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Standing Committee on Government Agencies

Intended appointments

Comité permanent des organismes gouvernementaux

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44th Parliament
Thursday 27 August 2026

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Jeudi 27 août 2026

Chair: Mary-Margaret McMahon
Clerk: Vanessa Kattar

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
GOVERNMENT AGENCIESCOMITÉ PERMANENT DES
ORGANISMES GOUVERNEMENTAUX

Thursday 27 August 2026

Jeudi 27 août 2026

The committee met at 0902 in committee room 1.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Good morning, everyone. The sensational Standing Committee on Government Agencies will now come to order. As always, all comments by members and witnesses should go through the Chair. Thank you for coming today. I appreciate it.

SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Our first item of business will be the adoption of a subcommittee report. We have a subcommittee report dated Thursday, August 20, 2026. Could I have a motion, please? MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: I move adoption of the subcommittee report on intended appointments dated Thursday, August 20, 2026, on the order-in-council certificate dated August 14, 2026.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Any discussion? MPP Gates.

MPP Wayne Gates: It's always a pleasure to be back at committee. But once again, I'm very disappointed that this committee has had the opportunity to call 13 people I'm aware of—there may be more than that—and we have five people coming to this committee. I think I spoke on this a few weeks ago, and here we are. We're all giving up our summer to come here. Some of us are travelling a long way. I know my colleague from Windsor is driving in from Windsor or flying in from Windsor, one of the two—

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Train.

MPP Wayne Gates: I think it's not much to ask, if somebody wants to sit on a committee, that they can come by Zoom, they can come in person. I think it's wrong. I think it's important for this committee, for its credibility, that people come to the committee.

I'm going to tell you an example which I think is fair and reasonable, and I think the Conservatives may even agree on this. There's an individual named Jeff Lang who is the CEO and president of the WSIB. On December 29, 2024, during the Christmas break, the Legislature wasn't sitting, and we could have called the committee back, and we didn't. It was recommended to him that he get on the committee of WSIB, as president, by the labour minister at the time, who happened to be a good friend of mine, Monte McNaughton. On January 28—the same day that we called the election in 2025—he was appointed. Details of that appointment are that he makes \$440,000 a year,

plus a pension. And if he's not reappointed, he gets a buyout of \$440,000.

Now, as we saw last week, including in Windsor, he has made the decision to close offices all over the province of Ontario—Windsor, St. Catharines, Sudbury, Thunder Bay, the Soo, North Bay, Guelph, Kingston. We're losing hundreds of jobs, some very skilled jobs—who are taking care of some of the people who are injured on the job; people who go to work every day, want to get a fair day's pay, a fair day's wages. Through no fault of their own, they get hurt on the job and they have to go on WSIB. And we're closing those offices.

The part that I raise here is that he was a failed PC federal candidate in the election, and he got appointed, without coming to the committee, to a \$440,000 job. I believe that's more than anybody in this room is making, by the way. I'm guessing; I don't know the PCs' salaries.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Come on, Wayne. It's reported.

MPP Wayne Gates: I'm just saying.

I'm just trying to be clear here: I think it's wrong.

Another example of that is in the last election. I ran against Ruth-Ann Nieuwesteeg, who was defeated. I beat her, obviously, or I wouldn't be here—I won't say “by 8,000 votes,” but I did. She was appointed to the Ontario tourism board. She's a funeral director and owns a funeral home. I know a lot of people are dying to come to Niagara Falls, but that doesn't make sense to me.

These are examples on why I believe—and I've been very consistent on this; I've been on this committee a long, long time—that I think it's important for people to come to this committee.

Getting back to my original statement—because I think Jeff Lang is a great example and Ruth-Ann is another great example—I want this committee to work. We're going to have a tough guy coming at 9 o'clock—he's going to face some tough questions. But do you know what? He's here. He knows that he's going to get some tough questions, but he's here.

Ms. Laura Smith: Point of order.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Smith, point of order.

Ms. Laura Smith: With all due respect, I want this committee to work as well, so I'd like to get to the task at hand, which is interviewing the candidates.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Could you wrap up?

MPP Wayne Gates: I can appreciate that, but we've got an extra half-hour since we've only got five candidates nominated.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): We're trying to make it relevant.

MPP Wayne Gates: I appreciate that, but I think it's important to the community outside there—to us on our time and the value of our time. I said that my colleague from Windsor—that's a four-hour drive, to come to Toronto. I don't think we're asking people who want to come and sit on committees—to come here or to come by Zoom, it's not too much.

So my last question will be, how many people were asked to come to committee this time? I have 13, but it may be more.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Yes, everyone who was requested was asked to come, and for certain reasons, they could not. Some were travelling. Some had medical appointments. So those who could attend are attending, either virtually or in person, as are—

MPP Wayne Gates: I can appreciate that, but I'd like to know the number.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): The number who were asked to come?

MPP Wayne Gates: I understand that they were all asked to come. We know five are coming. How many refused?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Vanessa Kattar): There are nine individuals on the subcommittee report dated August 20. All nine were requested to appear before the committee.

MPP Wayne Gates: So four of them said, "We're not coming. We'll just wait for the 30 days and then we'll get appointed"—like what has been happening in this committee for a long, long time.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Vanessa Kattar): Two of them said they were travelling, one of them had a medical appointment, and the other one said that they had a pre-scheduled meeting that they could not move.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Gilmour.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: This is the reason why I think it's very important that we as a committee extend those certificates. We have seen multiple times—some of these are very valid reasons. It's the summer. People are travelling. People have medical experiences. But someone who is getting a \$440,000 salary should at least get an interview here before they receive that kind of responsibility. There's an accountability factor. That is what this committee is set to do, and we are failing to do our job when we do not bring these people before us.

Again, I would urge my colleagues, when it is time to extend the certificates, that we do not hesitate, but that we do immediately extend those certificates and give people the opportunity to come before us. Give the people of Ontario the accountability that they have come to expect from—well, I would say this government, but I think that we know that that is actually failing at the moment. So let's do better. Let's show that this committee can be accountable and can hold people accountable and look after the

people of Ontario by extending those certificates and ensuring that they come before us.

0910

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Are the members ready to vote? All those in favour? All those opposed? That carries.

INTENDED APPOINTMENTS

MR. PETER VAN LOAN

Review of intended appointment, selected by official opposition party and third party: Peter Van Loan, intended appointee as member, University of Toronto governing council.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Our first intended appointee is the Honourable Peter Leo Van Loan, nominated as a member of the University of Toronto governing council.

Welcome, Peter. We just had to do a little housekeeping there first. Now it is your time, and we would love to hear from you. You have some time to present and share your story and your wealth of experience. After that, each party will question you for 10 minutes. Whatever time you take is removed from the government's time, and they are perfectly fine with that and happy with that. Look at those smiles. So without further ado, the floor is yours.

Peter, welcome, and thank you for your willingness to continue to serve.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I want to thank the committee for the invitation to appear today with respect to the board of governors at the University of Toronto.

The continued success of the University of Toronto as Canada's leading post-secondary institution means a great deal to me.

On a personal level, I've graduated from the University of Toronto three times. I attended Victoria College at the University of Toronto, obtaining my BA, with a specialist in political science and a minor in geography. My master of arts degree was in international relations. Finally, I obtained a master of science in planning from U of T's department of geography in the School of Graduate Studies.

My law degree comes not from U of T but from Osgoode Hall Law School, so I do have some breadth of perspective on how things work elsewhere.

My association with the University of Toronto continued after my time studying there. I spent 10 years in the master's planning program, where I was responsible for the urban development controls course in the master of science in planning program. I also appeared as a guest lecturer in a number of other university courses, including most frequently in the late Stephen Clarkson's course on Canadian political parties.

The importance of the University of Toronto to Ontario and Canada is significant and profound. In the current times, with the unprecedented challenges we are facing, I think this is more true than ever. The University of Toronto is clearly Canada's pre-eminent institution of higher learning.

As such, it's essential to our country's success in shaping and contributing the human capital that will ensure Canada's future story is a positive one.

Consistently ranked in the top 20 globally, the University of Toronto clearly demonstrates that Canada and Ontario are capable of offering a superior educational experience. It helps to serve as a magnet, attracting some of the best global talent. And the benefits are clear. It can be seen in driving innovation in our economy, supporting Ontario's first-class health care system, all while supporting the culture that gives Ontario residents a superior quality of life. These are all elements that help to drive our economy forward, especially in a world where creators and innovators have more choice about where they want to live and raise their families. The University of Toronto has succeeded in this respect, in large part, by maintaining a commitment to academic rigour and rewarding achievement and merit. It is essential that this culture of excellence continue.

In today's environment, the challenges caused by trade wars, real wars and the restructuring of previously stable relationships all put that role of the University of Toronto in a more important place than previously. As the United States turns inwards and many other countries move in a similar direction, there's an opportunity for the University of Toronto to shine as a beacon of opportunity for young, ambitious and optimistic people to make their mark and build their foundations. But it also puts the university in a place where the competition with others is tougher than ever.

For Ontario's economy to succeed, we need the University of Toronto to succeed; such is the significance in role of this key institution. There are ongoing challenges for the University of Toronto to continue to excel.

One of the keys to the university's past success has been to focus in a balanced way on the importance of a large, high-quality undergraduate cohort while maintaining superb postgraduate and research programs. The temptation for those in an institution like the University of Toronto is to increasingly focus on research and graduate programs at the expense of the undergraduate experience. This tendency and temptation must be resisted to ensure that the University of Toronto continues to play the key role that it has in the past.

Another growing challenge, one that mirrors that in the Canadian economy, is to attract the best and brightest of Canadian talent to choose to stay in Canada and to study at University of Toronto. A growing trend I see in my son's generation—he's in high school—is that proof of success for high achievers is judged as the experience of studying elsewhere, especially in the United States or the United Kingdom. As one who has given a great deal of my life to working to build our country and one who feels a patriotic love for Canada, I find this tendency to prefer opportunity elsewhere both disappointing and alarming. It is perhaps typical of a Canadian tradition of selling ourselves short. We need to reverse this kind of thinking in the younger generation and demonstrate to them that their best futures and opportunities can be fulfilled here in Ontario. The University of Toronto has a key role to play in working toward such a future, thanks both to its objective excellence and its global reputation.

That's why there's a strong public interest and interest of the Ontario government in ensuring the continued success of the University of Toronto. It's my hope to be able to contribute in some small way to that project, through the opportunity to serve as a member of the board of governors of the University of Toronto. Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much, Peter.

We will now go to the government side. You have four minutes and 53 seconds. MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: I want to thank the applicant for coming in today and talking about his experience.

I'm going to cut to the chase, because we're limited in time.

You talked about the balance and the different levels of university, and you have experience in that area. You also talked about children, students, making a mark, and making a decision for our students in these complex environments.

How do you think that your experience will translate into being an effective university governor?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Well, I will be one of 50 on the board of governors, if I am approved, so I don't have an exaggerated sense of what my level of influence will be. But I'd hope, as I said, that if the University of Toronto can continue to focus on the things that have made it successful in the past, and that is focusing on the academic excellence, focusing on achievement, sticking to the things that matter, that people are looking for from universities—I think they've been very successful at that in the past, and I would like to see that focus continue. That's where I would see my efforts in particular.

