post-secondary sector that was struggling financially at the careless hands of the federal Liberals, a tuition framework that under the previous government had zero regard for affordability, and an OSAP program that was bound for failure, and we put them on a path to long-term sustainability.

We know our post-secondary institutions are the pipeline that builds one of the most competitive workforces in the G7 and that today’s students are tomorrow’s industry leaders. With these changes, we’re ensuring our schools can keep producing the graduates Ontario needs and that students can continue to access a world-class education

that sets them up for successful careers for today and every day that follows, no matter what our province may face, because that is what it means to protect Ontario.

The opposition can continue to twist, distort, heckle, not listen to the actual facts or the changes we made, but my message to the students and post-secondary institutions is clear: Because of our government's decisive action, Ontario's colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes will be able to continue offering the best education in the world. Ontario's students will continue to be equipped with the skills they need to land good-paying jobs that drive our economy, and our province's workforce will remain one of the most competitive in the G7.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I'm going to start out by sharing some comments about the importance of OSAP grants: "Here is what makes OSAP truly impactful: 85% of Ontario's financial aid for full-time students in 2024-25 came in the form of grants—money that students do not have to repay. Let me repeat that: Students do not have to repay these grants. By reducing the amount of student loans needed to take on—we're supporting graduates to start their careers with less debt and more freedom to pursue their careers and their future lives. That means more young people can afford to buy homes, start their families and contribute to Ontario's economy sooner."

Those are words that were taken directly from Hansard, spoken in November 2025, not by an NDP member but by the minister of colleges and universities himself.

Interjection: He said that?

Ms. Peggy Sattler: That's right. The minister understood then why saddling the next generation of students with a mountain of OSAP debt was bad policy—bad for students, bad for the economy, bad for Ontario's future. So why the change of heart? Well, shortly after they were first elected, this government took a post-secondary sector that was already in crisis and threw it into complete chaos, then stood by as thousands of jobs were lost, hundreds of programs cancelled, entire campuses closed and student services cut.

After driving our colleges and universities to the brink of collapse, the government finally recognized it had to do something. But rather than allocating the revenues actually needed to stabilize the sector, the government instead decided to convert OSAP from primarily a grants program to a loans program. They did this without any consultation with students or the public, sweeping the rug out from under the feet of students who are making decisions right now about college or university in the fall with the reasonable expectation that OSAP grants would be available.

But since the announcement, the government has heard from students as well as their families about what these changes will mean. They have heard from high school students worried about having to choose between graduating with a massive amount of debt or not going to post-secondary at all. They have heard from current college and university students who are being forced to consider pausing their program or changing their career plans,

giving up their dreams of going to grad school, becoming a doctor, nurse or lawyer. They have heard from mature learners who want to retrain or reskill but are having second thoughts when it means taking on more debt in addition to car payments, rent or mortgage costs and child care.

Students are mobilizing in communities right across this province, and I want to thank those who are here with us today.

Interjections.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Yes. Thank you.

Students are speaking out in the media, forming coalitions, organizing rallies, holding town halls, coordinating school and campus walkouts with one clear message for this government: Reverse these damaging cuts. Today, we're giving the government a chance to show that they have listened. This motion calls for the restoration of OSAP to 85% grants and also for the removal of interest on student loans, just as other governments have done.

We are in the midst of an affordability crisis and a jobs crisis. Rents are sky-high. More and more students are relying on food banks. Youth unemployment is almost 20%. Students can't find part-time jobs or summer employment. They don't know if they will find a job when they graduate.

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This motion will provide the relief that young people need: relief from debt, relief from interest on loans.

Speaker, we all benefit when young people—when any Ontarian—is able to pursue post-secondary education. We should not be putting barriers in the way of people who are simply trying to get ahead. Our motion takes a step forward to ensuring that education is truly a pathway to opportunity. There is only one choice for this government today: Vote yes to reverse these cuts.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: Right now in our province, it's a very scary and uncertain time to be a young person. That should mean it's time for all of us here in this Legislature to work together and do the right thing for students. That's why I will be supporting this motion, a motion that calls for a return to the OSAP model that was working for students—a model that ensured that if you worked hard and you got the grades, you got to go to school, because that's how it should be.

When I was growing up, we didn't have a lot. My mom worked hard. I worked hard in high school and in university, and the support though that I had through OSAP still made a very real difference in my life.

I want young people today, those who are in the gallery, those who are watching at home or will watch clips later on, to have even more support than I did so that they can go further, that they can achieve more, and not just build a future here in Ontario, but build Ontario's future.

This motion is calling for returning to the grant model of OSAP. It's the same model that students relied on before these cuts. So restoring OSAP grants would provide

students with some certainty. It will provide them what they're expecting.

Imagine being in first year or second year or third year and you put in your applications. You're like, "Okay, Mom, Dad, I got accepted. I got to go to school. This is how it's going to be set up for me." And imagine having that rug pulled right out under you. That's what this government has done with this change, Speaker.

That means, for students, more debt, more stress, more young people questioning whether they can even afford school.

Not too long ago, I was in Belleville. I was talking with folks who attended Loyalist College and people involved in programs at Loyalist College. Folks were telling me that their kids were the first in their family to go to post-secondary, to go and chart a different path, a different course for themselves. This government is saying, "No, no, no, hold on. We don't want you to achieve. We don't want you to believe. We don't want you to have that same hope." It's a shame, Speaker.

Every person in our province deserves a fair chance. Every student should have the opportunity to go to a great school, to discover what they're good at, to build a career and a life. Education shouldn't depend on how much money your parents make. It should depend on your effort and your ambition.

I see some gaslighting, frankly, from the other side, and I see the province continuing to blame the federal government. Well, who gets accepted by institutions? The province has control over that. The acceptance letters of folks coming from other parts, overseas? The province gets to actually have some control over that, otherwise you don't get to come to the country in the first place. So the province poured gasoline on an already bad situation—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I have to interrupt and caution the member, and caution all members, about the language they use in the House. "Gaslighting" is not appropriate.

Mr. Rob Cerjanec: But Speaker, the provincial government, I feel, was riding the wave. I felt that the actions over the last eight years, when it came to our post-secondary system—instead of taking responsibility for the system, instead of doing what the provincial government should be doing and building up the system, they were irresponsible. The provincial government, in my view, through their actions, was irresponsible, and it was reckless. And now it means for those kids who are in first, second or third year, the rug is pulled out from under them.

It means that students are going to be graduating with \$20,000, \$30,000, \$40,000 and even more in debt, things that they weren't necessarily banking on before. That means, you want to go and buy a home after? Well, you're starting at negative \$40,000. That's not the province that I want to see, Speaker.

So instead of helping students, this government is making life harder for them. They're cutting those grants and replacing them with loans. They're increasing the debt burden on young people.

Students themselves are saying it clearly. They're worried that they're going to pay more and get less support. They're already reconsidering their plans. Some are choosing closer schools or no schools at all.

That's what these cuts, frankly, are doing. They're going to limit opportunity. And young people in our province—the deck is already stacked against them. Housing costs are high, the cost of living is going up and it's a tough job market. Youth unemployment is extremely high in our province. Now we're going to make education more expensive as a result. Students and young people are getting squeezed from every single direction. It's harder to buy a home, harder to start a family, harder to get ahead.

We're at a turning point, I believe, in our province's history where if we want a strong economy, we need educated, ambitious young people who are willing to take risks, to start new businesses and to create new industries. But when people are buried in debt, it's pretty hard to go out and take a risk when you're starting negative \$40,000 in debt—you delay starting businesses, you delay starting families. Higher student debt hurts innovation. It will hurt innovation in our province, it's going to hurt our economic growth, and, frankly, it's going to hurt Ontario's future.

We need to talk about what education really is. Hearing the Premier comment about basket-weaving programs—there are programs that exist because they do provide value to students, classes in the arts, in the humanities, in the social sciences and so many other fields that build creativity, critical thinking, community, the ability to understand other folks. When I did my undergrad at York University—I'm very proud—my degree was interdisciplinary. I got to learn about things that I otherwise wouldn't have had the opportunity to do. If you're in engineering, accounting, sciences or political science, like I took, having a well-rounded experience will make you better at what you do. Those experiences matter because they shape who we become and they shape how we build our lives.

We expect young people to contribute. If we expect them to build communities, to grow our economy, we have got to give them a fair shot. Right now, I see this government is making it harder. It raises a very serious question: Why would any government want young people to start behind? Why make them carry more debt? Why make it harder to succeed? Does this government want entrepreneurs, happy families and the economy of the future, or do they want a workforce that is desperate from constant financial pressure and unable to get ahead?

With this motion—and I'll say this very, very clearly—I am glad to see the NDP calling for a return to this model because it's a return to the Liberal OSAP framework. It's a system that prioritized access, that prioritized opportunity. If we agree the model worked, we should work together to restore it and work together to improve it. That's what I implore members in this House to be able to do because it's about fairness, it's about opportunity, it's about the future of this province. I look forward to working together with those who are interested to bring back OSAP ASAP

and ensure that every young person in Ontario has a real chance and opportunity to succeed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate? Further debate? I recognize the member from Niagara Falls.

MPP Wayne Gates: I was standing; you just didn't see me.

I just want to start by talking to the minister.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Through the Chair, please.

MPP Wayne Gates: I want to say, turn around, all you Conservatives, and look at these students that have given up this afternoon to be here for this debate. Turn around, look at them, give them a big round of applause, show them how you appreciate them coming here.

The minister, through his speech, is trying to convince all of us—all of us, the Liberals, the NDP, the independents, the Greens—that you can't afford the program, that you're doing everybody a favour because 20 years from now or 30 years from now you won't have the money to have a grant system. I would almost buy that bag of you know what, except I take a look at my notes here and you're spending billions of dollars on the 413. You're spending billions of dollars at Ontario Place. You're spending billions of dollars—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Through the Speaker, please.

MPP Wayne Gates: —on projects all over the province. I'm going to say this clear: The only place you should be investing, the first place you should be investing should be in our young people, the people who are going to run this country for the next 50, 60, 70 years—not making it harder for them; making them go into debt, \$30,000, \$40,000, so when they come out of school, they can't buy a house, they can't pay their rent and they can't buy their groceries. So the only thing you should be doing is investing in young people—because other countries all over the world get it.

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The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I will remind the member to speak through the Chair.

MPP Wayne Gates: I was looking at you; I was just looking over the top of your head.

I'm going to finish by saying you have to support this motion.

The last thing I'll say is, I've got a granddaughter, and when she heard about this—she's in university, and the only way she could go was through the grant process. She called me—the first call I got, not from a constituent; from my granddaughter. She said—

Interjection.

MPP Wayne Gates: Yes, I've got to sit down.

“What am I going to do, Grandpa?” I said, “Never vote Conservative.” That's what I told her.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Ms. Lee Fairclough: We are facing a serious affordability crisis. As I travel around Ontario, I'm hearing from young people who are trying to keep their heads above

water. Rent and grocery prices continue to explode, and, with the worst unemployment rate for their age group since the 1970s, it has become near impossible for young people to get a job.