There are other issues that are always important. I was going to say my planning background would have been very important for a university, which has a special place—this is a university that actually mixes with the fabric of the city; it's not an isolated, self-contained campus, and that brings with it special challenges. The current government made significant progress to helping the position of universities like U of T by giving them greater authority in the planning area over their own ability to make decisions and shape their environment. I think that's something that's efficient, saves money and helps them focus on playing their role in the city a lot better, growing and managing their growth and planning their future in terms of physical infrastructure a lot better. However, that being said, I think I still might be able to contribute in some of those areas as well.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: How much time is left?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Two minutes, 49 seconds.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Van Loan, for being here.

One of the responsibilities of being on the governing council of a university is ensuring the long-term financial health of the university. I was hoping you can share with us what principles you think are important when we're looking at financial stewardship of an institution like the University of Toronto.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: The University of Toronto, I think, has a pretty good track record on that level.

I should say the previous president of the university was actually a former professor of mine, he was a colleague of mine when we were teaching together in the program, and then when I was a federal cabinet minister I was pleased to work with him in ensuring that there was appropriate support for some of the special programs, initiatives that University of Toronto has.

University of Toronto, I think, has done well financially in terms of its own management, in terms of its alumni relations and fundraising, in terms of support from governments of all levels, and you obviously want to continue that. It can always be better.

One area where I see an opportunity for continued support and growth that might be important to me is that of appropriate bursaries and scholarships, continuing to grow that part of what the university has to offer to ensure the best can come here regardless of their background. I went to U of T from, let's just say, a very modest financial background. I understand the challenges that people have in going to university in those circumstances. But I also—and my life demonstrates it—understand abundantly the benefits one can achieve from that education and how it sets you up for the future.

0920

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Sabawy, one minute.

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Thank you very much, Mr. Van Loan, and welcome back. I'm very happy to see your background, with all the different roles you played in the public service sector, in government, and as a policy-maker.

Can you briefly describe the importance of gaining career experience or work-integrated learning in post-secondary education and how that could put our graduates in a very competitive situation with graduates from the competition, especially the US?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: As I say, I think the real focus has got to be for the university to continue to maintain high-quality academics, attract the best students, attract the best talent in teaching, and maintain its position as the pre-eminent school, reputationally and objectively, in Canada. That is part of it. When I look at how does my own experience fit in—

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much. You will just have to hold that thought. Maybe someone else will carry it. We are in suspense for that.

Over to MPP Gates: 10 minutes.

MPP Wayne Gates: Welcome, Peter. My understanding is that you were born in Niagara Falls. Is that accurate?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: This is totally accurate.

MPP Wayne Gates: I did a lot of research on you last night.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: There were, in fact, in the Harper government, two cabinet ministers born in Niagara Falls. So we got very good treatment when Rob Nicholson was there.

MPP Wayne Gates: I've got a few questions.

Is it accurate that you were the minister of internal government affairs under PM Stephen Harper?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: I was Minister of Public Safety. I was Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs for a period of time. I think that's what you were talking about—inter-governmental?

MPP Wayne Gates: Is it also reasonable and fair to say that you've had a long career as a partisan Conservative?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: I don't think it takes a great deal of research to come to that conclusion, yes.

MPP Wayne Gates: It's amazing what you find out at 2 o'clock in the morning.

You were also president of the Ontario PC Party under Harris?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Yes, and also of the PC Party of Canada.

MPP Wayne Gates: There was an interesting quote that I found. It says that you were notoriously nasty to opposition parties. Is that accurate?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: I wouldn't say that. I was House leader for much time, and I always appreciated what the Bloc Québécois said. They enjoyed what they called a direct approach—no nonsense. "We know what your interests are. Here's our interest." We could get business done quickly. I remember one of my counterparts from the Bloc saying I was the best House leader he had ever worked with, and he'd been there—he was dean of the House, so I was pretty pleased with that.

MPP Wayne Gates: That's not how other people saw you. But that is fair.

Is it accurate that you have donated to the PC Party?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Yes. That would be very accurate.

MPP Wayne Gates: Can you help this committee understand how much you gave to the PC Party—do you know, say, since 2018?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: It would be a great deal—I couldn't tell you the number—and to the Conservative Party of Canada.

I look at it from this perspective: I used to work together with a fellow named David Smith. We were a team practising law. He was, of course, a Liberal, a former Trudeau cabinet minister—Pierre, not Justin. He ultimately became a senator. He was a city of Toronto councillor, and he was Chrétien's campaign chair. He used to say that it's important for us, in our law firm, in general, to support the system. We want to encourage people to support the system. Our democracy is important, and that's part of our civic duty. I think that's the way we should all treat it.

I think you, as people who will also be heading out to life elsewhere, should have the same view: that those who contribute to our democratic process, whether it be as volunteers contributing financially, or the biggest sacrifice of all, serving here for the enormous riches that are offered to those who serve—that is something that should be considered to your credit; I think in other countries, it is. I think in Canada, we're a little bit down on politics as involvement. Your civic involvement is a good thing. I

think it's something that should be encouraged, not punished.

MPP Wayne Gates: I'm going to do these questions so that I can get a few of them out. I'm only doing five minutes on you. You're lucky.

It said \$24,859 to the PCs since 2018. You're also the second, if you can imagine, past PC Party president that has been appointed this summer at this committee. I understand that you've donated this kind of money.

The one thing you said during your minute speech there is—I agree with you—that democracy is under attack—particularly by the Conservative Party. In Niagara region, they're going to appoint the chair and give them strong-chair powers. That is a direct violation of democracy, not having the opportunity for the residents of Niagara to vote for the chair—the same strong-chair powers for the mayors.

So I'm agreeing with you that it's important that people donate to campaigns. I'm not sure that a lot of people can afford \$25,000 to donate to a party—

Mr. Peter Van Loan: It's over a long time.

As a New Democrat, I'm sure you appreciate the notion of from each according to their means—

Interjection.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Sorry. MPP Smith, do you have a point of order?

Ms. Laura Smith: We should stick to the questioning of the individual's credentials.

MPP Wayne Gates: Well, this has been accepted in this committee for years, and every time, you raise the same question.

It's important for everybody to know exactly who people are supporting. I don't think there's any doubt about Peter's credentials, quite frankly. I also look at that.

You are a PC. You've worked in the riding association. You've donated lots more money than I've ever done to any party. I guess that's not a knock against you. If you can afford it, that's what they can do.

I'll ask you a question—because you raised the university right next door to us. I see a lot of kids in the elevator, where I'm living, in my apartment. I talk to them regularly about the struggles that they're having around paying for their university, the struggles that they have on, quite frankly, paying their rent, even being able to afford food at the end of the week. Some of those kids are going to food banks to survive, to get an education. I'm going to ask you a question that I think is fair: Are you concerned about the impact of the major OSAP cuts on working-class students, who will be saddled with thousands of dollars of debt because of changes to OSAP from a grant to a loan—75% to 25%? After you answer that, I'll turn it over to my colleague.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Financial issues, I think, are always challenging. I think in Ontario, there was a decision at some point to deregulate tuitions, which made that particularly more challenging. Frankly, when I look at what tuitions are for law school right now, I think coming from the background I came from, I would have been, perhaps, a little bit intimidated about seeking to go to law school. Of course, from the other end of the telescope, I

see that those are appropriate because the benefits of that education are indeed enormous. I'm not sure I would have perceived that, necessarily, at the other end of the tunnel. But I also think you have some responsibility of your own.

Everybody's experience is different, and I don't want to say that everyone should live the same life experience I did. In fact, there are people close to me who approached things very differently and took OSAP, but I instead chose to work. I worked 40 hours a week while I was in school. I paid my way through and never took an OSAP grant or loan. For me, that was a point of pride. It was a point of pride. It was a point of independence. It meant that I had to work hard and struggle, but I was pleased to be able to have done that. And I think it's an important part of my identity and view of myself.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I appreciate it. Thank you so much, Mr. Van Loan.

I'd like to just stay in this line of questioning around the University of Toronto. We've gone over the connections you have to the PC Party, the deep connections there. But I'm also wondering about—in your job at Aird and Berlis. The biography indicates that you currently lead the firm's public policy and government relations group, advising clients on matters that are before the very government that is appointing you today. As someone who has a reputation for being so partisan, so notoriously nasty with other parties, how are you going to make that switch to the institutional, the academic, the focus on students, rather than the loyalty to a government that you are so closely connected to? And when they are making bills, how are you going to maintain that independence to be able to look after this new constituency base?

0930

Mr. Peter Van Loan: I'll go back to what I said earlier. I don't think that people should be penalized for playing their civic duty.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Of course.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Frankly, we should be encouraging people to be good citizens, to support our political process. We should be honouring people who choose, like you do, to serve in public office.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: So does that mean you don't think there are any steps you need to make or any differences, changes, you need to make?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One minute.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: I'll use a kind of odd analogy. When we were in Stephen Harper's government, when you were at the cabinet table, there were a number of different approaches you could take. My view was always that when I was at the cabinet table, my job was to put on my Canada hat—not my York-Simcoe hat, not my portfolio hat, not my Ontario hat, not my Conservative Party hat, but my Canada hat. We were there to make decisions in the best interests of the country. I think that's what you do when you're in a role like that. You're making decisions in the best interests of the institution.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: May I ask one last question with my remaining time?

If the provincial funding continues to be insufficient—it's the lowest in the country—would you be prepared to publicly advocate to this government to increase public investments in the university?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: I think as a member of the board of governors in the University of Toronto, that's not what my role would be. The university would have its own official way of channelling those kinds of positions, communicating with the government.

As I said, I do think there is merit in always working to build those endowments that allow for greater bursaries, for greater scholarships, so that you can allow the best of—

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much. Sorry, again, to cut you off.

Over to the third party: MPP Smyth.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you for being here today. We do appreciate that very much. As you've heard, it doesn't always happen with all the intended appointees. So we're grateful for you to be here and answer our questions.

I just want to go back to the OSAP piece with you for a moment. I totally appreciate what you talked about—working 40 hours a week, you're very proud of that, you paid for your own education. I think we are in a different, obviously, state of affairs now with the economy, with education. Costs are absolutely ballooning. We know the struggles that students are facing. We've seen them over and over again—the protests here at Queen's Park.

I think you said you have to have some responsibility of your own. Do you feel like OSAP was being taken advantage of by students?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: I'm pondering what I can say from my cabinet confidentiality oaths, but I do recall, when we were in government, that one of the things that struck me was that our greatest expenditure at the federal government level was forgiving student loans in that area. I thought that was a little bit perplexing. That's where most of the funding on the student support went—to forgiving loans. At the same time, people who had taken loans and paid them back—they didn't get the same kind of benefit.

That's an interesting question to ponder. I think it's worth thinking about. I don't think it's going to be my role at the board of governors at U of T to do that. There are folks like you in the government who will wrestle with those issues in the proper form, in the right way, in terms of public policy.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Does it strike you as fair—the change that has been made in the funding formula?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Well, I will say this—

Interjection.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Smith, point of order?

Ms. Laura Smith: Yes. The questions should be relevant to the applicant's qualifications—full stop.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much.

Just be mindful of that, MPP Smyth.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Okay.

Then, let's clarify. For people who don't know, you're an intended appointee as a member, part-time, of the governing council. You mentioned there are a number of other people on that council who would be with you. What is your role?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Well, my understanding is that at University of Toronto, much of the work gets done in committees. Most of the work gets done not in the main body of the board of governors or the governing council, but rather in the various committees. I've spoken to individuals who have served there. So to a large degree, that will depend on the luck of the draw.

I mentioned a couple of areas where I thought I could make a difference, whether it be helping to focus on building up their endowments to support bursaries or helping in terms of the planning and development of the university, its buildings and ongoing integration and role in the city, where, through my planning background and so on, there might be something to offer. But those things may not be for me to choose. We'll have to wait to see what assignments might be available if I am successful and I gain the favour of this committee.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Given, as my colleagues have pointed out, your extensive public service and financial contributions to the party—federal, provincial—how do you think you could demonstrate in this role, to faculty and to students, that your appointment is based on institutional governance rather than on political patronage?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Well, again, it would be by doing the job. As patronage appointments go, as you know, this one has no compensation, so it's not that kind of an appointment. It's an opportunity to serve, and that's how I view it.

Again, I'll return to it—I think it's kind of sad to see this focus, where we think it is a bad thing to have served publicly, to have done your civic duty.

I'll tell you, the reason I got involved in politics, to a large degree, had to do with the fact—my family background is Estonian. When the Soviets occupied, the first time, then the Nazis came in, then the Soviets again—much of my family was executed, sent to Siberia. I was fortunate that my mother and parents left, though they were on the list for the deportations to Siberia. I was told by my grandmother—what was the first thing they did? The first thing the Soviets did was come and get the party membership lists. Why? Because people who had that civic duty, who believed in democracy, represented a threat to that kind of authoritarianism.

As soon as we start telling people that if you get involved in politics, if you support a political party, Liberal, NDP, Conservative, that's a bad thing—and I can tell you, there are discussions happening in boardrooms in Toronto right now and around the province, with people saying, "We better not get involved." We're discouraging people from supporting municipal candidates. That's a dangerous thing. That's bad for democracy. That's a sad thing for our society. I think we should encourage and support that.

My colleague David Smith, who I worked with for years, had the same view. We could work together. You asked,

“Can I work together with others?” Obviously, we were a team—a Liberal and a Conservative working together—and both adored each other. I miss him a great deal. I was pleased to be able to speak at his retirement as a senator. That ethic—I think he put it so well when he said we’ve got to encourage civic duty and civic involvement, and not punishment and not discouraging—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Right. And do you know what? It’s not civic duty that’s under attack here. This isn’t what we’re—

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Don’t make it so that when someone comes to this committee, they’ve committed the sin of helping support our democratic system.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: That is absolutely not the intent. I think it’s about just shining a light on—it’s just a context and a perspective.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Well, it’s not a secret what my partisan involvement is. I don’t think that’s a big deal.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Not in this room, maybe, but for the people of Ontario, so—

Mr. Peter Van Loan: I don’t think it’s even a secret outside.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: And then maybe for students who aren’t as schooled in who had what background in the past—

Mr. Peter Van Loan: And that’s where it’s most important.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Absolutely.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Those are the young people who we need to be encouraging to support our democratic system.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Sir, we’re talking about impact. We’re talking about influence. We’re talking about perspective that could be taken from your previous roles into a new role. And it’s fair to ask.

U of T, for instance, often takes some public stances on environmental sustainability, on equity, human rights, that could diverge from—maybe—political policy that you have adhered to or advanced.

I want to ask you, with your past experience, with your expertise, with your political views, which you are very proud of, and your civic duty, which we all respect, how would you protect U of T’s academic autonomy and institutional independence when provincial policy priorities sometimes clash with university research or governance decisions?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Well, academic freedom has got to be the cornerstone, and academic freedom is an institutional choice, in the sense of—not everybody is expected to adopt the same views. That’s the whole principle—each individual student, each individual professor, each academic there should have the freedom to express their own views, make their own choices, do what they wish. I think that has to be encouraged, and we’ve got to encourage an environment where that is. That means not allowing cancel culture, not allowing people to be intimidated for their views on campus—to allow those things to coexist, to allow debate to flourish.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: And that in and of itself is a political statement.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: That’s an important part of what happens at a university, and I think you want to encourage that.

0940

In fairness, I think the University of Toronto—not perfect, but through the difficult challenges of the past 10 years or so, navigated them quite well and did a good job of continuing to focus on what its real job was and to allow that diversity to flourish. As I said, not perfect—but I think when we look around the universities of North America, they did a better job than most.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: What would you want to see your legacy be in this position? It is part-time, but maybe you would want to advance that to a full-time role, if it exists—or any kind of influence? And why a university? I know you have the history, you mentioned that—but there are all kinds of things you could do with the experience that you have had.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: There are.

Well, I think it’s actually important that this is a job that comes without compensation. That’s kind of part of the point. This is genuine public service.

As you know, I have this great attachment to the university. I did not mention that my stepdaughter just started practising law. She is an undergraduate and law school graduate from the University of Toronto. My parents also went there. So the affiliation is long and deep—that’s why the University of Toronto. But it also, as I said, has a place to play in Ontario’s economy.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One minute.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: And we’re probably at this incredibly challenging point. When I tell you what my son’s friends say, the peer pressure on him—“If you stay in Ontario, you’re kind of a loser.” I don’t want that attitude out there. I want the attitude that if you go to university here in Ontario, you’re getting a first-class education and doing the best that you can. I don’t know that that would be my legacy, but I hope that in some small way I can contribute to that.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Just one final question, if I have time here: What guardrails would you put in place to ensure that your private advocacy never overlaps with the university interests or any capital projects?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: I think that you’ve got to clearly understand what the limits are. Of course, as a former cabinet minister, I went through all of that, and I continue to do that in my professional practice today. I think I understand well the notion of what a conflict of interest is and how one must avoid it, and—

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much, Peter, for coming in and giving us your time and your story. We really appreciate it. You’re welcome to stay till the end, maybe around noon, to find out the results, or you can go about your merry way on this beautiful day and find out later.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Thank you very much.

MR. PAUL MOREAU

Review of intended appointment, selected by government party: Paul Moreau, intended appointee as vice-chair, Algonquin Forestry Authority.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Our next intended appointee is Paul Moreau, nominated as vice-chair of the Algonquin Forestry Authority. He will be appearing virtually.

Hello, Paul. Welcome. I'll just give you the lay of the land for this committee.

First of all, thank you for putting your name forward and for your willingness to make Ontario an even better province.

You can present yourself and share your stories and experiences with us, and then we will take rounds of questioning from the government, the official opposition and the third party. Everyone gets 10 minutes—except the time you take is deducted from the government. They are happy about that. They are fine with that. They will ask any questions—they will be very succinct in their time asking you questions.

The floor is yours. Thank you very much for coming, Paul.

Mr. Paul Moreau: Good morning, Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today regarding my proposed appointment as vice-chair of the Algonquin Forestry Authority.

By way of background, I have spent more than 30 years working in municipal and provincial public service—most recently as the chief administrative officer of the county of Renfrew. Throughout my career, I have developed considerable experience in governance, strategic planning, financial oversight, intergovernmental relations, and I've been responsible for stewardship of public resources.

I also bring a strong personal connection to the region. I have lived in the Algonquin and Ottawa Valley region for the vast majority of my life, and I have a good understanding of its communities, geography and the importance of the forest sector to the economic and social well-being of this part of Ontario. Algonquin Park and the surrounding forest landscape have always been an important part of the region in which I have lived and worked. In fact, in 1991, I proposed to my wife in Algonquin Park. So it's an important place to me.

Earlier in my career, I gained direct experience in natural resource management and forestry with the Ministry of Natural Resources, as the district manager but also as a district planner, and served in numerous roles within that ministry. I was responsible for district-level operations and involved in forest management planning.

As a registered professional planner and member of the Canadian Institute of Planners, my professional background has also provided me with considerable experience in land use planning, natural resource management and regional economic development.

I believe that the combination of professional experience and regional knowledge is particularly relevant to the AFA. Sustainable forest management requires balancing environmental stewardship with economic opportunity,

operational realities and recreational interests that communities need in the long-term public interest.

I also bring considerable governance experience. I am currently serving as the board chair of the Petawawa Centennial Family Health Centre. I serve as the chair of governance for the Association of Family Health Teams of Ontario. I have also served in other roles—in a governance role for the children's aid society for Renfrew county, and other boards.

I understand the distinction between governance and management and the importance of a board providing appropriate oversight, asking good questions and supporting management in ensuring accountability for results.

If confirmed as the vice-chair, I would approach the position objectively and collaboratively, with a strong commitment to good governance, sustainable forest management and responsible stewardship of Ontario's forest resources.

I believe my background in public administration, forestry and natural resource management, planning and board governance, together with my long-standing connection to the region, would allow me to make a positive contribution to the AFA and support the chair and my fellow board members in carrying out its mandate.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be pleased to take any questions that you may have.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much for sharing that story with us—especially your proposal.

There is six minutes and 17 seconds left for the government side. MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Mr. Moreau, thank you so much for being here, and thank you for putting your name forward. You've got quite extensive and truly relevant background to this role.

Algonquin Park—certainly, I know it means so much to you as a special place; it means so much to Ontarians as a whole. The Algonquin Forestry Authority is truly important for all Ontarians. So I'm hoping to ask you what, in your view, is the role and the importance of the AFA for not only those who work in Algonquin Park, live near Algonquin Park and the surrounding communities, but also for Ontarians. Why is the work important, and why is it important to strike the right balance?

Mr. Paul Moreau: There are two components to that end, and you've touched on it. There's an economic element to it, but there's also protection of the natural resource and ensuring the continued sustainability of that resource. Whether or not you're a citizen of Ontario and you've been to Algonquin Park, Algonquin Park is there for you to enjoy, whether you want to go there or not. I would say that it is the crown jewel in the Ontario Parks system. It provides a fantastic recreational opportunity for many folks from Ontario. At the same time, it's an important economic driver to our community and our province. It employs directly 285 people in forest operations in the park. There are another 4,000 people employed in mills and probably another 13,000 indirectly. It supports nine mills directly with wood and probably another 13 or 14

other mills that receive periodically. So in terms of an important component of the wood basket, as I would put it, for the province of Ontario, supplying wood, it would be a critical element in terms of employment as well. It plays those dual roles, and I think that's why the role of the AFA board is so important. It has a tricky balance in terms of protecting that resource but also ensuring that communities continue to have employment opportunities and those mills remain strong.

0950

In fact, I know the government just committed \$1.9 million in terms of upgrades to some of those mills. So the government also sees the value in those mills. I know MPP Denault played a huge role in securing those funds. It's very important for our community.

I trust that partially answers your question?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: That's fine. Thank you so much.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Sandhu.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: Thank you, Mr. Moreau, for your presentation and for appearing before the committee. Thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

My question is, why do you believe a strong and sustainable forestry sector is important to Ontario's economy, particularly in northern communities?

Mr. Paul Moreau: I would again start and reiterate just a little bit of what I said. Those forestry jobs are the basis for many communities. In my area, nine mills are directly supported through the forestry sector and wood that comes out of Algonquin Park. There's a broader connection, though. It's hard to miss it these days. You may have heard there are tariffs coming out of the United States. And those jobs are probably more important than ever. Diversification within those communities is critical. To protect those jobs in those communities as the basis for economic growth and development remains critical, I know, for our community in Renfrew county.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Rae.