Now life has become even more difficult for young people because of the Conservatives' terrible plan to gut OSAP funding.

OSAP cuts are not just numbers on a spreadsheet; they are a direct attack on opportunity. These cuts force young people deeper into debt before their careers can even begin. These cuts will affect young people's choices: which school to attend, which degree to pursue, or if they will need to take on a part-time job or multiple jobs while they're learning. For the most economically disadvantaged students, it will mean the difference between being able to continue their education or leaving school altogether.

This is the dangerous reality that the Conservatives are creating. Now, more than ever, more students will lose their housing and turn to food banks. It does not have to be this way. Conservatives chose to do this.

My priorities are completely different. My priorities are what matter to young people. I want an Ontario where every young person knows that they can build a future here without being buried in debt before they even begin their career.

I spoke with Anna in London recently, who is the first in her family to ever go to university or college. She was counting on OSAP to make that possible, and now she's unsure about what her future will look like.

I would do things differently. I would protect grants. I'd reduce student debt. And I'd make sure every single qualified student can afford to stay in school. That is the future the Liberal Party is trying to build.

Young people are living the consequences of the Conservatives' incompetent decisions, and the Conservatives are failing this generation.

For the first time in generations, families are now asking a painful question: Will their kids actually have a good standard of living like they did? The OSAP cuts are yet more proof that that fear is becoming a reality in Ontario.

Education is the backbone of an advanced and thriving economy, and to cut people's access to education is to undermine the economy itself. If we want to create an Ontario that is a world leader, we need to invest in our young workforce.

The consequences of this decision don't just stop at graduation for young people. Young people will be saddled with debt because of the Conservatives. The dream of home ownership, buying a car, or even starting a family feels more impossible. These are the long-term costs of this short-sighted Conservative policy.

I have visited several universities and colleges recently, travelling around this province, and I've spoken to students, including at McMaster, Queen's, Western, right here at the University of Toronto, and Humber College in my own riding. I hear the same story again and again: Young people thought that they would be completing their

college or university degree, and now they're having second thoughts. They feel their future plans fading away.

There is also no new net money being allocated for colleges or universities by this government.

When I looked at the budget last week, I looked closely to see where we found that money to give to the universities and colleges to help them. It came directly from the OSAP line. The two are the same. Overall we are seeing a decline in investment over the next several years.

While I rise to support this motion today, next week our party will introduce our motion, because this motion still does not go far enough. The Ontario Liberals were proud champions of education during our time in government. The OSAP structure we are defending today is the proud creation of the Ontario Liberals, and we will always stand up for affordable, accessible post-secondary education for every young person.

With that said, the description of the Liberal government's track record on protecting OSAP is simply wrong by the NDP. Nevertheless, we need to protect OSAP and we are committed to protecting opportunity in this province. That is why I will support this motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I rise today to save OSAP. I want to share voices from Oshawa that were shared with me through my OSAP Impact Survey, a community town hall I hosted, what I heard from students walking out of their high schools and from students here on the lawns at Queen's Park. I want to know what this government will say to the future, but I have a few things that they would like to say to you.

From Joelle to Doug Ford, she says, "I want to say that you are destroying the futures of many students with dreams of success. These OSAP changes make it inaccessible for lower-income students to be able to pursue careers in important and highly needed sectors of work."

Sana says, "Since I rely on OSAP to help cover school expenses, any reduction in grants or increase in loans means I may have to work more hours while studying, which could affect my academic performance and mental well-being."

Mariangel says, "I plan to go into child and youth work," which "is not a 'basket-weaving course.' I'm only in grade 10, but I constantly worry for my future."

Kennedi wants to know how the Premier "feels to be taking away my chance to pursue my passion because my family doesn't have enough to fund my education."

Napith says, "I don't have the money to afford loans and I'm on my own at 16 trying to survive. I wish to go to university, but with 75% of loans it makes it impossible as I'll be spending years paying them off instead."

Eniola says, "My immigrant parents can't afford to put me through university with the OSAP cuts."

Julie is a concerned mom who says, "My children will now be strapped with a mountain of debt before their lives even truly begin.... This is a disaster that we were not prepared for."

Ronald's daughter is in STEM at Ontario Tech and he says that "even with the scholarship, without the OSAP

grant money, she is seriously considering dropping out after first year."

Erin says, "You are keeping the poor poor."

And what I say is stop attacking the future of students. Reduce barriers to success. Support this motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: It's my turn to rise today. Of course I need to support this motion. I don't think that supporting and standing up for the Ontario Student Assistance Program is something that is optional. I think it's an obligation, really. It's an obligation if we believe in fairness, it's an obligation if we believe in opportunity and it's an obligation if we believe that young people in Ontario deserve better than a lifetime of debt simply for choosing to pursue an education. Because at its core, this debate is about a simple question: Who gets a fair shot in Ontario?

Speaker, I will switch into French for most of the remainder of my notes, so if you need to pay particular attention, please feel free.

Donc, monsieur le Président, ce débat nous oblige à regarder la réalité en face. Le gouvernement prétend vouloir s'aligner avec d'autres juridictions. Alors, parlons-en des autres juridictions.

Partout au Canada, les gouvernements vont dans la même direction : ils réduisent le fardeau des étudiants. Le gouvernement fédéral a éliminé les intérêts sur les prêts étudiants, et les provinces comme la Colombie-Britannique, le Manitoba, le Nouveau-Brunswick et Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador ont fait la même chose.

Mais qu'est-ce qu'on fait ici en Ontario? On fait exactement le contraire. On s'en va dans la direction inverse.

Alors que les autres juridictions allègent le fardeau, notre gouvernement a décidé d'alourdir le fardeau pour les étudiants. Alors que les autres juridictions facilitent l'accès, le gouvernement recule en redirigeant les fonds où les étudiants ne pourront pas en profiter.

Monsieur le Président, il faut aussi parler du sous-financement chronique de nos établissements post-secondaires. L'Ontario affiche déjà le financement par étudiant parmi les plus faibles au pays. Ce n'est pas quelque chose dont on devrait être fier. On demande à nos universités et à nos collèges d'en faire plus avec moins, et ensuite, on se tourne vers les étudiants et on leur dit: « C'est à vous à payer la différence, maintenant. »

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Ce n'est pas une politique responsable; c'est un transfert de responsabilité qui est très injuste. En fait, ce n'est pas nouveau non plus, parce que si on regarde en 2019, le gouvernement a coupé environ 700 millions de dollars dans les prêts et bourses pour les étudiants.

Il y a aussi un autre moment dans l'histoire récente dont on parle peut-être un peu moins souvent et c'est ce qui est arrivé pendant la pandémie en 2020-2021. Je sais qu'on n'aime pas s'en rappeler mais ça a existé et il y a eu des conséquences. À ce moment-là, le gouvernement fédéral avait doublé les bourses canadiennes, en reconnaissant que les étudiants vivaient une crise majeure.

Qu'est-ce que notre gouvernement a fait? Il a réduit ses propres dépenses de 400 millions de dollars. Alors, au lieu de soutenir les étudiants dans un moment critique, le gouvernement a choisi d'absorber l'aide. À un moment où les étudiants avaient le plus besoin de soutien, le gouvernement n'a pas été au rendez-vous.

Aujourd'hui, nous voyons les conséquences de cette approche. Les étudiants font face à une double crise : le coût de la vie explose, les perspectives économiques sont incertaines et malgré cela, on leur demande de s'endetter davantage.

Monsieur le Président, dans ma circonscription d'Ottawa-Vanier, c'est une réalité qui est très concrète. Les étudiants de l'Université d'Ottawa, La Cité collégiale et je vais inclure le Collège Algonquin parce que j'en entends parler aussi, tous ces étudiants-là travaillent très fort. On sait qu'ils cumulent des emplois. Ils jonglent avec des loyers qui sont trop élevés. Ils font en fait tout ce qu'on peut s'attendre d'eux. Mais malgré cela, ils se demandent : « Est-ce que je vais m'en sortir? »

Ce sont des histoires que j'ai entendues pas plus tard que la semaine dernière de Liam, Geneva, David et plusieurs autres, et je dois vous avouer que les courriels continuent de rentrer à mon bureau et j'entends des étudiants qui sont très préoccupés et qui s'inquiètent de leur avenir.

Mais les impacts vont bien au-delà des études et il faut vraiment s'y arrêter. Il y a une étude en 2023 qui a démontré que 62 % des jeunes croient que leur dette étudiante compromettra leur capacité d'acheter une maison, le rêve de tout le monde. Pour ceux qui ont une dette de plus de 5 000 \$, le chiffre passe à 80 %.

Donc ces élèves-là, qui ont des dettes élevées, ont perdu leur rêve de pouvoir un jour appartenir une maison. Pourtant, on a un gouvernement qui fait la promotion de ce rêve-là, qui dit qu'il met en place des mesures pour permettre aux jeunes d'atteindre ce rêve-là, mais ce n'est pas ce qu'on voit avec les mesures aujourd'hui. Ce n'est pas seulement une question d'éducation; c'est une question d'avenir. On ne fait que retarder l'accès à la propriété et nous redéfinissons les trajectoires de vie d'une génération entière.

Monsieur le Président, il faut aussi parler des choix de société que cela implique. Qui va devenir enseignant, infirmier, travailleur communautaire si ça signifie commencer sa carrière avec des dizaines de milliers de dollars de dettes? Qui va choisir des carrières essentielles, mais moins rémunérées, si le prix d'entrée est un endettement à long terme?

Je veux aussi être claire : je soutiens l'intention de cette motion, mais—on l'a entendu déjà de la part de mes collègues—ça ne va pas assez loin. On doit être plus ambitieux. C'est pourquoi les libéraux de l'Ontario proposent de rétablir les bourses à 80 %, proposent d'éliminer les intérêts, mais en plus on veut offrir la gratuité aux étudiants à faible revenu, parce que l'éducation doit être accessible à tous et ne pas dépendre de notre revenu. On veut aussi accorder une période pas de six mois, mais une période de grâce de deux ans pour donner une chance aux

étudiants de se trouver un emploi et de commencer à payer leur dette. Parce que la solution à un système imparfait, ce n'est pas de l'affaiblir davantage, c'est de le renforcer.

Permettez-moi—je vais dire un mot également pour les étudiants franco-ontariens, parce que pour eux, les défis sont encore plus grands. Avec un nombre limité d'institutions qui offrent des programmes en français, plusieurs doivent quitter leur communauté pour étudier. Ça, ça engendre des frais additionnels, souvent sans soutien adéquat.

Si nous voulons une francophonie forte en Ontario, on doit avoir un système d'aide financière qui soutient réellement nos étudiants. Un système de prêts qui les laisse crouler sous les dettes met en péril cet objectif.

Enfin, monsieur le Président, ce budget envoie un message très clair : ce gouvernement est prêt à creuser le déficit, mais pas pour les étudiants, pas pour les jeunes qui tentent de bâtir leur avenir, et pas pour les familles qui sont déjà sous pression.

Speaker, this is not just about numbers in a budget; it is about the kind of province we want to build. Are we a province that burdens its students with debt before they've even begun? Or are we a province that invests in them, believes in them and gives them a real chance to succeed?

In Ottawa-Vanier, I meet young people every day who are ready to contribute, ready to lead and ready to build a better future. They're not asking for handouts; they're asking for fairness.

This motion is a step, but it's only the beginning. Because when we invest in students, we invest in our economy and communities and in our future. That is the choice before us today.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

M^{me} France Gélinas: We need more physiotherapists in northern Ontario.

This young woman, Danielle, wants to become a physiotherapist. She applied at the University of Toronto and she did her budget. It's a four-year bachelor's degree followed by a two-year master's degree. The tuition at the University of Toronto is \$10,550 a year. They say the ancillary fees are \$2,500 and that you should budget for other expenses, like the costs of books and uniforms, and put aside \$1,700 a year. So she is at \$15,750 a year.

She comes from northern Ontario. She needs a place to stay, so she applied for a residence. She took the cheapest residence with the cheapest meal plan that she could get, and it's \$13,000 a year. So we're at \$28,750 per year for pretty much everything.

But she says, "I'll put another \$1,000 because of my cellphone, and I may have to buy a box of Tampax every now and again—so another thousand bucks." Okay—she's at \$30,000 a year.

She looked at OSAP. She comes from a very poor family—two sisters, one brother. She qualified for the maximum of \$525 per week. That's \$17,859 for two terms per year. She expected \$15,180 in grants and \$2,678 in loans, which would mean she would graduate with \$16,068 in loans.

Now, because of the change, she is at \$4,464 in grants and \$13,394 in loans, which means \$80,365 in loans by the time she graduates.

She's not going to university.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I'd like to start by reading some letters that students, residents of mine in beautiful Beaches—East York, wrote about OSAP.

"Hi Mary-Margaret,

"As someone who is going back to university this fall and will require OSAP to help fund my way, why has Doug Ford been allowed to make education more unobtainable? With this new model, it pretty much is mirroring what is" happening "in the US for educational affordability."

Another person writes to me saying, "Reducing grants and increasing loans means students will graduate with significantly more debt at a time when the cost of living is already high. These changes make post-secondary education less accessible, especially for low- and middle-income families, and place unnecessary financial pressures on young people trying to build their futures."

Another person says, "Provincial financial aid programs, such as OSAP, have bestowed our provinces with thousands of skilled and talented professionals: doctors, nurses, lawyers, engineers, researchers, and many others. These professionals would not have been able to service our communities had it not been for these programs. Hence, I pose to you a question, what would Ontario look like if our doctors and engineers had never been given the chance to further their education due to financial barriers?"

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And the last one for today, because it's certainly not the last one in my inbox: "I am a resident of the East York Beaches region, as well as a second-year university student. I am writing to express my deep disappointment and concern regarding the Ford government's recent decision to reduce OSAP grants. For many students across Ontario, OSAP grants are not optional support, but rather the difference between being able to attend university and being forced to abandon their education due to financial barriers. As your constituent, I expect my elected representative to advocate for the interests of students and residents in our community at Queen's Park. I have already taken steps to voice my concerns through protests and petitions and I will continue to raise this issue publicly and within the community."

And I've received many, many more—all of us have, and I am sure the government has too.

I want to say today that I am happy to support the opposition day motion from my colleagues beside me. And I want to assure everyone here today—all the great young people who came here; thank you. I want to assure you that all opposition parties are united in this fight to reverse the ridiculousness of the cuts to OSAP. And we're united; it's not a partisan issue. So I want to give you hope and also tell you that many things—not many, but some

things—in this chamber have been reversed. The biggest one was the greenbelt, and the reason it was reversed is because of people power.

I'm so impressed. I'm darn proud of all of you and your friends for everything you've done to mobilize this far and hopefully can continue to do so: the rallies outside, the rallies at your university, emails, the calls, newspaper articles. So my message to you is, don't give up. Your voice matters. Your future matters. You matter. And if you think you're too small to make a difference, try sleeping in a room with a mosquito.

We know this government does not have a good track record on education, especially when they show it by taking these draconian measures like gutting—and I'm going to say "gutting" like you're gutting a fish—you're gutting OSAP.

They fail to see the benefit of smaller class sizes. They fail to see the benefit in addressing the humongous backlog of disrepair of our schools. You know, I've spoken about Secord public school in my riding a zillion times to you.

And we don't see any respect from you for teachers, for school boards, for staff. And now you're cutting OSAP—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Through the Chair, please.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: And now the government is cutting OSAP.

Tuition frequently is often more than \$6,000 per year, averaging about \$24,000-plus for a four-year degree. And oftentimes we see students taking longer to complete their degrees and certificates, because they need time to work to afford school and not come out with crushing debt or pursuing graduate and postgraduate studies because they are told their qualifications—or, rather, their connections—are not enough for a well-paying job. And we know the—I'm trying to think of an adjective that wouldn't be unparliamentary—colossal, the colossal number for youth unemployment these days.

And you know, I talk about, "Oh, back in our day, tuition was cheap. Back in our day, we could just roll out of school and get jobs. Back in our day, we could get a house so easily. We could rent a house so easily. We could get a car so easily." It's not that way to these kids today. This is not a good future for them, if we don't step in and take the measures to ensure that they had the same playing field that we had when we were younger. For crying out loud, I hope it's not that long ago that you don't remember that, when you were a student, that you don't remember. Well, you're acting ancient with this kind of draconian measure.

It's not a secret that this government devalues arts and social sciences. But what they fail to think about is that OSAP affects everyone, including and especially students in STEM. More than two thirds of full-time post-secondary students rely on OSAP. For example, tuition for engineering is at times \$6,000 more than the average tuition for other programs. So while the Premier pressures students into STEM, he has no plan to get them there and to keep them there and to support the best possible out-

comes when they're there. There's no long-term thinking. There's not been any with this government, actually.

These major cuts to OSAP explicitly determine who goes to post-secondary education and who does not. Of course, low-income households will be disproportionately disadvantaged, with their choices being to not attend post-secondary school or to drown in debt. Some 7.4% of Canadians live below the poverty line. Nearly one in three lone parents lives in poverty, with many headed by women in the household. Sexual orientation and gender identity also influence experience of poverty, with non-binary people, for example, experiencing a poverty rate of 20.6%. Studies also consistently show that racialized individuals experience greater levels of poverty—we know this; we all should know this. People with disabilities are more than two times as likely to live in poverty, not to mention the many physical barriers that face people living with disabilities that would prevent or seriously complicate their access to post-secondary education.

This is not a coincidence; this is a system—a system that this government perpetuates when they further block equity-deserving communities by ripping away supports for students and saddling them with debts for generations. All this to say that when this government fails to consider the long-term and nuanced implications of removing OSAP, a measure meant to facilitate equitable access to better life outcomes, they perpetuate marginalization.

This motion is certainly an important step in the right direction, but it cannot be the end. So I implore this government to listen to Ontarians—especially youth—and to reverse OSAP ASAP.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Mr. Chris Glover: First of all—
Interjections.

Mr. Chris Glover: Thank you.

I want to thank all of students and the professors and the community members who came out to support this motion today. I know many of you are angry—and you should be angry, because you're getting ripped off. This government is changing the grant ratio from 15% to 85% to 75% debt and 25% grant. That means that they are downloading an additional \$2.5 billion in debt onto students next year. That's \$3,400 on average per university student. That will bring the average undergraduate student debt to \$30,000 for a four-year degree.

It's absolutely shameful what this government is doing. And what are they doing? They promised a few weeks ago that they would actually increase funding by \$1.6 billion. But if you look at the budget, the budget says this year the government is investing \$14 billion; next year, it's \$12.8 billion. That's a \$1.2-billion cut.

This Conservative government inherited from the Liberals a province with the highest tuition fees, the highest student debt levels and the lowest per-student funding for colleges and universities. We still have the lowest per-student funding. The Canadian average is \$17,000 per student, per year. The Ontario average is \$10,000. So now this government is forcing students to

take on more debt to attend the most poorly funded system in the country.

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And where are they spending all of this student money, that \$3,400 that they are taking out of your pockets? Well, \$2.2 billion is going to a private spa at Ontario Place; \$2.5 billion went to the skills development slush fund, where \$2 million of that went to the Premier's dentist to pay for staff training and \$10 million went to a friend of the Premier's who owns a strip club, again, for staff training.

So students, you should be angry; you should be fighting back. We can defeat this. We can reverse these cuts to OSAP. We can make sure that you have an affordable education.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Just weeks ago, hundreds of high school students stood outside my office in St. Catharines, rallying against this government's crushing OSAP cuts. These were young people, full of hope—hope for their future, hope for opportunity—now feeling defeated, realizing the plans they made and the budgeting they did was just for nothing.

Days ago, the Minister of Colleges and Universities said, "There are no cuts to OSAP. I don't know how I can say that any other way." But let's be clear: \$70 million less in post-secondary funding is a cut; reducing OSAP grants from 85% to 25% is a cut. Students in St. Catharines—students, imagine that, telling the minister—are trying to be the first in their family to graduate. They're coming from single parents, single-income households. Do they not deserve a fighting chance to contribute meaningfully to Ontario's economy? Not every student has parents who can bankroll their education, and not every student can turn to private funding.

This government has been cutting opportunities since 2019, and the Liberals before them set the tone with chronic underfunding. Students deserve better. I am calling on this government to immediately restore OSAP grants to 85%, remove interest on all new and existing OSAP loans, and get your hands out of the students' pockets.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: Education is supposed to open doors, not close them. Yet everyone says the same thing to young people: "Study hard, get an education," that it's the key to a better future and life, that education is supposed to be the great equalizer. But instead, right now under this government, the rules are being changed right in the middle of the game: cuts to OSAP, sky-high tuition, more debt, less support.

Ontario students already pay some of the highest tuition fees in the world, and it's only getting worse. Education is becoming a luxury when it should be a right. There should never be a financial barrier to learning. If you want to study, if you want to build your future, you should be able to without wondering if you can afford it and without drowning in debt.

Investing in education is about the future of our province. Ontario needs more skilled workers, not less.

I'm calling on this government to do the right thing and reverse these cuts to OSAP now. Quite frankly, listening to the debate and the rationale of the minister, it's like they looked up from their money-printing press. We've got a debt of half a trillion dollars, a deficit of almost \$14 billion, and they're bored. They said, "You know what? Let's pick a fight with the students of Ontario," like they're bored. It's unbelievable that this is happening—the outrageous things that they want to spend money on, the outrageous priorities. Unless you're rich—you're the only ones doing well. But if you're a student, you're looking at a mountain of debt coming out of post-secondary education, no hope of buying a house and no ability to even pay the rent.