Mr. Matthew Rae: How much time do we have left, Chair?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): You have one minute and 56 seconds, so be quick.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Oh, man. I'll be quick.

Hi, Paul. It's nice to see you. I just also want to mention that it was great to hear about your personal connection at Algonquin—proposing to your wife there. I actually proposed to my wife, not in Algonquin, but in another provincial park, at Hardy Lake in Muskoka. It's a unique opportunity to do that. My brother-in-law actually works for one of those mills that use Algonquin for their product—so it's great to be able to hear some of that full circle here at committee this morning.

Really briefly, Paul, just on some of your past experiences: I know you're the CAO of Renfrew county right now, but your work with the Ministry of Natural Resources and your professional career—how will that help you, if you're appointed by this committee to the Algonquin forestry board? How will those roles help you, do you think, in preparing you for that role?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One minute.

Mr. Paul Moreau: It gives me a very good understanding of the distinction between governance and operations. I know the operations element, so it gives me an understanding of how I can address concerns when they come up, but I would also respect the role of management in making those types of decisions. That background gives me an operational understanding of what occurs in forest operations in the park.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Over to the official opposition: MPP Gates, the floor is yours.

MPP Wayne Gates: Thanks for being here. We appreciate it.

I'm going to start with the same questions I started with the last individual—I don't know if you were watching.

Do you belong to any political party?

Mr. Paul Moreau: No—well, I did have a membership at one point to the Liberal Party, but I have not renewed it or done anything with it for years.

MPP Wayne Gates: Did you ever do any donations?

Mr. Paul Moreau: I think someone knocked at the door and I gave \$10 or \$15.

MPP Wayne Gates: Well, it's a start. Every \$10 or \$15 gets us elected sometimes.

I want you to know that my staff love Algonquin. They go up there to camp all the time; so does my youngest daughter. It's a beautiful spot that we should be protecting.

Having said that, because it's close to Doug Ford's area, have there been any requests for Algonquin Park to put a Ferris wheel in the park at all?

Mr. Paul Moreau: Not that I'm aware of, sir.

MPP Wayne Gates: It seems to be his fantasy when it comes to parks. So I just thought I'd ask you.

Why did you decide to dedicate so much of your career to conservation?

Mr. Paul Moreau: I've always enjoyed the outdoors, but I also have an understanding of the importance of resource management to our community. I've seen the benefits of it on both sides—economic and recreational. I am an avid outdoors person. I like the outdoors, I respect it, and I want to make sure that it's managed in a way that is sustainable.

MPP Wayne Gates: Yes, it's important. There's no doubt that our parks help our environment, so—very important.

Can you talk a bit about the importance of conservation of our provincial parks and forests in general?

Mr. Paul Moreau: In general, Algonquin Park is probably the only provincial park—I'm going by memory here—that has logging associated with it. We have a variety of different park types, depending on what Ontario Parks deems appropriate for that area. There are nature reserve parks. There are active-recreation-type parks. So, depending on the community where the park is situated, there are a variety of different parks available to the residents of Ontario. Each park has a management plan, which is a critical element. It is developed with community consultation, which is extremely important, and lots of feedback. I've been part of that process.

I'm not sure the committee would recall, but I was a member of the staff in Pembroke district, as the planner when the Lands for Life process unfolded and the province increased the number of provincial parks in Ontario.

MPP Wayne Gates: Have you worked with Indigenous communities on conservation in the past, and how will you work to include Indigenous perspectives in your work at the forestry authority?

Mr. Paul Moreau: I have had a fantastic relationship working with, specifically, the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan and the nine off-reserve communities associated with the Algonquins of Ontario.

As the district manager of the Ministry of Natural Resources, I was responsible for the implementation of the annual hunt agreement that was in Algonquin Park. That was an ongoing negotiation between the province of Ontario and the Algonquins. So I developed an important working relationship with those communities over the years. And I continue to spend some time on the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan reserve and run into old colleagues from those days and continue to have a collegial relationship.

I also played a role in the agreement in principle development with the Algonquins as part of the land selection committee. When that agreement was developed, I participated with the province, supporting the province's efforts in finding suitable lands that would be part of that settlement with the Algonquins.

MPP Wayne Gates: Can you speak to the balance you will have to strike between protecting Algonquin forests and maintaining good forestry jobs in the area?

Mr. Paul Moreau: The Algonquin Forestry Authority has a forest management plan. That forest management plan limits operations to less than 1% of the park being harvested on an annual basis, and not only that, but it actually operates on a selection-harvest process, where only portions of the forest are harvested; it contains—let's say, for example—buffers along creeks and streams. Those things are protected.

There are also special elements within Algonquin Park where viewscapes are protected, so the users of the park who are using it for recreational purposes—they don't see active forest operations.

With that said, is there sometimes an operator who will make a mistake? Yes, but there are some compliance remedies available to the AFA and its compliance inspectors that deal with issues like that.

MPP Wayne Gates: As you know, the forestry industry is under attack from high tariffs from the United States. It's important to protect the workers and the industry that bring money and jobs to the communities around Algonquin.

What do you think the AFA can do to create a sustainable environment for forestry workers and the communities who rely on the industry and the jobs?

Mr. Paul Moreau: I would say that probably the solution for those mills is diversification and ensuring that there is adequate wood supply so that the industries can continue to manufacture and make the products that the market demands. So the role or the important component or the

important piece for the AFA is to ensure adequate wood supply for those mills.

1000

MPP Wayne Gates: How does the AFA work with Algonquin Park and its staff to provide fun and safe access to the natural beauty of Algonquin?

Mr. Paul Moreau: I'd go back to say that it stems back to the annual operating plans and the forest management plan and protecting the resource that is available for those folks who use it to recreate and other activities. It would be those setbacks, buffers that are put in place—those things that protect those other uses.

Again, forest operations are minimal, and they're planned out on an annual basis within the 10-year forest management plan.

MPP Wayne Gates: A question that you may or may not be able to answer: Do you believe that the forest industry needs more water bombers to fight the forest fires that are really plaguing the north this summer?

Mr. Paul Moreau: It's a very intriguing question. I'm not sure I'm qualified to answer it.

MPP Wayne Gates: I think you are actually qualified to answer it—when I take a look at your entire life being spent protecting it. You're retired. You're allowed to have an opinion on it. I don't think there's a secret that we need more water bombers. It was a trick question. I'm surprised that you didn't answer it quickly and say, "Absolutely, yes." I'll be honest with you. If you love the forestry and you love the environment—the environment is getting killed right now by the forest fires, and a lot of it is because of lack of staff, lack of water bombers. Our country has got to do better. Our province has got to do better. We need to protect our forests. We need to protect the jobs that are up there. So I was just surprised by your answer. But it's fair and reasonable to say that.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Smith, point of order.

MPP Wayne Gates: I'm finished. You don't have to intervene. I'm done. Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Over to the third party: MPP Smyth.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you, Mr. Moreau, for being here today virtually. We really appreciate it.

I just wanted to follow along a certain line of questioning, as my colleague—about the forest fires. Can you tell us how it has been in Algonquin Park this summer? We've heard, obviously, about the Far North and concerns there. But how concerned have you been about fire threats in that region, in, as you call it, the jewel of parks in Ontario?

Mr. Paul Moreau: To be frank, I'm not really truly aware, and I think I wouldn't want to hazard to guess the forest fire hazard level in Algonquin Park at this point. I think I'd leave that to the experts, to provide that particular advice. I know from my experience just living here in the town of Petawawa, which is right on the border, we've received quite a bit of rain recently, so, anecdotally, I think we're in good shape. But I would leave that up to the Ministry of Natural Resources forest fire folks.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Do you get any active reports on the forest fires there—you must, in the region.

Mr. Paul Moreau: We do, and I have not heard a lot—to be frank, I'm not sure if local municipalities have put a burn ban in place, given the current situation. So, again, I'm reluctant to tell you something that I'm not really qualified to tell you about.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: I just was wondering. As the position being vice-chair, Algonquin Forestry Authority—I would think that you'd be aware of what's happening with fire threats, and what you might feel is in need or not in need in the region.

Mr. Paul Moreau: I understand where you're coming from.

I would expect that when and if I am appointed to this role, I would receive regular updates as part of my role, as the vice-chair, and I would act accordingly, providing those types of recommendations to the general manager of the AFA, to make sure that adequate precautions are being taken. There are a number of levels in terms of precautions—because not only is it the protection of the forest resource and making sure that wood supply continues to be available, but it's also protecting the safety of the employees and the families in the surrounding communities. As you're well aware, when a forest fire does occur, it can spread quite rapidly and have significant impacts to local communities.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: And I would think, when we were watching what was happening in northern Ontario and other parts—

Mr. Paul Moreau: Yes, absolutely.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: —you would want to make sure that there are adequate resources available to protect the jewel of Ontario.

Mr. Paul Moreau: Absolutely.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: On to another topic right now: I want to discuss what's going on south of the border and how we're all deeply concerned about what's happening etc. and about protecting our own country, obviously.

Then, talking about Algonquin Park and tourism, do you think you're ready for what could be a greater influx of travellers to Algonquin Park—or have you seen that since the tariff wars started heating up a couple years ago? How is that being managed, and how are our resources being respected by people who go there? Do you feel it's being protected enough from that regard?

Mr. Paul Moreau: I do. I think there's adequate protection. Like any natural resource and park area, it has a capacity limit for the number of tourists, so that has to be managed.

Ontario Parks does play a role in developing management plans for Algonquin Park that create restricted zones. There is backcountry camping. Again, personal opinion here: I think the strategies around backcountry camping—it's not suitable for everybody, and it makes it more difficult to access. And in doing that, it limits the number of people who can access those parts of the park—so, again, protecting the resource.

I think the best example that I can think of, again, was COVID. When we had lockdown restrictions and people

were looking for things to do, our parks played a significant role. There may be a parallel there with respect to what you're suggesting, in terms of an influx of campers. Many people used Ontario's provincial parks as an escape and a getaway and a way, for lack of better words, to stay sane during a very difficult time. I think there are some parallels there.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Do you think that the park is protected enough in that regard, to be able to sustain that, though—and then that balance with the forestry aspect of it all?

Mr. Paul Moreau: I do think so. The forestry component is limited to a harvest of 1% per year, so it's very limited. But the trick is, that 1% is critically important to the jobs and economies of many of the local surrounding communities. So there's always that balance that needs to continue to occur.

On the heavy recreational use: I know that Ontario Parks does a fantastic job of continuing to monitor those things, and I suspect that if and when that does occur, they would be adjusting their management plans to address those concerns.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Are there any specific measures that you would champion to balance the commercial forestry allocations with the crown forest conservations? Do you feel it's at a good place right now?

Mr. Paul Moreau: I do feel it's at a good place, and I know that the operational procedures have significant limitations in them as well. So there would be numerous timing restrictions for harvesting in different particular areas.

Let's say, for example, you're dealing with specific cold-water fishery habitats. Harvest operations could not occur in those particular areas during spawning for those particular fish. So again, that resource is protected for those recreational users in perpetuity, for the long term.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: My final question would be, how is your past experience—CAO, chief administrative officer; municipal clerk—informing your oversight of local stakeholder relations and municipal partnerships and sustainable harvest quotas, which you just referenced, across the Algonquin region?

Mr. Paul Moreau: Sorry, how does my—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: How does your past experience help you work with your partners, with stakeholders, with those quotas?

Mr. Paul Moreau: I think it has given me a very broad understanding of the community, the community's needs. Again, I go back to my opening statement, where I talked about the understanding of the economic needs of the community but also the social needs—and that is the need for recreation and those types of experiences for all of Ontarians in Algonquin Park.

Again, there's the governance element. I have a very good understanding of governance, strategic planning, those types of things, and I think I've gained some political acuity along the way in understanding those types of issues as well.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much, Paul, for coming in and sharing your stories. I think we're all envisioning going camping this weekend or getting out to beautiful Algonquin Park, and as you call it, the crown jewel in our parks system.

You are welcome to stay and be in the background while we interview other people or you can go about your day, go out for a forest walk, and you'll find out your results later on.

We really appreciate you putting your name forward, with your wealth of experience.

Mr. Paul Moreau: Thank you so much for your time today.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thanks, Paul.

With that, we're going to have a five-minute bio break if that's all right with people. The clock starts now.

The committee recessed from 1012 to 1018.

MS. KAREN RESTOULE

Review of intended appointment, selected by official opposition party and third party: Karen Restoule, intended appointee as member, Ontario Energy Board board of directors.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Welcome back. We will now move to review our third intended appointee today. Karen Restoule is nominated as a member of the Ontario Energy Board board of directors. She will be appearing virtually.

Hi, Karen. Welcome. Thanks for coming and putting your name forward and being willing to serve for all Ontarians.

The lay of the land is that you will have some time right now to make a presentation and share the story of your life, your experiences, and why you would like this role with us, and then each party will have 10 minutes to question you. Whatever time you take in your presentation will be deducted from the government side, and they are perfectly fine with that.

The floor is yours.

Ms. Karen Restoule: Thank you so much for inviting me to meet with all of you today. I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak to my background, qualifications and support for my potential appointment to the Ontario Energy Board.

Remarks in Anishinaabemowin.

What I just said, in English: Hello. My name is Girl of the Clear Water. I am from Dokis First Nation, a small but very mighty Ojibway nation along what is now called the French River. I'm also a proud Canadian who grew up in northeastern Ontario, a part of the province where energy, natural resources and infrastructure have always been very closely connected to how people make a living, how communities build their futures and the quality of life that they achieve. My own community, Dokis, has experienced that history first-hand and today is a proud equity partner in a hydroelectric generating station in our community.

That background shapes how I see Ontario and also how I've anchored my career over the years.

Professionally, I've spent much of my career in public service and public policy, working at the intersection of First Nations, government and, increasingly, industry and the economy.

A good part of my career was spent in Ontario's justice system. First, in the early days of my career, I was a probation and parole officer in the Sudbury, North Bay and Sturgeon Falls offices. Then, years later, in 2016, I was appointed to a senior leadership role at Tribunals Ontario, an independent and adjudicative body which oversaw 19 tribunals at the time, with more than 800 adjudicators and operational staff. I was part of the leadership team responsible for ensuring that this large and complex public institution continued to serve the citizens of Ontario in a fair, timely, effective and accessible manner.

That experience taught me a great deal about public institutions, the importance of good governance, clear accountability and sound administration, particularly as we faced the onset of the pandemic in 2020—but most importantly, above all, something that we would remind ourselves nearly every day is remembering that these institutions exist to serve the people of Ontario.

Earlier in my career, I also served as director of the justice sector at the Chiefs of Ontario, where I worked on complex legal matters, justice and public safety policy, and issues affecting the 134 First Nations across Ontario. More recently, my work has increasingly focused on the economic side of that relationship—on economic development, natural resource development, infrastructure and the growing role of Indigenous leadership in Ontario and Canada's economies. Across that work, I've had the opportunity to engage with various leaders, workers and citizens across business, government, First Nations—all around looking to solve some very complex challenges, but also some opportunities there. That work has really required me to understand different interests, which—I like to say that I'm led by curiosity, which leads to asking a lot of questions, to be able to see the picture as the different groups and interests see it, and then navigate challenging conversations respectfully, but more importantly, looking across those conversations for any smart solutions where those interests might be aligned.

I would also mention that energy touches virtually every part of our lives, as citizens here in Ontario and across the country. It matters to families and household affordability, to businesses, to the province's competitiveness. It matters to communities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, across northern, rural and urban Ontario, and it is fundamental to the major investments and economic growth that Ontario will need in the years ahead.

My experiences in public institutions, in governance, Indigenous relations, economic development and organizational leadership, I would say, all lend themselves really well to the responsibilities of the OEB's board. If appointed, I would approach my responsibilities in the same way that I have approached public service throughout my career: prepared to listen; prepared to face challenges with courage and humility; prepared to ask tough questions, to exercise sound judgment, all in the service of citizens, Ontarians

across the entire province who depend on the OEB. With that, it would be an honour to contribute to that work and serve the province in this way.

I thank you. Meegwetch for listening to my intro this morning.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much. Meegwetch.

Now it is three minutes and 18 seconds for the government side. MPP Sabawy has the first question.

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Thank you very much, Karen, for being able to stand in front of this committee today. I'm very honoured to hear the journey you have.

As a person with my career in IT—this year would be my 40th as an IT—and past employee for Cisco Systems Canada, which you sit on the advisory board of, I've seen lots of technology eras come and go like waves, in different eras, and we see now with AI and data centres.

The current focus of both IESO and OEB is ensuring that energy decisions are made with the right focus to maximize economic growth.

With your background, with your advisories you sit on, can you talk about the importance of ensuring that decision-making produces direct, tangible results for both the Ontario economy and the individual ratepayers?

Ms. Karen Restoule: Thank you for that question.

To put it succinctly, the reality is that Ontario can't grow its economy without a reliable, affordable and increasingly abundant supply of energy. That's just the reality of the world that we live in and the reality of the world that we're headed into.

And then to your point about the Connected North program, which was founded by Cisco Systems, who connect Indigenous youth across Canada's north with experts and leaders and all kinds of really established folks in all kinds of different sectors, like fashion and cooking and business, to help connect the south to the north—with that technology that they leverage to facilitate that program, they require affordable energy to do that.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One-minute warning.

Ms. Karen Restoule: In a very real way, reliable and affordable energy is really important.

I think of the Gretzky reference: We have to go to where the puck is going, not where it is right now. That means making sure that access to energy is not standing in our way. Ideally, we don't want insufficient energy supply to constrain our growth and our quality of life here in Ontario.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): All right—19 seconds.

Ms. Laura Smith: We'll pass.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Over to the third party: MPP Gilmour.

1030

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Thank you so much for being before us, Ms. Restoule. It was really lovely to hear your story, and it's so clear that you've got an impressive breadth of experience in administrative justice, Indigenous policy, governance, executive leadership—all very, very impressive.

I think where I'm going to focus my questions is on the role of the OEB director and the importance of independence, impartiality, focused judgment that's required in that role. But before I go there, I'm going to go where we always do, as the official opposition. We ask each candidate, just to get it on the record, whether they've ever been a member of any political party.

Ms. Karen Restoule: I believe I have, yes.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Which party would that be?

Ms. Karen Restoule: The Conservative Party of Canada. And I believe, all the way back when I was in undergrad, I may have bought a membership to the federal NDP.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: In recent times, have you made any donations to political parties?

Ms. Karen Restoule: I have, in the last year.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: What I've got here—if you can just confirm—is \$4,050 to the federal Conservative Party, to candidates Jamil Jivani and Gregory Kung, as well as the federal Conservative riding associations. Do you think that would be right?

Ms. Karen Restoule: Yes, that sounds right. Obviously, that exceeds the limit per individual, so it would have been—

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Yes, within the limits. Perfect.

In terms of the role here, what I'm wondering around is that—you're chair, currently, of TC Energy Indigenous advisory council. That's an advisory role to a major pipeline proponent, as I understand it. TC Energy and its affiliates have matters that come before energy regulators. I'm wondering what steps you've taken or you're going to take to wall off that relationship if a related matter, directly or through an affiliate, comes before the board.

Ms. Karen Restoule: I take real or perceived conflicts of interest very seriously. It is an area with which I had leadership responsibilities at Tribunals Ontario, in my role as chair. So I'm exercised and familiar in this area. I have disclosed my current and previous professional and governance relationships through the appointments process.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I saw that.

Ms. Karen Restoule: That's part of the process.

Obviously, if I'm appointed, I would comply with the conflict-of-interest rules, any directions set out by my ethics executive and/or the Integrity Commissioner, whom ever will be weighing in on it. If and where there is a matter that would create a real potential or perceived conflict, I would absolutely disclose it immediately and seek the appropriate guidance from my ethics executive. If there were a mitigation plan in place for whatever activities that I do have and where recusal was required, I would absolutely recuse myself and not participate in any discussions or receive any confidential materials or make any attempts to have any conversations. I would simply ensure full responsibility in and around that.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I appreciate that. Thank you for that answer.

It's correct to say, through having read some of your writings and stuff, you've supported pipelines and energy development in the past? Correct? Yes.

So what I'm wondering about, in terms of the role that you're currently seeking, is the connection to Bill 40,

which received royal assent in December 2025. Just in case you aren't familiar—and for lots of us, it's new—they've added a new objective for the OEB to regulate the electricity sector in a manner that supports economic growth consistent with the policies of the Ontario government. You know the OEB's existing mandate is to ensure that the sector is both reliable, sustainable, and that, as you said earlier, the public interest is served. When those objectives conflict—and they certainly will; they have in the past—will you, as a board member, weigh them, especially given some of your public writings and your advisory work that has consistently supported pipelines and energy infrastructure development?

Ms. Karen Restoule: I think, to be fair, I'd like to correct what you're putting out there.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Please.

Ms. Karen Restoule: If you read my writing, I support Indigenous equity ownership, Indigenous leadership in any kind of energy project. Fundamentally, what that goes towards is the right of Indigenous nations to self-determine what they believe to be right for them in terms of developing their own local economies. I stand by that.

And, of course, in the event that there would be a conflict, I would clarify and/or seek advice from the Integrity Commissioner or the ethics executive.

I think that distinction is important to recognize in this conversation.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I agree. Thank you for that correction. I appreciate that. That's sort of what this committee is about—piecing these pieces together.

In December 2023, after a full evidentiary hearing, the OEB issued a landmark decision and it told Enbridge Gas to stop passing the costs of new gas infrastructure expansion onto the homebuyers. Within weeks, the energy minister, the government minister, announced he would overrule it—that was Bill 165, Keeping Energy Costs Down Act, that was passed in 2024 to reverse the decision, with legislation. Do you feel like that would be appropriate—for the government to reverse final regulatory decisions through legislation?

Ms. Karen Restoule: Again, I'm going to tap into my experience at Tribunals Ontario in overseeing a public institution that is independent of government. I want to say that as a prospective board director for the OEB, I'm not here to comment on or relitigate any individual decision or policy decision even made by any elected government. It is important to respect the boundaries, respect the mandate that I'm being considered for. Commissioners make independent adjudicative decisions. This is something that I held to very high regard when I was the chair of the Ontario Parole Board, the chair of the Landlord and Tenant Board, the executive interim or alternate executive chair at Tribunals Ontario—ensuring that that independence is respected of those decision-makers is priority. Government establishes legislation and public policy. What you've laid out there is a conversation that wouldn't be within my mandate, and I wouldn't be looking on having any opinion on it.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Do you feel that that undermines public confidence in regulators, when governments do that?