Government, do better. The future is looking at you right here. They're counting on you. Support this NDP motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: To the young people here today, you are right to feel shocked and angered by this government's choice to decimate OSAP, and I commend you for standing up, travelling to Queen's Park. Students are visiting their government MPPs' offices. Actually, in Hamilton, the students that visited the Hamilton Mountain office had the police called on them. Hundreds of students are walking out because they had to rethink their entire future—like in Hamilton, when Westmount Secondary School students walked out. At an emergency round table we hosted with McMaster University and Mohawk College student associations, we heard from students just like you who must make the impossible choice between graduating with a huge debt or, unfortunately, not going to school at all.

We heard from Desiree Heneberry, who is the Mohawk Students' Association Indigenous rep. She's Ojibway from Garden River First Nation. She works three jobs and still cannot make ends meet. She has been unhoused since September. She has so much debt that she doesn't think she can continue her studies.

Speaker, every student in Ontario should have the opportunity to succeed. No matter what their financial background is, whether they're rich or poor, they deserve a chance. But this government's cruel message to the young people of Ontario is that you are on your own.

But we in the official opposition are here to stand with you. We're here to stand with your hard-working parents, with your grandparents who have hopes and dreams for your future. We know how hard you have worked. We know how hard you've worked in your studies to get accepted to university. We know that you work part-time jobs, and you're doing everything that you can to succeed.

This government's decision to cut OSAP is devastating, so I implore this minister to stand with the young people of Ontario and support our motion this afternoon to reverse the cuts to OSAP.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

MPP Alexa Gilmour: It is a privilege to rise on behalf of people, especially students, of Parkdale–High Park in support of this motion.

My father tells me that his yearly summer job earned him enough to pay for university. Now gone are those days, and this silver-spoon Premier's response to the students wanting a fair shot, like people before have had, has been both callous and cruel.

Instead of investing in Ontario's future, this Conservative government is forcing young people to choose between their dreams and a lifetime debt sentence. Ontario's youth are already struggling. Unemployment for those aged 15 to 24 is at record highs. The rent is sky-high. And tuition? Well, it's already too expensive, so many students and families are forced to choose, thanks to the actions of the previous Liberal government and the Conservative government. And now, it's going to get a whole lot worse.

The Premier is reducing the proportion of available OSAP grants from 85% to 25%, after already cutting \$700 million from the program in 2019. What does this mean, Speaker? It means that rich families will have another advantage over everyone else. It means that natural talent will never reach its full potential. It means the loss of tradespeople who build Ontario, of award-winning engineers and cancer researchers, of artists who tell our Canadian story. When young people are forced to sacrifice their future because their government won't invest in them, it impoverishes us all in ways we cannot even imagine.

So I want to thank the young people in my riding of Parkdale–High Park, the young people from across Ontario, who see through this government's excuses and have been organizing to save OSAP. Let me tell you, not only are these young people driven, they bring incredible gifts and passion, and let's not stand in their way.

Today, I stand with them, and I'm urging the government to support the NDP motion, reverse the cuts and remove the interest. Let's invest in Ontario's youth.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

MPP Lisa Gretzky: It's my pleasure to stand up on behalf of my constituents in Windsor on this motion to reverse OSAP cuts and remove the interest on student loans.

You know, Speaker, at a time when the Premier says that he is protecting Ontario—we heard the minister just say it—his Conservative government is attacking students again by cutting OSAP and handing out large debt sentences. When the cost of living is already so high and families are trying to stretch every dollar even further, this Conservative government has decided to cut OSAP and make life even harder.

Speaker, 700,000 people in this province are unemployed, and over 100,000 of them are youth. We have parents who are unemployed and who have no choice but to return to post-secondary to retrain. Conservatives are cutting OSAP and cutting nearly \$70 million this year from colleges and universities—\$1.2 billion in 2028-29.

They're cutting the program under the guise of sustainability and fiscal responsibility. Yet this Premier and his government have prioritized a \$2.2-billion privately owned luxury spa in downtown Toronto that will actually cost taxpayers a trillion dollars by the end of the 99-year lease that they've given these people. They gave \$10 million to a strip club owner and \$100 million to the Premier's campaign manager.

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I have a constituent, a Windsor student named McKenna, who wrote to my office and said, "By cutting ... OSAP you are taking away our right to education and putting students in positions where they have to choose between their future and their financial stability."

Speaker, there is a saying that goes, an educated mind is one of the most valuable resources to have in life. This government should be empowering students—the next generation of professionals in this province—not tearing them down and leaving them in either a lifetime of debt or not going to post-secondary education at all.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I'm using my time to share the words of Olivia Kembel, a brilliant student trustee from my riding who was a participant in our recent model Parliament at Queen's Park. In Olivia's words, "Students are incredibly worried about the direction our education system is taking. We do not see it improving, and we do not see the support that students and teachers require.... Education is becoming increasingly ... inaccessible and uniform, when what we need is an accessible, diverse and empowered system."

"Education is the foundational framework that builds healthy, successful futures for young people, the same young people that make up the future of this province. Decisions to cut OSAP grants and lift the cap on post-secondary tuition create an elitist system where the most marginalized people and youth in our communities will be hit the hardest. We feel that the future of this province is being dismantled, and students are losing hope in our system and their futures."

"To the students who feel as though your passion and dreams for arts, culture, or academics is worth less, know that your" so-called "'basket weaving courses' are what make up the soul and colour of our society. They are just as important as careers in the trades or medicine."

"A successful province is a well rounded one" where people learn to think critically and "where all of these fields have equal opportunity, where students have hope for a higher education and a system that supports them and their goals."

"We know the system is not perfect, but it can certainly be better than this. We deserve better than this."

Students in the galleries, you deserve better than this. Reverse the cuts.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I appreciate the opportunity and want to thank the people who have attended this afternoon for this debate. I speak in support of the motion—no one is surprised.

I think the question we all have to ask ourselves is, what kind of society do we want? What kind of society do we want? If we want a society that's open, if we want a society where people have the opportunity to get ahead, where their fate is not determined by the income of their parents when they're born, then you have to invest in the next generation. If you want to have a society that can actually take on the technological challenges, the political challenges, the climate challenges that are coming at us fast and furious, then you have to educate the next generation. And when you say to them, "Hey, you're on your own. Cough up. Pay for this," you're discouraging a big chunk of the population. You are wasting talent. You are telling people, "Sure, you have tremendous ability, but you're not going to be able to use it. Get used to it." That is the most backward-thinking approach I can imagine.

I'm going to go back into a little bit of history, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Europe—you know, I was around—when those owners who were running what are referred to as "the dark satanic mills" had a revelation: They needed workers who could read and do math. And they actually pushed for public education because they understood if they wanted to have a society that was industrially powerful, they needed a population that could do the work in an informed way.

If we want to actually take advantage of the technologies that are being developed now, if we want to develop those technologies, we have to invest in the next generation. This attack on the next generation is one that cannot stand if we want a decent society.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Ms. Catherine Fife: This reduction in OSAP grants feels very mean-spirited; it's very personal, because it compromises hope for the future for so many students.

I know I would not be here had I not accessed OSAP grants, going to university. It was a miracle I got to attend at all. I was the first in my family to attend university. There are many firsts in this House today, and they want to go to university. They want to be part of the future of this province.

I implore the government to understand that investing in students and their abilities and their potential is actually an investment.

Think of the University of Waterloo: Every \$1 invested by the government returns \$8.16 in economic activity. Employers more than double their investment when they hire a Waterloo co-op student, realizing \$2.20 in economic output for every \$1 spent. The University of Waterloo and their students here today—over their 263,000 alumni, they've founded 68,000 companies; they've created 1.7 million jobs; they've generated almost \$400 billion in annual revenue globally. Why would you risk this?

In an economic tariff trade war, we should be focused on supporting the people of the province of Ontario, making sure they reach their potential. When they do, the province of Ontario will do as well. Get out of their way.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

MPP Robin Lennox: I stand today in solidarity with the many college, university and high school students in

Hamilton and across Ontario who have stood up and spoken out about their right to an affordable post-secondary education.

The Conservative government's changes to OSAP will place an incredible financial burden on students and their families.

We know that one in three households with student debt are already living paycheque to paycheque. They are also twice as likely to need to take out a payday loan and three times as likely to fall behind on their bills. That's under the current system. And it will only become more dire after the Conservative government guts OSAP further, as they have announced. This will also disproportionately impact students who want to start professional degrees like engineering or careers in health care.

Nursing students and medical students face high tuition rates and gruelling clinical schedules that make it impossible for them to hold a part-time job while completing their training. And we cannot afford to discourage anyone from starting a career in health care right now.

That's why we must immediately reverse the harmful cuts to OSAP and restore 85% grants for students. And we must take it one step further and eliminate loan interest altogether.

Once we're done cleaning up this government's latest mistake, we can get back to the important work of ensuring that Ontario colleges and universities have the resources they need to give our young Ontarians the quality education to build their futures.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: I'm always proud to rise in this House to speak on behalf of the good people of Toronto Centre. In particular, today I'm very proud to speak on behalf of the students and their working families who are devastated by the news of the cuts to OSAP that this government is proposing.

We all know that access to education is an equalizer. It should never be taken for granted. And it should not belong to just the privileged few who have the means to be able to go.

I myself am someone who actually had to take OSAP loans to finish my education, and so did my sister and my other sister—and just about every single member of my family has required the assistance of OSAP.

Speaker, we have a government that is so callous and so heartless, who have ignored the voices of students, who turn their back on them even though they are in this House today.

We know that OSAP can change lives. We know that families are committed to doing the best they can—especially working families, especially immigrant families who put education at the forefront for all their children. And yet, that opportunity is being taken away by this government's heartless, gutless move to take away their OSAP grants. By reducing those grants and increasing the burden of loans, you are committing this generation to more debt, just as your budget tabled last week is saying nothing more to this generation than that they are going to inherit more debt, more deficit.

1700

Education is not an expense to be trimmed; it is something that has to be invested in. You have a chance to turn this around. There is no reason whatsoever for these OSAP cuts. Please do the right thing. Look into your hearts. But also, more importantly, look into the faces of the students and families that are here. Speaker, this is what I want this government to do.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Mr. John Fraser: I'm glad I was able to make it back for this debate. Of course, I'll be supporting the motion, despite the fact that there's always a dig in there somewhere, which I'll talk a little bit about later.

What we called on the government to do was to fix OSAP ASAP. Because what this government's done is, they've said to students who want to get a post-secondary degree, diploma or trade, "You're on your own. You've got to go into debt." You flipped it on its head, basically before even the end of a semester.

Did you somehow think that that was not going to put people in the position to say whether they were able to go or not, whether it was going to reduce participation at our colleges and universities and in trades? You obviously didn't think about that because we know—not just anecdotally, but by what students say to us—that a lot of them are very seriously considering not returning to their program because they are financially unable to.

One of the things that I do when I'm in a cab, every time I'm in a cab, I talk to whoever is driving that cab. Sometimes we get around to family. I don't ask about family right away, but we get there. Driving a cab is a hard job. It's a hard job and it's not a high-paying job, especially since some of the changes with rideshare. Here is what I inevitably hear: "I have four kids. One is a nurse, one is in engineering, one is waiting to go to university because they want to be a teacher and the other one wants to be a nurse too."

Moms and dads work hard to make sure that we get our kids there. For some families it's harder than others. It's way harder. All they want—they're doing a job where they're making less money. They've got no benefits. It's a 12-hour-a-day job. It's a grind. They might be an engineer. They may have been a teacher. They may have been a professor. They know the importance of education, and they have sacrificed their lives so their kids would have opportunity. They took a job less than what they were capable of doing because they knew what they had to do is, "I've got to get them there. I've got to get them so they can make it."

All they are looking for is a little bit of help. And that's what the government has been doing—until now, where the government said, "You know what? Your kids are going to have to go further in debt. I know you worked hard, I know you got them there, but you're going to have to worry about your kids going into lifelong debt." That's what this change means. That's what you are saying to families.

It wasn't like you told people you were going to do it. It wasn't like you had some sort of transition where you conditioned people to the thing you were going to do. No, you just changed it. Now you've got people out there who aren't going to be able to participate. You've got moms and dads who are worried about debt. You've got kids who are worried about debt. It's wrong.

I do want to say one thing with regard to—I'm going to send this over to the minister; it's from the Owen Sound Current, and I suggest you read it. It's a great analysis of what the government has done on post-secondary education. Full credit, this is David McLeish. I want to read you a section here: "The media release also notes that this funding will 'raise annual operating funding to \$7 billion, a 30% increase and the highest level in the province's history.'

"Sounds impressive, but funding for the post-secondary sector was routinely above \$7 billion annually from 2011 to 2018 when the Conservatives took power."

"A more honest statement would be that this funding 'returns annual operating funding to where it was over a decade ago.'

"It is also worth noting that on average from 2019 to 2025, the Conservatives increased funding for colleges and universities by a mere 0.4% whilst increasing government spending by an average of 5.3%."

So when we say that you starved our college system, you did. The numbers are right there. You fired 10,000 people after you've underfunded them, after you starved them. I think I described it as—the college and university presidents and associations were there. It's like the government gave a starving person a cheese sandwich. What are they going to say? "Thank you." They need it. They're desperate.

But you're not fooling anybody—0.4%, 2019 to 2025. If you actually look at it, the funding will match what it was in 2017. That's nine years ago. You guys have only been around for eight years. Think about that. Why are we overstating why you're doing that? Who are you trying to fool?

I would like to say one thing about my colleagues to my left. I saw the motion, and I was thinking back to 2013 and that minority government budget. I was looking for the demands for college and universities, student loans and student assistance. I couldn't find it—shocking. You had your one chance—

Mr. John Vanthof: That was a Liberal government.

Mr. John Fraser: No, but you guys didn't even say a thing. You were silent.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Please address the Chair.

Mr. John Fraser: Not a zip—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): The member will remember to address the Chair.

Mr. John Fraser: Speak through the Chair? I will. I think I got them all excited. I got to poke you. You poke me, I poke you back: That's the way it works.

Interjections.

Mr. John Fraser: I know, but it wasn't a priority for you then. I'm from 2014. I'm just saying.

Speaker, back to OSAP—

Mr. John Vanthof: That was a reach, John.

Mr. John Fraser: Well, got to stretch it out every once in a while, eh?

Interjections.

Mr. John Fraser: I know. You weren't here—well, you were here.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'm always here.

Mr. John Fraser: Me too.

Speaker, back to the matter at hand, what the government has done is say to students who want to get a degree, a diploma or a trade and their moms and dads who got them there, who are worried about them, "You're going to have to take on more debt. You're going to have to borrow. You're going to have to carry it for the better part of a lifetime."

What that will do is that there will be less people going to post-secondary, there will be less people getting a degree. This is the craziness of it, the insanity of it. What's the most important thing in the global economy? Highly trained, highly skilled, healthy people. Strike one, strike two, strike three—this government is failing.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: As the shadow minister for education in Ontario, I frequently have the opportunity to meet with high school students in Ottawa West–Nepean and across Ontario, and some of them are here now. What I've heard from these students, Speaker, is incredible frustration that most of their education has taken place under this government, where all they have ever known is cuts. All they have ever known is class sizes that are increasing and a loss of academic supports, of educational assistance, of any resource that would help them to succeed.

And now, just as they're about to graduate and move on to post-secondary education, they're having the rug pulled out from under their feet. They are being told, "If you want to go, you're going to have to go into greater debt, or your parents are going to have to go into debt or they're going to have to work longer so that you can get a post-secondary education."

1710

Once again, this government is telling our young people, our kids, "We don't care about you. We don't care about your futures. We don't care about the role that you're going to play in our economy, in our province. We don't care how badly we need you. We just want to let you know how much we don't care about you by rubbing this in your face again and again and again."

That's the message that this government has sent to these students this afternoon as well, and proof that this government doesn't know what they're doing on education. We have a teacher shortage in the province—a serious teacher shortage—and this government, instead of addressing the working conditions that are driving teachers out of the workforce, said they're going to create

new spaces and faculties of education. It's like using a teaspoon to fill a bucket that is gushing from the bottom.

But do you know what, Speaker? Some 52% of students and faculties of education rely on student loans. So how are we going to get young people to take those new seats in faculties of education when we're going to tell them they have to go into deep debt in order to study education and become a teacher in the province of Ontario? It's absolutely ludicrous to think that we're going to solve any problem by telling young people, by telling our future teachers, to go into debt.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

MPP Jamie West: I want to thank Marit Stiles, leader of the official opposition, for bringing forward this opposition day motion. This is an opportunity for the government to fix the mess they made with OSAP, with the cuts to grants. It's also an opportunity to get rid of that interest—we shouldn't be making interest off of the future of young people, like those in the gallery.

I want to also recognize my mom. I'm an example of why OSAP is a great thing. I grew up under the poverty line. My mom worked full-time but we were in geared-to-income housing. When I was going into post-secondary, my mom had saved \$100—that's all she could afford to save. Because of that, because of OSAP, because it was affordable then, I was able to graduate, and that's the future that these kids deserve. The reality is parents and grandparents, we want better for our kids, and the Conservative government is making it worse.

I want to give you an example here. I want to talk about a mom; she's a student with two kids. She said, "In this economy, my children will no doubt have to live with me well into their twenties and possibly thirties. I want them to go to university and get a good education so that they will be able to one day buy a house and support themselves."

Another student—a mature student—lost their health and had to go back to school to get a new job. "With these OSAP changes, I'll be paying for my loan until retirement age. This change feels like it's robbing me and my family of the future and stability this degree was supposed to give. Not all of us come from wealthy families. Some of us have been paying for everything themselves since they were 15."

I also want to talk about another student, a younger student. She said, "Our generation is graduating into a job market crisis, which only makes everything much worse. It worries me that when I graduate, it'll be hard to find a job, and I have to start paying back OSAP in six months and my loans will be greater than before."

Another working mom who's a student: "I am thoroughly upset with this announcement as I am a working mom and I now fear that I will not be able to continue my education. Funding and grants have helped me get through my schooling up to this point, and as someone who wants to eventually grow my family and own a house, this will not be possible."

Speaker, this is a big mistake. The Leader of the Opposition is going to fix it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Ms. Marit Stiles: I first want to start by thanking all of my colleagues for lending your voices to this very important debate, and the students who are here in the gallery today with us. Some of them came from as far away as Ottawa this morning just to join us here and they aren't speaking. They are here on behalf of so many thousands of students and workers and family members who are also asking the government to do the right thing today.

I was thinking, Speaker, as a mom of two young adults—as any parent, I think, would do—we would do absolutely anything to help our children find success, to help our children to have the best possible chance for a good future. I think every single person in this room who is a parent would do the same thing, right?

Today, this government has the chance to do that for every person in this province, for every family and every student. They can step up. They can just acknowledge that, this time, they made the wrong decision. Do the right thing. Vote in favour of this motion. Reverse this terrible decision. Give young people, students in the province of Ontario, a fighting chance. This time, please, do the right thing: Take the opportunity, reverse the cuts and save OSAP.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): MPP Stiles has moved opposition day motion number 1. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

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

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

In my opinion, the nays have it.

Call in the members. This will be a 10-minute bell.

The division bells rang from 1716 to 1726.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): MPP Stiles has moved opposition day motion number 1. All those in favour of the motion will please rise one at a time and be recognized by the Clerk.

Ayes

Armstrong, Teresa J.	Gélinas, France	Schreiner, Mike
Bell, Jessica	Gilmour, Alexa	Shaw, Sandy
Blais, Stephen	Glover, Chris	Smyth, Stephanie
Bourgouin, Guy	Gretzky, Lisa	Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie)
Bowman, Stephanie	Hazell, Andrea	Stiles, Marit
Burch, Jeff	Hsu, Ted	Tabuns, Peter
Cerjanec, Rob	Kernaghan, Terence	Tsao, Jonathan
Clancy, Aislinn	Lennox, Robin	Vanthof, John
Collard, Lucille	McCrimmon, Karen	Vaugeois, Lise
Fairclough, Lee	McKenney, Catherine	Watt, Tyler
Fife, Catherine	McMahon, Mary-Margaret	West, Jamie
Fraser, John	Pasma, Chandra	Wong-Tam, Kristyn
French, Jennifer K.	Rakocevic, Tom	
Gates, Wayne	Sattler, Peggy	

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): All those opposed to the motion will please rise one at a time and be recognized by the Clerk.

Nays

Anand, Deepak	Gualtieri, Silvia	Racinsky, Joseph
Babikian, Aris	Hamid, Zee	Rae, Matthew
Bailey, Robert	Hardeman, Ernie	Rickford, Greg

Bouma, Will	Harris, Mike	Riddell, Brian
Calandra, Paul	Holland, Kevin	Rosenberg, Bill
Cho, Raymond Sung Joon	Jones, Trevor	Sabawy, Sherif
Cho, Stan	Jordan, John	Sandhu, Amarjot
Clark, Steve	Kanapathi, Logan	Sarkaria, Prabmeet Singh
Coe, Lorne	Kerzner, Michael S.	Sarrazin, Stéphane
Cooper, Michelle	Leardi, Anthony	Saunderson, Brian
Crawford, Stephen	Lumsden, Neil	Scott, Laurie
Darouze, George	McCarthy, Todd J.	Smith, David
Denault, Billy	McGregor, Graham	Smith, Graydon
Dixon, Jess	Mulrone, Caroline	Smith, Laura
Dowie, Andrew	Oosterhoff, Sam	Tangri, Nina
Downey, Doug	Pang, Billy	Thanigasalam, Vijay
Dunlop, Jill	Parsa, Michael	Thompson, Lisa M.
Firin, Mohamed	Pierre, Natalie	Triantafilopoulos, Effie J.
Flack, Rob	Pinsonneault, Steve	Vickers, Paul
Gallagher Murphy, Dawn	Quinn, Nolan	Williams, Charmaine A.