Ms. Karen Restoule: Again—

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Smith with a point of order. Sorry.

Ms. Laura Smith: These questions are out of scope. We should be asking questions about the applicant's credentials.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): If we could make it relevant, please, MPP Gilmour.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I will move on.

I wanted to just take a look at this impressive body of work that you did and some of the leadership work and how that informs who you are today.

You served as the associate chair of the Landlord and Tenant Board from June 2020 to 2022. That's the pandemic time. There were extraordinary pressures on all public institutions. That's very real. At the same time, that period was covered by Ombudsman Dubé in a 2023 report called Administrative Justice Delayed, Fairness Denied. As you know, that report found at the time that the scheduling for a hearing had ballooned from a matter of days to seven to eight months, which they called a serious problem—fair. I'm wondering, as the leader responsible for operations during that stretch, what do you believe went wrong? What did you do to fix it?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One minute.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: What have you learned that you're carrying on into this role from that moment?

Ms. Karen Restoule: I'll clarify that I stepped into the LTB role in mid-2020, so late summer, fall. So I would have actually stepped in at a point when the Ombudsman would have already made determinations that the timelines were excessive.

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First and foremost, the integrity of public institutions is a priority for me. It is our duty in those roles to ensure that public confidence is built every single day in these institutions.

So in the time that I was appointed to the LTB for those 22 or 18 or 20 months or whatnot, I actually brought the hearing timeline from 18 months' wait to three to six months' wait time—

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much. I think that's a good note to end on. It's positive.

We will move on to the third party. MPP Smyth.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you, Ms. Restoule, for being here today. It's very interesting to listen to your body of work and the work that's ahead of you.

I want to continue in the line of questioning that my colleague was asking about your leadership at the Landlord and Tenant Board and that transition to digital-first hearings, which drew some really sharp criticism, and mentioning the Ombudsman investigation regarding the barriers for low-income and remote participants.

How would you ensure that the OEB remains accessible to marginalized and remote communities without reliable Internet access?

Ms. Karen Restoule: That was a large question.

You'll note, if you look into it, that the Ministry of the Attorney General had its mandate to transition to electronic and virtual prior to the pandemic, and the pandemic simply made that reality a little quicker in order to maintain the integrity of the system, so that folks across Ontario, whether you're a tenant or landlord, could have confidence that the system was accessible to them in a fair and reasonable time frame.

When we talk about access to justice, this is something that, growing up in northeastern Ontario, living in a First Nations community, sharing a home in a First Nations community—in fact, Dokis doesn't have cellphone service, and it has spotty WiFi on a good day. I understand the challenges of living in rural Ontario, and that was always front of mind in those conversations that we were having with the various stakeholders.

So when you ask this question about ensuring access to justice, it's important to recognize that in-person matters also create barriers to folks to be able to access justice and services at various points of all governments—not just in Ontario; federal governments as well. Being able to offer an alternative to citizens across the entire province, in all corners of the province, whether you're in downtown Toronto, in St. Catharines or up in Red Lake—in small towns, if you don't have access to WiFi, you do have a cousin or a neighbour who does, and they're more than willing to help and to open the door to you to access that technology, to be able to participate in whatever matter that you're looking to get resolved.

That's what the research showed us when we were at Tribunals Ontario. I haven't been in a role like this in a while, but I would imagine that that's still the case today.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: So what are ideas for that access, for those without that Internet access? I know you've got friends and neighbours, but it just doesn't seem like a strategy.

Ms. Karen Restoule: I think what you're saying is, what are the publicly available points of access? I can't speak to how OEB does it. I'm not in that role yet. If I'm appointed, I would be asking these questions of the team at the OEB as well, because access to justice is important.

I could speak to my experience at Tribunals Ontario. The legal aid system does have offices across the province, and they do provide support to individuals who are looking to access their matters through the use of technology. My understanding, at least when I left—we were in conversations with libraries across Ontario that were looking to create more confidential access points. But also, keeping in mind that if you're in person at a hearing room, all the other parties are in the room anyway, and so they're not so confidential—these are public matters—but still, looking to create access points through technology so that individuals could log in and get in touch and participate in any matters that they're involved with.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Under your tenure at the LTB, as I understand it, the service standards for issuing orders in simple cases went from four days to 30 days.

What concrete operational improvements would you bring to the OEB to prevent regulatory backlog?

Ms. Karen Restoule: Yes, the backlog challenge was fairly significant. I am trying to jog my memory here in terms of, operationally, what the challenges were. I know that the pandemic did suspend—and there were some staffing challenges due to some leaves.

One of the questions that I would ask the OEB would be, do we have the proper operational complement to ensure that matters are being processed on time? Is the process cumbersome or are there some procedural improvements on the operational side that we can work to improve on to ensure access to justice in a timely way—conversations along those lines. These are some of the questions that I would be asking the team there.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Given, as mentioned, your past roles as chair of the Indigenous advisory council for TC Energy and your work with Conservative think tanks, how do you think that you would maintain really strict impartiality when adjudicating matters involving major pipeline and energy infrastructure proponents?

Ms. Karen Restoule: First and foremost, my role would be, if appointed, at the governance level; I wouldn't be overseeing any matters. I would certainly ensure that I wouldn't be providing any public commentary or opinion on any matters that appear before the OEB.

Going back to the previous conversation on the conflicts of interest and making sure that I am in line with that—I have had practice doing that. Even when I was at Tribunals Ontario, I was writing policy commentary for the Hub, and I was able to do so in close conversation with the ethics executive as needed.

I would be bringing that same approach to this role, keeping in mind that I wouldn't be looking to provide commentary on Ontario energy policy in my writing. That would be a simple clause or consideration to abide by while I'm in those roles.

But, ultimately, going back to my point about if I'm appointed, I'll be having a conversation with the ethics executive and/or the Integrity Commissioner and their team to ensure that whatever activities I'm engaging in are not presenting as a conflict with my role at the OEB.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Right, because you want to assure the public that your regulatory decisions at OEB would be entirely independent of any kind of partisan influence.

So are you saying right now that you would, say, want to continue writing for the Hub while you're in this position?

Ms. Karen Restoule: But as a board member, I wouldn't be making any decisions at the OEB—

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Being part of the OEB—

Ms. Karen Restoule: That's the commissioners, right? The commissioners are the ones to make the decisions. I would be lending my governance experience and skills.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One minute.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: But still, governance experience and skills—just ensuring that there is not a constant partisan influence or partisan commentary, I guess. So would you want to continue writing?

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Ms. Karen Restoule: I would meet with the ethics executive and have those discussions. These are conversations that I've had before with my ethics executives in previous appointments. It is one of the first conversations I'll be having. At that point, am I recusing myself? Am I stepping down? Am I making a choice? I'm open to anything to ensure that how I serve the OEB is done responsibly.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you so much for answering my questions. I really appreciate it.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much, Karen, for coming in today and for putting your name forward for the board.

You're welcome to stay and observe and be a voyeur for the other two interviews, or you could go about your merry way on this beautiful, sunshiny day and you'll find out later. It's up to you.

Ms. Karen Restoule: Thanks so much for all of your time. I appreciate the opportunity.

MR. MICHAEL CVITKOVIC

Review of intended appointment, selected by government party: Michael Cvitkovic, intended appointee as member, Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology board of governors.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): We will now move to the review of our fourth intended appointee, Michael Thomas Cvitkovic.

Welcome. It's great to see you in person. Yes, please come forward. It's not the Dragons' Den. It's actually a friendly committee. Please have a seat.

Michael is nominated as a member of the Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology board of governors.

The lay of the land—you may have seen it—is you get some time to share your story and your experience with us, which we are all ears to hear, and then everyone has 10 minutes of questioning. Whatever time you take will be deducted from the government's side. Look at those happy faces. They are happy to have you take as much time as you want.

Thank you for putting your name forward and being willing to serve.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you. Good morning. Bonjour.

Before my prepared remarks, I would like to first acknowledge that the land that we are meeting on is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, Anishinaabe, the Chippewas, Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. I'd like to also acknowledge that the city of Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 of the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Good morning, Madam Chair, Mr. Vice-Chair and members of the Standing Committee on Government Agencies.

I'd also like to acknowledge MPP Gates. As a man who was born and raised in Fort Erie, Ontario, I just want to thank you for your service to my hometown.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to appear today and for considering my appointment to the Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology board of directors.

My name is Michael Cvitkovic, and I'm a proud Durham region resident. I currently serve as the president and chief executive officer of the Abilities Centre in Whitby, a community organization focused on accessibility, inclusion, employment, wellness and participation.

It's hard to believe, but for more than 25 years, I've served in the not-for-profit, public, sport, health, community and post-secondary sectors, with a consistent focus on governance, financial stewardship, partnership and organizational change. In fact, my professional career started in post-secondary education, working at York University. Nearly every role since has involved working with colleges and universities. That experience has given me a practical understanding of how Ontario colleges strengthen communities, support students and respond to our current labour market needs.

I'm seeking this appointment because I deeply believe in the public purpose of Ontario colleges and in Durham College's role as a vital regional institution in Durham region. Not only does Durham College prepare students for meaningful careers; it helps employers access skilled talent and contributes directly to the economic impact and social well-being of the region I call home and, of course, throughout the province of Ontario.

My connection to the college is both personal and practical. I've served on the Durham College academic advisory committee for sport management, I've been a guest lecturer and, through sport officiating, I've seen the Durham Lords' pride in athletics. These experiences reinforced for me how Durham College connects applied learning, community identity and real-world pathways for students.

If approved, I would bring a governance perspective shaped by executive accountability and hands-on board service, from a lifetime of lessons.

At Abilities Centre, I work directly with our board to strengthen our governance policy framework controls, risk management and our strategic alliance. Since becoming CEO, I've led the restructuring of our organization, expanded partnerships, delivered positive financial results, promoted our mission and advanced capital improvements through self-generated revenue—a tough task in this environment, for a non-profit organization. For Durham College, that experience will support thoughtful oversight, responsible resource stewardship and practical decision-making.

I also have experience in complex public accountability environments. As general manager of the Toronto 2017 North American Indigenous Games, I collaborated with Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners, overseeing an \$11-million operating budget, and helped create a legacy fund while addressing the 88th call to action of the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. I've served as chair of governance, nominations, finance, audit and policy committees—including this past year, as the governance and nominations chair for the Whitby Chamber of Commerce. Through these roles, it has taught me the importance of transparency, ethical decision-making, succession planning and a clear distinction between governance and management—policies I would bring to Durham College.

Ontario colleges open doors for learners and different people of all abilities, backgrounds and life experiences. And my work at Abilities Centre is rooted in the belief that talent is everywhere but opportunity is not always equally available.

I hope to help Durham College continue removing barriers, strengthen community partnerships, and prepare graduates who are ready to contribute to the province's future.

Members of the committee, I deeply respect the trust involved in public appointment.

As governor, I will act in the best interest of the institution and the public, while holding myself to a high standard of conduct. I would be honoured to serve Durham College and its students, employees, partners and the broader Durham region community as a member of its board of governors.