The Clerk of the Assembly (Mr. Trevor Day): The eyes are 40; the nays are 60.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I declare the motion lost.

Motion negatived.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Orders of the day?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Speaker, if you seek it, you will find unanimous consent to see the clock at 6.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Agreed? Agreed.

Mr. Chris Glover: Point of order.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): I recognize the member from Spadina–Fort York on a point of order.

Mr. Chris Glover: I'd like to invite all of the students and their supporters who came down to join us on the main staircase for a photo.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): That's not a point of order.

We are now moving to private members' debate. I'll let people vacate for a moment.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BUSINESS

RURAL ONTARIO

MPP Billy Denault: I move that, in the opinion of this House, the government of Ontario should recognize the vitality and importance of rural Ontario by designating the third week of September of every year as Rural Ontario Week.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Pursuant to standing order 100, the member has 12 minutes for his presentation.

MPP Billy Denault: It's great to be back amongst colleagues at the Legislature after spending time in our ridings, listening to our constituents, hearing more of their concerns, engaging with members of the community and stakeholders so we could return with more initiatives to advocate for.

I, for one, am very excited as we commence debate on a motion I tabled just before we adjourned for Christmas. I rise today as the sponsor of the motion entitled, "That, in

the opinion of this House, the government of Ontario recognizes the vitality and importance of rural Ontario and thereby recognize every year the third week of September as Rural Ontario Week."

I want to begin this debate on a personal note. Speaker, I come from rural Ontario, from the riding of Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, from the Ottawa Valley. I am proud to be a product of rural Ontario, and I have had the privilege and opportunity, that which I am most grateful for, to have experienced the uniqueness, the opportunity and equally the challenges coming from rural Ontario.

I can say with confidence that while many across this province may not always see rural Ontario in their day-to-day lives, they benefit from it every single day. The people, the places, the innovations and institutions all are worth recognizing, and I want to begin by sharing some of those examples of uniquely rural aspects that come from my rural riding that would be clear examples that make up that recognition during Rural Ontario Week.

During this time of year, we start to see allergy season come around. When you stop at a Shoppers Drug Mart and purchase a Reactine, there's a good chance it was manufactured right in Arnprior. If you turn on the lights, that power may have been generated in the many dams or as a benefit of the nuclear sector. All may very well come from the generation superpower that is the Ottawa Valley. When you're taping up for some time on the ice, it could very well have been manufactured in Renfrew, from Renfrew Pro. In Pembroke, from Roseburg MDF to SRB Technologies to KI, we continue to build great things in the Ottawa Valley. In Chalk River and Deep River, you'll find Canadian Nuclear Laboratories, the birthplace of the Candu reactor. The many farms, the mills, the many places to visit where people in our community work all are worth recognizing. Or of course there's innovations like the Renfrew County Virtual Triage and Assessment Centre, innovations from Bubble technologies or from Canadian Nuclear Laboratories, as well as many others. We in the Ottawa Valley have always punched above our weight.

There is also of course the beauty of the riding. The Bonnechere River, the beautiful valley that stretches out when driving into Eganville—I can't help but think about Mac Beattie's song My Renfrew County Home when I describe it. Of course, Algonquin Park, as well as the many other parks in the valley, show a part of the province that few may ever have the opportunity to enjoy.

Lastly, Speaker, it's the people—the people who show up every day in the fields and the forests, at the factory, at the jobsite, in the classroom and everything in between. Through them shines a personality that I have always come to admire: honest and hard-working, never to mince words and always to show such deep kindness—people that put in their time and build community. It's those people that wove the fabric that is small town rural Ontario. How else could the Beachburg Fair be celebrating its 170th year this year if not for those people?

I have to say, Speaker, that there is no place that I would rather be from.

Not many may fully recognize the substantial contributions rural Ontarian communities make towards our province's thriving economy. These communities drive key sectors such as manufacturing, natural resources, forestry, tourism, and agriculture industries that are essential not only to our economic success but to our way of life.

In 2024 alone, rural Ontario contributed over \$116.5 billion to Ontario's gross domestic product. That is not a small figure; it is a clear and undeniable reflection of the strength, resilience and importance of rural communities across this province.

Speaker, the rural Ontario community is home to approximately 2.5 million people, 268,000 businesses, and it supports 1.2 million jobs. These numbers tell a powerful story. They show that rural Ontario is not peripheral; it's foundational. Yet, despite this, there remains a gap in awareness.

Ontario is a diverse province. We are made up of urban, suburban, rural and northern communities, and each plays a vital role in shaping a stronger, more prosperous province for all. But too often, the contributions of rural communities are under-represented in the broader conversation.

That is why this motion matters. Rural Ontario Week is about recognition. It is about education. And it is about connection. It creates a dedicated time each year to highlight the importance, vitality and opportunities that exist within rural Ontario. It allows us to showcase the innovation happening in small towns, the economic power of rural industries, and the strong sense of community that defines these regions. This is not about creating division between urban and rural Ontario; it's about bringing them closer together. It's about helping someone in a city understand where their food comes from. It's about showing young people the opportunities that exist in rural Ontario, right in their own backyard. And it's about ensuring that rural voices are heard, understood and valued.

Our government has already taken meaningful steps in this direction. We recognized the importance of rural communities by establishing the Ministry of Rural Affairs in 2024. This was not symbolic; it was strategic. It was a commitment to addressing the unique challenges rural communities face, while supporting their growth and long-term sustainability.

The goal is clear: to build communities that are sustainable, resilient, trusted, innovative and thriving. And we have backed that commitment with action. Through the rural economic development strategy and programs like the Rural Ontario Development Program, we've invested directly in rural success.

Speaker, while investments build infrastructure, recognition builds understanding. Rural Ontario Week builds that understanding. It provides an opportunity for schools to educate students about rural industries. It encourages communities to host events that celebrate local culture and innovation. And it gives businesses and organizations a platform to showcase the opportunities that rural Ontario offers. It also strengthens something that is often overlooked: pride—pride in our farmers who feed our prov-

ince; pride in our forestry workers who support sustainable resource development; pride in our manufacturers who drive economic output; and pride in the communities that continue to grow, adapt and thrive despite unique challenges.

A stronger Ontario is one where every community feels seen, valued and supported. By designating the third week of September as Rural Ontario Week, we are reinforcing that commitment. We are saying clearly that rural Ontario is not an afterthought; it is a priority. And we are building on the work already under way to ensure that rural communities continue to succeed for generations to come. By passing this motion, Ontario would be the first province in the country to acknowledge the importance of the rural part of their province.

In closing, this motion is not complex, but it is meaningful. It recognizes the people, the industries and the communities that form the backbone of our province. It strengthens the connection between all Ontarians, no matter where they live. And it helps build a future where rural Ontario is not only acknowledged but celebrated.

For all of these reasons, I urge all members of this House to support this motion.

I look forward to further debate as we continue this evening.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Mr. John Vanthof: It's always an honour to speak on behalf of the residents of Timiskaming–Cochrane and on behalf of the official opposition—and this evening, to speak fully in favour of the motion put forward by the member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke. I can't say this very often, but I agreed with every word he said.

Interjections.

1740

Mr. John Vanthof: Oh, don't clap a lot. But we share something, because Lake Temiskaming is the head waters of the Ottawa River. So basically, the Ottawa Valley kind of starts in Timiskaming. And I agree: The way he described rural Ontario, I felt it. Those of us who have lived there all our lives, we feel it in our hearts.

But I have a few questions for the government, based on what the member said and a gap in awareness. Where does rural Ontario start and where does it stop? To me, if you don't have public transportation, that's kind of a sign of rural Ontario. If you need a car to get somewhere, that's kind of rural Ontario, right? If you have to self-sustain yourself, that's kind of rural Ontario.

But we do expect, in rural Ontario, to have similar services. In the parts of Ontario where people live and there's no 911, is that rural Ontario, or is that remote Ontario? Because in parts of my riding that are as well-populated as Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, there are parts where there is no 911. This government talks about enhanced 911; they have yet to provide full 911. Is that rural Ontario or is that remote? Is Timiskaming rural or, in your minds, remote? Because your government talks all the time about how agriculture is going to blossom farther north than we are. It's a great place to farm, as is Renfrew–

Nipissing–Pembroke. Timiskaming–Cochrane is a great place to farm, but is it rural or is it remote?

Two weeks ago, there was a storm. Now, the highway was closed for a few hours because of the weather, and then the highway was cleared, but the highway stayed closed for 36 hours. Is that rural, when the Trans-Canada Highway closes? Is that rural or is that remote? And does this government actually care about remote?

And when that highway opened—when the Trans-Canada Highway, which runs through Timiskaming–Cochrane, opened through New Liskeard—do you know how it opened, after 36 hours? They put a snow plow in the front and then an OPP cruiser behind, and then the trucks and a few passenger cars have to follow it like a wagon train. And as soon as the cruiser leaves, the trucks try and pass each other, and it's closed again because of accidents. That's the Trans-Canada Highway.

I listened to the minister when he made his budget motion about how the status quo isn't satisfactory and how they're breaking down trade barriers across the country. You can't even keep the Trans-Canada Highway open and safe, so I ask, is that the rural Ontario that the member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke is talking about? Because I feel that rural Ontario; I'm proud of that rural Ontario. But when my residents can't go to the grocery store for 36 hours, and when the highway opens they're afraid to get on it, that doesn't feel like the rural Ontario that everyone here is so proud of. That feels like you really don't care.

You want the minerals. I heard the member across the way talk about, “Are we going to support the budget to get to the critical minerals?” Do you know what a critical mineral is where I come from? Salt on the road. I can show you a picture of Timiskaming today, and I predict the roads are going to close again today. They're whiteout. Is that rural, or is that remote? Do you care, or don't you?

And that is why we are so frustrated. We are as proud of this province as anyone. When I go and visit my daughter in Montreal, I drive through Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke and I'm proud of that area. It's a beautiful area. I'm proud of my area. I'm proud when I go to Thunder Bay, when we went over Cochrane and across. But many of you would never drive that road in the wintertime, and rightfully so.

You want to talk about rural Ontario? Why is it eight times more likely that you're going to die on a highway in Timiskaming than the norm in the province? I'm proud of my area, but is that rural or remote? Do you care? Because I don't think you do. Honestly, we didn't see anything in the budget regarding the crisis we're having on the highways in northern Ontario.

That's a crisis that should be for the government too because, you know, you keep talking about the Ring of Fire. Do you know how you get to the Ring of Fire? Highway 11, that's how you get to the Ring of Fire. That new road you're building goes onto Highway 11.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Address the Chair, please.

Mr. John Vanthof: You're fixing the main street of Geraldton—another part of northern Ontario that I think is

rural, but you might think is remote—but Geraldton dumps onto Highway 11. So you're all talking about you're going to develop and how that's going to be a change-maker—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Address the Chair, please.

Mr. John Vanthof: I apologize, Speaker. I get excited—how that's going to be a game-changer for Ontario. Well, maybe. But how come, right now, Highway 11 and Highway 17 are closed as much as they were open?

So the government doesn't like this statistic—I've been criticized for this statistic: In 2024, Highway 11 was closed 363 times. Highway 17, from North Bay to the west, was closed 868 times. Now, the government says, “Well, you're misrepresenting that.” I said, “Okay, so tell us how many times it was closed in 2025.” We couldn't get an answer. I can tell you how many times it was closed last week and two weeks ago, right?

We all love Ontario. We love rural Ontario. I know the member. I respect that member. I get along with that member. I get along with most of you. I could feel it in his heart—and I hope you can feel it in my heart too. But please feel the pain and feel the anger when all we hear are words and people who live in my part of the world are afraid to get on the highway because—and in the words of someone who's trucked his whole life, “It doesn't matter how good a driver you are, at some point you're going to get tagged.”

Now, is that the Ontario we all want to be proud of? I don't think so. So why? Why does it continue to happen?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Mr. Ted Hsu: It's pleasure to rise today in support of this bill to declare Rural Ontario Week in September.

Part of my riding of Kingston and the Islands is rural. It's getting less rural. Unfortunately, there has been a significant amount of sprawl over the past decades. But the eastern part of Kingston is rural, the northern part of Kingston is still mostly rural, and we have Wolfe Island, Howe Island and Simcoe Island in the riding, which are rural. I think Kingston is a special city in that if you live in the city, you probably have a lot of friends or maybe family who live in the rural parts of the city. The social and professional circles mix between rural and urban. It's a good place where rural and urban residents can work together, live together and play together, as I think my honourable colleague mentioned.

I'm really glad that there is going to be—hopefully—a week, if this bill passes, that is recognized, where rural Ontario can get the attention it deserves. That was the major theme of the speech of my honourable colleague from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke.

1750

But I think that it's also important for us as legislators to pay attention to rural Ontario every day. It's a promise that I made at the ROMA conference, that I want to make sure that the Ontario Liberal caucus can say to rural Ontario, “You have our attention every day.” That's a promise that I intend to keep.

Now, there are some really great things happening in rural Ontario that are important to let people know about.

I also lived in another part of rural Ontario. I lived, actually, in the member's riding. I lived in Deep River for a couple of years. There was no large city nearby. And when you have a little town like that, it's really different. If you go to the post office or you go to the supermarket, you're almost guaranteed to bump into somebody you know. You have a short conversation or a long conversation, but you are always bumping into people you know. It's a very tight-knit community.

In a community like that, in rural Ontario, people will know that Atomic Energy of Canada had its laboratories there. There is a lot of innovation going on, whether it's in nuclear energy or spinoff technologies. There are still spinoff companies around Deep River related to the laboratories at Chalk River. There is a lot of innovation to show off and a lot of innovation not only to show off but to support and help grow and expand and succeed in the commercial world. That's another part of rural Ontario.

But there are also issues—problems—in rural Ontario that need to be highlighted, and I hope that that is something that happens in Rural Ontario Week.

One is the health care desert. We have rural emergency room closures that are continuing, that the opposition is always trying to get the government to pay more attention to. We have shortages of primary care and mental health care, which are worse in rural areas. Then you have the problem, compared to the big cities, of trying to raise money for equipment in hospitals without the big donors that you would find in big cities.

There is the question of infrastructure. There are some rural municipalities that are taking care of arterial roads. In eastern Ontario, people will recognize, say, Highway 38 or 41. There are rural municipalities taking care of those roads and I think it's fair to say when they look at the province uploading the cost of the Don Valley Parkway or the Gardiner Expressway, they might be tempted to say, "Hey, can we set up some rules so that maybe we could get in line for some of the infrastructure costs to get uploaded?" Maybe it's a good thing to upload infrastructure, but let's set up some rules so that rural Ontario can make a pitch just like the city of Toronto can make a pitch.

There's also the digital divide. Lots of governments have made promises and spent money to develop high-speed Internet for all parts of Ontario, including rural Ontario, but Internet dead zones persist. Let me just take the example of the Trans-Canada Highway. This is the Trans-Canada Highway—you would think, a national piece of infrastructure—but when you drive along it, there are a lot of long stretches where you don't have Internet.

If you take VIA Rail, even between Kingston and Toronto, you would think, "This is like the centre of the population of Canada. It's really concentrated." You would think you would have cell service along the whole route. No, you have a lot of dead zones, even along the VIA Rail tracks between Kingston and Toronto.

So there's a lot of work to be done when it comes to the digital divide. I think the way to put it is that high-speed Internet is now essential to the survival of any diversified and resilient economy and especially rural economies.

I hope that, in Rural Ontario Week, we talk about shortages of skilled labour, electricians, plumbers, mechanics, other technicians and skilled trades that, say, farmers might need. It's worse in rural areas.

In my riding, in Wolfe Island, because you have to take a ferry to the island and sometimes the ferry service is unreliable—well, in recent months, it's been pretty good, but there have been many times when it's been unreliable—a lot of contractors don't like to work there, so they just don't. Because, as they say in rural areas, "It's not the kilometres; it's the hours that you spend." Time is money, and so if you're spending it travelling from place to place, it's not surprising that if you're not careful, you're going to have a shortage of the skilled workers you need to do anything.

And then finally, I want to mention another issue in rural Ontario, and that's the loss of prime agricultural land to suburban sprawl. Once Ontario loses its best soil—and actually, a lot of Ontario's best soil is now called Toronto and Mississauga. But once we lose our best soil, it's gone forever.

The business of farming has to be profitable, especially near urban areas, and it has to continue to be attractive to future generations. And so, one issue that I think is important that I'll take the opportunity to mention now—and certain ministers are here whom I'd like to hear this—is that rural economic development programs in cities with a population over 100,000, which have large rural areas—in those areas, it's especially important to have economic development so that rural economic activity, like farming, is profitable and you can make a good living at it. That will push back against pressures to sell land to developers who are just going to build housing on urban sprawl. I think that's something really important to look at.

I do support this bill, and I think there are a lot of wonderful things to highlight in rural Ontario: everything from the lifestyle to the communities and the economic activity. I think that it will be very important to highlight that rural Ontarians feed Ontario, they power Ontario and they supply the province with materials, recreation and environmental services. All of these things come from the rural areas in Ontario. But let's also remember during Rural Ontario Week that, often, it's with less funding, fewer doctors, aging infrastructure and smaller tax bases.

It's important, I think, to go and visit. I'll just end with a story that has always stuck with me. I've gone to the municipality of Tweed several times, and it's kind of amazing. Let me tell this story in the context of the province of Ontario uploading the cost of the Don Valley Parkway and the Gardiner Expressway, so the city of Toronto doesn't have to cover those costs, which I'm not necessarily opposed to.

But, in the in the city of Tweed, there are like 6,000 people and they manage 57 bridges. Some of them are very old—some of them are 100 years old—and they don't have the money to fix all the bridges. So they're going to let eight of the bridges just fall apart and not fix them when they go. This is a difficult decision that the municipality of Tweed has made.

I think we have to figure out a way to set up a framework where we can say, “Okay, this money should go to rural infrastructure, this amount of money should go to big-city infrastructure” and set up something so that it’s a little more objective, it’s a little less political.

But having said that, let me just conclude with something that’s more relevant to the bill, just to say that I hope Rural Ontario Week is a week that not only celebrates rural Ontario, but draws attention to the problems and the needs of rural Ontario and it’s not just a fluffy tourist kind of holiday.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: It’s my pleasure to join the debate today with regard to a very important motion that has been brought forward by the amazing member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke. He’s full on shooting from the hip and speaking from his heart as well.

1800

Interjections.

Hon. Lisa M. Thompson: Absolutely.

You know, it’s important that we in Ontario have an opportunity to recognize and celebrate rural Ontario, and that’s exactly what’s going to be accomplished during Rural Ontario Week.

The member’s words, recognition leads to understanding, weren’t lost on me—and congratulations. I think it helps frame exactly what we are trying to do here. It’s important to understand that across Ontario, there are people, there are businesses, there are organizations, there are events that get staged year in and year out to celebrate the heart of every community throughout rural and northern Ontario, and that’s the purpose of Rural Ontario Week. It’s to embrace the heart that really keeps the pulse not only within our rural ridings but the economic pulse of all of Ontario thumping and thriving.

Rural Ontario is really, really important, and in the sense that we do prove to be home to so much. It’s been interesting listening to the debate today. But when I say that we are the pulse of the economy for all of Ontario, so much happens in rural Ontario that we cannot take for granted. It’s through a motion like this that we have a chance to reflect on what’s happening at home. I really, really appreciate the fact that the member opposite took time to take us through his riding of Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke and celebrate the industry, celebrate the business, celebrate the people and the events that make his riding something he’s so incredibly proud of.

I hope it was incentive for all of us that are in this House today to think about the rural ridings that we represent and the people and the businesses and the industry and the people who just give everything they have for a successful event, to ensure people have a chance to come out and celebrate why they’re proud to call small town rural Ontario home. I congratulate him on taking us all on that journey.

That’s exactly what Rural Ontario Week is going to do if it should pass. I’m heightened by the support that it sounds like the member is going to be receiving for his motion, because in our government, under the leadership

of Premier Ford, we’re doing a lot to help elevate and encourage people to embrace what rural Ontario brings to the table. We went across the province and travelled and listened and created a strategy. But most importantly, the member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke also recognized our contribution to the GDP, which is \$116 billion.

We need to continue to embrace rural Ontario. I too am proud to say I’m a product of rural Ontario, and I can’t wait to celebrate all that we have in this amazing province because small towns can impact and can develop and introduce big things that have an impact on the entire province.

Ladies and gentlemen, there’s one thing that I would like to share with you: We do have something that happens in September that showcases the very, very best of rural Ontario, and that’s the International Plowing Match and Rural Expo. This will be an opportunity to support the member and say, “You know what? We’ve got an event to showcase the very best of rural Ontario.” I congratulate him for this effort today.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

M^{me} France Gélinas: I am really proud to represent Nickel Belt. I represent 33 small communities, most of them too small to be a village. They’re just small communities in northern Ontario. All of us live in rural.

I live on the side of a lake. There’s a First Nations community across the lake. I can leave my windows open during the summer and no cars go by, no noise, nothing. The whippoorwill can be annoying sometimes, but I put up with it. But those are some of the pleasures of living in rural Ontario. I wouldn’t live anywhere else but rural Ontario.

But you have to also come to grips with the fact that I only have cell service when I go at the end of the dock. The rest of the time, the cell service doesn’t work. We have very limited and expensive Internet—not easy to get. We have no 911 in most of Nickel Belt. Most people don’t know this when they come. There are beautiful campgrounds throughout Nickel Belt. People come and visit. I don’t wish harm upon anybody, but sometimes things go wrong and they discover we don’t have 911. Things like natural gas: We have to heat with propane or with oil because there’s no natural gas.