I thank you for your time, your service to our province, and your consideration, and I'd be pleased to answer any questions.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Five minutes and 28 seconds—take it away, MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you so much for being here today.

I'm delighted to see that you put your name forward for Durham College. I know they're already hard at work. I've had the chance to visit Durham College twice now. I'm truly impressed with how they have developed relationships with local industry, local business. It's something that we hear a lot—that employers will say that there's a disconnect between the academics and the education system and the job skills needed to be successful in your career.

I'm curious to know what steps you believe might be necessary to better prepare our young people for meaningful careers—especially the students attending not just Durham College, but our colleges across the province.

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: I think it's really important that colleges continue to keep the finger on the pulse of the trends of business, of industry. Durham College, in my opinion, has done a tremendous job of that throughout Durham region. We work closely at Abilities Centre with them as well.

A couple of months ago, I was fortunate to be a panellist—Durham region was named the 2025 Intelligent Community of the Year by the Intelligent Community Forum, which is a global leader in innovation and welfare. I sat as a speaker with Dr. Popp, the president of Durham College, and there were just constant accolades to Dr. Popp and what Durham College is doing, working with the AI industry and tech industry, in manufacturing, in nuclear power—

areas that are really important to Durham region and the community. Industry after industry and leader after leader really praised the college's understanding of what's relevant in the region, and as a result, throughout the province. So my hope is just to continue with that trend, of really having an understanding of what's going on in the region and just how we can continue that momentum to do something pretty special.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: How much time do I have left?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): You have 3:30.

Ms. Laura Smith: Thank you very much for being here.

Further to my colleague's question: You talked about the strong connections that you have with the community, the college, the Abilities Centre. But let's talk about students who are graduating into in-demand labour market fields where they can pursue careers that will help the economy. Can you talk about ensuring strong partnerships between the colleges and local employers so that these students can get the jobs that are in demand for the future?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: It's vital. The times have changed in terms of the education system and post-secondary education. We really need to make sure those partnerships are strong—not only to understand what businesses are experiencing on a day-to-day basis, so that students can be prepared for it, but also opening doors for internships and co-op and postgraduate opportunities. So understanding what is current and understanding the trends of what's happening now is really important, and that comes only from a real, clear understanding of how that partnership can work. A lot of it comes from educational experiences through internships, through guest lecturing as well. So it's being able to ensure that the community, and in this case, the Durham region business community, is also participatory in the educational experience. I think that interdependent relationship is how you create stronger partnerships.

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The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One minute, 55 seconds—MPP Sandhu.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: Thank you so much for your presentation.

With the recent enrolment challenges facing post-secondary institutions in Ontario, and understanding that post-secondary education is a joint responsibility between the government and institutions, what steps will you take to ensure that the board is held accountable for its decision-making in both financial and social matters?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you for your question.

It really starts with strong governance, I think, more than anything. Throughout my career, both serving boards and being on boards—I'm a bit of a governance nerd, if you will. It starts with ensuring that policies and procedures are not only created to ensure the protection of the organization, but that they're also, in practice, constantly monitored and followed. I have a history in my career, both being on a board and serving boards, of ensuring that.

And it really starts with values. You can have strong governance, but if you don't have the right people around the boardroom—

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): You have 46 seconds.

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: —with shared values, then that's where you slip up. So governance is the pathway to get there, but ensuring you have the right people at the table, I believe, is the most important.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Over to the official opposition: MPP Gilmour, you have the floor.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Welcome to you, Mr. Cvitkovic. It's great to have you here. Thank you.

I'm going to start with some questions that we traditionally ask and then get into more specific questions on the role.

Have you ever been a member of a political party?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: I have not.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Have you ever made any donations to a political party or a candidate?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: I have not.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Great. Can you tell me just a little bit about what led you to apply and if anybody specifically asked you or recommended you to apply?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you for the question.

It was my own decision. Durham College being in my backyard, and having spent a lot of time there, either as a guest lecturer or through their academic advisory council, and also as a referee—I referee university and college volleyball when I'm not at the Abilities Centre. Just seeing the work that is done there and really appreciating—through the leadership of Dr. Popp and of the board of governors.

Since being at the Abilities Centre, from a personal level—I've been there about two and a half years. It's the first time that I've been able to serve my own community. Serving on the board of the Whitby Chamber of Commerce was a first step, and I saw this as just a natural progression of being able to give back to my community.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: It's great to see the connection to Durham, to the college.

You've got great credentials in governance, in marketing, in communication and business. I know that there's certainly—a lot of them are post-secondary school-adjacent, but not deeply in that post-secondary piece. So I'm wondering what steps you have taken or you plan to take just to build your understanding more specifically of college governance and public post-secondary finance.

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you for the question.

I think numbers are numbers, so whether it's a \$250-million budget or a \$12-million budget or an \$11-million budget from the North American Indigenous Games, it's following the path, following our policies and procedures from a financial perspective, asking the right questions, having the right people, both from a staff and management perspective, who are, day to day, executing the finances of the organization—bringing it to our finance and audit committee, as an example. It's what we do at Abilities Centre. So whether it's finances for a college or university or finances for another organization, the fundamental princi-

ples of managing those finances—standard accounting principles—would be kept and continued. So I don't see much of a difference in terms of managing the budget or finances of a college versus, say, the Abilities Centre.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: When we were looking at some of the specific challenges within the college-university sector, I noticed that Durham College's own president cited the IRCC changes at the federal level to the international student program as a direct cause of the March 2025 decision to eliminate 35 positions, approve 30 volunteer retirements, and leave 49 vacancies unfilled. That is a tremendous loss to the staffing population at the college.

I'm wondering, what is your understanding of how the federal international student cap has affected Durham specifically? And what would you, as governor, want to see from the management by way of mitigating and diversifying their strategy there?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you for your question.

I'm certainly well aware of the published reports and media reports on that topic. It's a real challenge, obviously. I have a daughter in second year of post-secondary education, so I'm very well aware of the financial challenges that occur.

I think as a governor, first and foremost, we have to listen and learn, ask questions, take into account the leadership of our college executives—Dr. Popp and her team—who provide recommendations to the board of governors. It's really important for us to understand the difference between the governors of the board and the senior leadership of the institution. Their role is to operationalize, provide recommendations to the board of governors, and then it's our role to ask the right questions.

I would take the information that's provided by the senior leadership of Durham College, with my fellow governors, to make the decisions we feel are in the best interest of the long-term viability of Durham College, because, essentially, that's our job—not only from a governance perspective, but to ensure the sustainability of what is a really important institution in our region.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Similarly, I'm thinking about the province's new college funding model that was announced in February 2026, and that's going to bring Durham roughly \$35 million in the fiscal year of 2026-27, as part of a \$6.4-billion, four-year sector investment. But again, the college's own material describes this as only partially offsetting the decline in the tuition revenue. Do you see this new model as adequately addressing the structural underfunding that has led to last year's layoffs, and is it your view that that's a partial fix? And what ideas, leadership would you bring to the conversation?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Excuse me. Point of order by MPP Smith.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I just asked what his ideas and leadership would be to the conversation—

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): We're just going to hear what her point of order is.

MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: The questions seem to be out of scope, so my direction would be to keep the questions to his credentials.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: All right. I thank you for that ongoing interruption, interview after interview.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Maybe rephrase it—yes. Thanks.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I believe that I can still ask this question.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Or rephrase it.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: We're looking at the underfunding, and we're looking at your ideas, your leadership that you would bring to this conversation.

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you for the question.

I really believe part of the solution was a previous question—and that is the ongoing work of partnerships within the Durham region community. We've done a tremendous job in Durham region, in seeing that Durham College is really a beacon for the future for our region, one of the fastest-growing regions in all of Canada. That partnership with industry—creating both strategic and financial opportunities for partnerships—I think is part of the solution, but there is no quick fix, and so it's working with the governors and the staff to find a long-term solution.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Would one part of that solution be advocating publicly for increased public investments in colleges and universities?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: I would have to first check with my other governors and the senior staff to see what their current position is, to get an understanding and listen to the current facts, financially, to be able to make an adequate assessment.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: We're also looking at the current year coming up, with the recent gutting of OSAP—the grants going from 85% to 15%, the loan ratio of 25% now going to 75%, grant-to-loan ratio. At the same time, the government is hiking tuition to our public colleges and universities. This is at a time, remember, when youth unemployment is at nearly 16% in Ontario—highest in the country.

I'm wondering what your understanding is of how these OSAP changes will affect Durham students specifically, and particularly those from lower-income, first-generation backgrounds.

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: I was one of those. I was a young man growing up in Fort Erie, Ontario, in government-assisted housing. So I understand the role that OSAP plays—I was somebody who was a benefit of OSAP. However, the current structure—the structure now that has been reverted back—is the same structure that I had as a young student at York University. My understanding of the current structure is that we're reverting back to what it was like when I was a young student.

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Change is always difficult, so it's important for Durham College, for the staff and the board of governors—all colleges—to be able to help with any perception of any barriers and how we can find solutions; how we can also, just as in the business world, prove our return on the investment. University—and I helped pay for my own

education—is an investment in your future, and so we want to be able to work with students to find that solution.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: I think one important thing worth noting—my father used to tell me he could work in the summer and earn enough money to pay the entire year's tuition and housing, and that is simply not the case for our students today. The costs of inflation, the costs of people's salaries have not kept pace with those. So I think we're in a very different moment than when I was in school, when you were in school.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One minute.

MPP Alexa Gilmour: You became president and CEO of the Abilities Centre in January 2024. That's a full-time leadership role. So I'm wondering about your time commitments and how you can realistically fit all the board preparation, committee work, the monthly meeting cycle—what your plan is there.

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you for the question.

Sadly, my daughter is no longer living at home—she's at a post-secondary institution herself—so my coaching days are behind me. That frees up a good 60 hours a month of volunteer coaching. When I made the decision to apply for this appointment, the decision was that I would stop coaching volleyball for a little bit and take on this wonderful three-year opportunity.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much, Michael, for coming in today and sharing—*Interjections.*

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Oh, my gosh. I was jumping the gun.

Mr. Matthew Rae: It's your own colleague.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Well, you can't ever accuse me of being biased.

Sorry. I thought we were done. We're saving the best for last, with the member from the third party, MPP Smyth.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you, Madam Chair—I think.

It's nice to see you here today. Thanks so much. I heard “the Abilities Centre,” and I automatically thought about the late Honourable Jim Flaherty and Christine Elliott. Have you had a chance to meet these people who started this fantastic organization?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Yes. Thank you for the question.

Galen Flaherty sits on our board as a director and chairs our advocacy committee and is certainly fulfilling his parents' mission.

In fact, on October 6, we are opening a café at Abilities Centre that will have graduates from our employment services program—provide meaningful employment—and we're naming it Christine's. So we're very excited about that.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: That's wonderful. That's a wonderful, wonderful thing that they began.

As the president and CEO of the Abilities Centre—and you touched on this briefly—what specific initiatives would you push to expand physical accessibility or specialized accommodation and inclusive programming at Durham College and campuses?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you for your question.