There are a ton of mines in Nickel Belt. There are more mines in Nickel Belt than in any other riding. Highway 144 goes across Nickel Belt, with tons of trucks coming from the mine—no shoulders on that highway.

And I want to share the story of Crystal Godin. I’m reading what she sent: “I am reaching out to share a serious highway safety concern and my personal experience following a motor vehicle accident on November 26, 2025, during one of the first major winter storms of the season.

“The accident occurred between the watershed and the tracks before Gogama. A transport truck heading” in the “opposite direction than me was swerving and crossing into my lane. I slowed down and moved over to avoid it, but my vehicle was pulled toward the shoulder.” There’s

no shoulder. If you go over, you go into the ditch. “When I tried to correct, I lost control on the icy conditions, spun out, and collided with the side of a second transport truck” coming her way.

“I travel this highway often, and, unfortunately, I regularly see transport drivers following too closely, crossing over the yellow line or driving aggressively for the road conditions. It feels unsafe, especially during winter weather, and I worry that more serious accidents will continue to happen without better enforcement or preventative measures.

“As a result of this crash, I sustained serious injuries, including a crushed ... vertebra and a fractured talus. I am currently off work and facing a long recovery. This has significantly impacted both my health and my livelihood.

“I’m asking if there are any steps that can be taken to improve safety on this stretch of highway whether through increased enforcement, winter maintenance, signage or transport regulation. I would appreciate any support or guidance your office can provide, and I am happy to share further details if helpful”—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Sorry, your time has expired.

Further debate?

Mr. John Jordan: I’m honoured to rise today as MPP for Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston to support the MPP for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke’s motion to declare the third week of September Rural Ontario Week.

Like so many rural ridings throughout this province, Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston’s diverse landscape is pivotal in driving innovation and resourcefulness, preserving the essence of community and cultivating a profound respect of our connection to the rivers, the lakes and the fields that define our region.

Speaker, often in the House, when we debate existing or proposed legislation, we reference a “rural lens.” What does that mean? It means there are shared challenges faced by rural residents because of the very nature of being rural. Geography and infrastructure greatly impact the delivery model for transportation, the harvesting of food and lumber, the extraction of critical minerals and aggregate supply and the resilience of safe, healthy, active communities.

As young families gravitate to small-town living, rural Ontario communities are ramping up to accommodate an unprecedented demand on the housing market and stepping up with innovative design and build solutions. In my riding, the Frontenac municipal corporation is leading the way with a new template for affordable, remote, communal water and waste water infrastructure that meets and exceeds the high standards for efficiency and environmental impact. Companies like Cavanagh construction and Lodestar building systems are addressing the demands for code compliance, affordability and efficiency with resilient, pre-built solutions.

As a growing senior population finds peace and purpose in rural settings, our communities are responding with thoughtful priorities and planning for aging in place, mindful of the challenges presented by remote access for

transportation, health services and active living spaces. Our community paramedics program is revolutionizing our capacity to help seniors and at-risk residents remain safe, supported and independent at home, and I want to acknowledge every member of the community paramedics team with huge respect for what they do, adapting and employing the newest technologies to enhance the care and compassion they bring to the people of our riding.

1810

Speaker, our rural communities are a fertile ground for productivity and intuitive skills development. Let’s talk about the resilience of our farming families. The skills needed for successful soil, crop and herd management are learned early and honed daily: raising and nurturing healthy stock, repairing machinery, building barns and mending fences, analyzing market reports and integrating new technologies into a modernized framework for the future. With a growing need for food security and a rising demand for farm-to-table meat and produce, the farming families who multitask their way through every 24-hour day are a precious and valuable resource.

An irrefutable homage to rural Ontario is the growth of our tourism industry. Urban neighbours are shopping and dining at our small-town venues. Global adventurers are camping, kayaking, fishing, boating and hiking the incredible trails that traverse the lakes, rivers, rocky outcrops, forests and fields of Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston.

They’re not the only ones enjoying the view. The film industry has fallen in love with our historic architecture and nostalgic, small-town backdrops.

In wrapping up my support for this motion, I’d like to quote a line from a love letter to Frontenac county written by Kevin McCann and submitted to the local Frontenac News. He wrote, “I’m proud of it—proud of this place where the stars look close enough to borrow sugar from, where the neighbours wave because that’s just what you do, and where the roads may be winding, but they always lead you exactly where your heart was trying to go.”

Speaker, I fully support this motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate?

Hon. Laurie Scott: I’m pleased to stand in the House this evening to support my colleague and speak on the new member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke’s motion that will recognize the third full week of September as Rural Ontario Week. Congratulations to him on his first private member’s motion. He’s doing a great job representing the people of Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke. If you haven’t seen his first-year anniversary video, you really should.

Every community in our province is important to Ontario’s identity, and rural communities deserve recognition and celebration for their special role in shaping our provincial identity, culture, heritage and economy.

I want to thank the Minister of Rural Affairs for all she’s done in support of rural Ontario. We should educate and boast about rural Ontario.

It was mentioned that rural communities’ industries contributed \$116.5 billion to Ontario’s GDP in 2024. I bet

most people don't know that statistic. It is great news. These businesses and industries include manufacturing, natural resources, forestry, agriculture and tourism, and I proudly represent many of those industries in Haliburton–Kawartha Lakes–Brock.

We have hard-working farmers who produce our beef, dairy, corn, soya and many more delicious fruits and vegetables.

We have a road map in Haliburton–Kawartha Lakes–Brock to thriving tourism.

“Kawartha” means “the land of shining waters.” As many of you may not know, I have many, many lakes, including the Trent–Severn Waterway, that people make their home, or they come to cottage. I have the Haliburton Highlands, which is beautiful on its own and where the Canadian Shield is.

We have the sculpture forest. We have the school of art in Fleming College. We have Highlands Opera—we have an opera in Haliburton.

Of course, we have many butter tart tours that navigate their way through, and they all have Kawartha Dairy ice cream on the side.

We have Mariposa Dairy that has goat cheese—large manufacturing, with large exports to other countries.

We have live theatres year-round.

We have Cavan Monaghan in Peterborough county. We have Brock township that creates lots of different farmland—as I said, to hills rolling in the Canadian Shield. We have the Haliburton forest that not only has sustainable forestry but has four-season tourism.

We have so many aspects in rural Ontario, and the rural Ontario development fund has helped so many different aspects in my riding, from helping restore a historic train station into a business incubator, rental spaces, a new medical centre, to the innovation hub in Kawartha Lakes and Peterborough county for local entrepreneurs and downtown community revitalization. I know the minister was up in Fenelon Falls and in Lindsay, but they've occurred in different communities like Coboconk, Omeme—different parts of Haliburton county. We just have so much to offer in rural Ontario, and there's so much to say in a short time.

But the member is right on in the fact that rural communities and industries are integral to Ontario's economy, culture and identity, and they deserve recognition. And that is exactly what will be achieved by creating Rural Ontario Week through this motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): Further debate? The member has two minutes to reply.

MPP Billy Denault: I do want to thank all the members who spoke on this motion, whether it's the member from

Nickel Belt, Timiskaming–Cochrane, Kingston and the Islands, Huron–Bruce, Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston and Haliburton–Kawartha Lakes–Brock.

Speaker, as a member from a rural riding, as the member of provincial Parliament for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, as a representative of the people of the Ottawa Valley, I take great pride in having fought—and will continue to fight—for the people of my rural community.

In our communities, the places, the innovations, and, most importantly, the people, deserve to be recognized. This motion would make Ontario the first province in the country to formally recognize the significance of rural communities in this way.

It is an opportunity to highlight why rural Ontario matters, what it means to be in rural Ontario and what small town rural Ontario contributes to the province. And as we have heard, it contributes so much already. These communities drive key sectors such as manufacturing, natural resources, forestry, tourism and agriculture industries that are essential not only to our economic success, but to our way of life.

Small-town rural Ontario may sound just as it's described—small, town, rural. But the places we come from are larger than life. They continue to punch above their weight and contribute so much to this province. As with everything that we as representatives do, beyond the places, the innovations and the economic might, it's the people—the people that we do what we do for; the people who show up every day, whether it's volunteering in their communities, working hard, or doing their part to build something stronger for the next generation.

I cannot help but think of my own family who have called the Ottawa Valley home for generations, living, working and building their lives in rural Ontario. I am proud to represent the people of Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, I am proud to represent the Ottawa Valley, and I am proud to come from rural Ontario.

I hope all members of this House join me in recognizing rural communities, and I hope this motion receives unanimous support.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): The time provided for private members' public business has expired.

MPP Denault has moved private members' notice of motion number 45. Is it the pleasure of this House that the motion carry? Carried.

Motion agreed to.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ric Bresee): All matters relating to private members' public business having been completed, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow, Wednesday, April 1, at 9 a.m.

The House adjourned at 1818.

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Fraser, John (LIB)	Ottawa South / Ottawa-Sud	Leader, Third Party / Chef du troisième parti
French, Jennifer K. (NDP)	Oshawa	First Deputy Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Première Vice-Présidente du Comité plénier de l'Assemblée législative
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Gates, Wayne (NDP)	Niagara Falls	
Gélinas, France (NDP)	Nickel Belt	
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Glover, Chris (NDP)	Spadina—Fort York	
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Grewal, Hardeep Singh (PC)	Brampton East / Brampton-Est	
Gualtieri, Silvia (PC)	Mississauga East—Cooksville / Mississauga-Est—Cooksville	
Hamid, Hon. / L'hon. Zee (PC)	Milton	Associate Solicitor General for Auto Theft and Bail Reform / Solliciteur général associé responsable de la Lutte contre le vol d'automobiles et de la Réforme relative aux mises en liberté sous caution
Hardeman, Hon. / L'hon. Ernie (PC)	Oxford	
Harris, Hon. / L'hon. Mike (PC)	Kitchener—Conestoga	Minister of Natural Resources / Ministre des Richesses naturelles
Hazell, Andrea (LIB)	Scarborough—Guildwood	Third Deputy Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Troisième Vice-Présidente du Comité plénier de l'Assemblée législative
Holland, Hon. / L'hon. Kevin (PC)	Thunder Bay—Atikokan	Associate Minister of Forestry and Forest Products / Ministre associé des Forêts et des Produits forestiers
Hsu, Ted (LIB)	Kingston and the Islands / Kingston et les Îles	
Jones, Hon. / L'hon. Sylvia (PC)	Dufferin—Caledon	Deputy Premier / Vice-première ministre Minister of Health / Ministre de la Santé
Jones, Hon. / L'hon. Trevor (PC)	Chatham-Kent—Leamington	Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness / Ministre de l'Agriculture, de l'Alimentation et de l'Agroentreprise
Jordan, John (PC)	Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston	
Kanapathi, Logan (PC)	Markham—Thornhill	
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	