I believe they do a very good job. We have a very strong working relationship with both post-secondary—as well as with all of the post-secondary institutions—in Durham region, but specifically Durham College. They are leaders within the province in terms of their accessibility and inclusion, both from their hiring practices, in working with us with educational experiences such as internships and co-ops and graduate assistance, but also the campus. It's really important that the campus is safe and inclusive and has accessible features as well. So I believe it has really become a best practice throughout the province.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: So you have a good eye on that—

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Absolutely, yes.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: —from the work that you've done to what they see there. That's great.

I think we were talking about fiscal pressures on colleges and universities right now, and it came to mind to me, and looking at Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology, the mandate is to offer a comprehensive program of career-oriented post-secondary education and training to assist individuals in finding and keeping employment—absolutely critical.

I want to know how you might feel about what happens with the skills development funding in this province by this government when there is a career-oriented post-secondary institution. It seems like the government might be bypassing the public college system, handing out, project by project, grants through SDF, when that money could be going directly back right to the colleges, like Durham, to sustainability there for the college system, helping them stay afloat and get some really good funding for career training in the college system.

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you for your question.

I think as a supporter of post-secondary education, I'm always going to advocate for more funding to go to Ontario colleges and universities. I appreciate that the government needs to make funding decisions that support their strategic needs and the mandate of the province. I think it's the shared responsibility of both the government and post-secondary education to meet those needs.

As CEO of the Abilities Centre—we're an organization that has received support from the government of Ontario that has directly strengthened our employment as well, specifically for people with varying lived experiences. So I'm sure it has been a difficult decision and one that has to be balanced by the ministry.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: How do you see Durham College being sustainable, going forward, with the funding models, and as you point out, the cutbacks, the positions not filled? Is this a sustainable situation here?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: I think it requires constant, ongoing monitoring and working with the senior leadership of Durham College to continually understand where those pressure points are, to get a true understanding of opportunities for increased enrolment, where that enrolment comes from, partnerships, as mentioned before, and to be able to just—we do it at Abilities Centre. You're

watching every day from a financial perspective, while also trying to plan for the future. So I think that relationship with the ministry is certainly important for Durham College—and continue to try to hopefully find solutions together.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: When we talk about the workforce, and we know about unemployment—the point is to get everybody a job. That's the point.

How much would you want to see it influence for students or suggested to students that in southern Ontario there is an unemployment crisis for youth—full stop—and that feeds into the OSAP issue as well, but there are jobs in the north. Is there any way you would see an integration at Durham College to help work with opportunities in northern Ontario for students to get employment post-education—the college education?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you for the question.

I think our role at Durham College is to prepare students for life after graduation in any field, in any place. Whether that's supporting jobs in the north, whether that's supporting jobs in other parts of Canada, or internationally, it's about providing the skills that are required for them to get good long-term, good-paying jobs that are ready for today's Ontario, which is obviously very different than the Ontario that I was preparing for as a student.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: To that point, talking about OSAP, you mentioned that the formula has reverted back to what you experienced as a student, but times have changed dramatically. These aren't the days when you can have—as a former intended appointee, Mr. Van Loan, said earlier, “I worked 40 hours a week and went to school.” Well, you could work 80 hours a week and still not have enough money to be able to pay for your education. Then we have employment issues with youth.

How do you expect students can actually go to college or university right now, given the new formula, given the lack of opportunity for jobs right now, especially in southern Ontario—and then have the sustainability of the college itself, if you can't have the enrolment?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: That's a great question.

I think it starts with education. It starts with being able to work with the students to understand—both from a high school guidance counsellor, from the families, from colleges and universities, to understand the options. This is an investment in your future. When I was a student, that's the way I saw it. It was taking out that OSAP loan to be able to help pay my way, to be able to go through my studies, to be able to start the career in the field that I wanted to—but I couldn't do it alone, obviously. So I think it's really important for us to keep the lines of communication open and do a really good job of being there for students, to be able to properly educate them on what those channels could be for additional funding that the colleges and universities might have outside of OSAP, whether that's through particular scholarships—there are foundations and organizations and industries that also provide scholarships and other funding opportunities for particular lines of work. So I think all of that creativity to be able to find a pathway, if a student wants to learn—I think it's incumbent upon us to try to find a pathway.

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MPP Stephanie Smyth: There are only so many bursaries out there, only so many scholarships, and communication doesn't pay the bills, to be honest—it helps to let them know. The formula has flipped; it's not the same as what you would have experienced, so talking about it isn't going to generate the ability to go post-secondary.

So that is the deep concern here, and once you see—have you looked at the trends and enrolment at Durham College, and are you concerned about seeing this pattern unfold before your eyes, into an area that you're going to be potentially joining, at that board of governors at the college?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Smith with a point of order.

Ms. Laura Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. The questions should be relevant to the applicant's credentials and his CV.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: How are you going to navigate this scenario on the board when there are fewer provincial dollars, possibly declining enrolment, and you want to keep that college alive and help students in the future?

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you for the question.

I believe part of the question was answered previously with respect to, again, working very closely regionally with industries, understanding what are good-paying jobs coming out of college as well, so that there is a clear understanding that that short-term personal investment will lead to a quicker opportunity to be able to make some of that money back and, more importantly, be able to pay for their future.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One-minute warning.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you. I appreciate it.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much, Michael. Now you're finished with us. Thank you so much for coming in and being willing to help our students and Ontario in general, and for putting your name forward. There is one more person we're interviewing. You can observe that or you can just enjoy your day and find out your results later.

Mr. Michael Cvitkovic: Thank you, Madam Chair.

MS. CONNIE CHEUNG

Review of intended appointment, selected by official opposition party and third party: Connie Cheung, intended appointee as member, Legal Aid Ontario board of directors.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): We now have our last intended appointee. Connie Cheung is nominated as a member of the Legal Aid Ontario board of directors.

Connie, you have as much time as you would like to speak and share your experiences with us, and your education, and why you are pursuing this particular role, and then every party has 10 minutes to ask you questions. Your

time that you use to speak will be deducted from the government side, and they are fine with that.

Welcome. Thank you for putting your name forward. We're happy to have you in person. It's always a delight to have people in person. The floor is yours.

Ms. Connie Cheung: Thank you very much.

Good morning. I would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to present my credentials for my appointment as a board member of Legal Aid Ontario.

My name is Connie Cheung, and I currently reside in the city of Toronto, Ontario. I attended university and completed my undergraduate studies at McMaster University, where I completed my bachelor of arts and science degree. Subsequently, I moved to Kingston, Ontario, where I completed my law degree at Queen's University. I was called to the bar in Ontario in 2018.

After completing my first year of law school, I started as a summer law student at Sherrard Kuzz, which is a management-side labour and employment firm in Toronto, Ontario. I later on completed another second-year summer at Sherrard Kuzz and, subsequently, my articling term there as well.

In 2017, I completed a secondment at the Ontario Labour Relations Board, which helped me gain a better understanding of how an independent adjudicative tribunal at the government operates. I also had the opportunity, during my secondment, to shadow mediators and adjudicators, as well as gain exposure to labour relations dispute advocacy and litigation.

In 2021, I completed a year-and-a-half secondment at the Hudson's Bay Co., as it then was, where I was the in-house labour and employment counsel for all of Canada. During my time there, I was able to see how Ontario businesses responded to government health and safety mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as witness how a large corporation struggled to operate under significant financial difficulties.

After my secondment, I returned to private practice at Sherrard Kuzz, and I am now one of the partners at the firm. My practice, currently, is primarily focused on representing management in labour and employment matters. I represent clients in various industries and backgrounds, ranging from health care to retail to manufacturing, as a couple of examples. I have appeared before the Ontario Labour Relations Board, the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario, the Ontario Superior Court of Justice, and the Divisional Court.

My experience has given me the opportunity to work with clients from diverse backgrounds and experiences. It has allowed me to act as a strong advocate for my clients' interests, but also to consider issues and balance the interests of all parties in order to find meaningful resolutions.

Earlier this year, I became aware, through one of my colleagues at the firm, that Legal Aid Ontario was looking for a management-side lawyer to serve on its board of directors. This position was to be appointed by the Law Society of Ontario. As I am always looking for opportunities to serve my community, especially where I'm able to leverage my educational and professional expertise to

do so, I applied for the role. If appointed, I would approach the role with a strong sense of independence, fairness, and commitment towards the establishment of a flexible and sustainable legal aid system throughout Ontario that recognizes the rights of all parties under the law and promotes access to justice.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much, Connie.

We will go to the government side. MPP Smith, seven minutes, 10 seconds.

Ms. Laura Smith: Thank you so much for coming in to see us today. We appreciate it.

You talked about so much of your work and your expertise within labour law, whether it was management in health care or retail, and you talked about how you believe your expertise could contribute to the board's deliberation and overall governance in Legal Aid Ontario.

Could you give us a little more information on how that path has guided you and how you think that would be a strong component in your work within legal aid?

Ms. Connie Cheung: Thanks for your question.

I think one of the important aspects of legal aid is employment issues. If I had the opportunity to sit on the board of directors, I think my experience would help me be able to really manage a number of employment issues that come up, and collaborate with board members to develop efficient and practical solutions that align with Legal Aid Ontario's values and strategic goals. This would potentially involve reviewing current employment policies and practices to ensure legal compliance and best practices, as well as providing regular briefings and updates, which I now currently do in my private practice, to other clients on developments in employment-related legislation and case law and how that may potentially impact the structure, organization and operations of Legal Aid Ontario.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Rae.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you, Connie, for applying for this position and for coming in today to present to the committee.

Just sort of building off of MPP Smith's questions, I know you had a brief moment to—I know your résumé is very long and you're a very accomplished individual. I'm just wondering if you could describe a little more of your professional experience and how you believe it has prepared you for the position and the oversight and governance, especially of Legal Aid Ontario. If the committee approves your appointment, how would you be able to effectively contribute to that board?

Ms. Connie Cheung: Thank you for your question.

In my private practice, I advise a number of clients in terms of their governance and oversight of their organization. Obviously, I specifically cater to a number of their labour and employment issues. I think if I were appointed to serve on the board, I would be able to apply that sort of long-term thinking—as well as reviewing what organizational needs are—to provide sound, practical advice.

I have also reviewed the Legal Aid Services Act to get a better understanding of what the role entails. Part of my understanding of being a board member is helping carry out its objectives, which is providing consistent, high-quality legal aid services; encouraging flexibility; and thinking outside of the box, being creative in terms of adapting to the changing landscape of the law as well as the changing needs for legal services.

My experiences both in private practice as well as in an in-house role have helped me to really evaluate what needs are, identify priorities and focus on how to work with the other board members in governance matters.

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The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Three minutes, 36 seconds, MPP Dowie.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Ms. Cheung, thank you so much for being with us.

We have heard time and time again over the last number of years that self-representation has been one of the most dominant reasons why there are delays in court, so it reinforces why Legal Aid Ontario is important.

I was hoping to explore your belief in the work of Legal Aid Ontario and why it's important for individuals and communities across our province.

Ms. Connie Cheung: Yes, I think Legal Aid Ontario is a critical aspect of the justice system, and part of it is really identifying that there is a diverse range of clients who require legal assistance. We see, oftentimes, self-representation can prolong legal processes unnecessarily. So having the right support and guidance can really promote access to justice for all parties involved.

I think a large challenge that legal aid faces is that—you'll see, recently, there have been changes to eligibility thresholds to expand the availability of legal services to parties, and of course that means an increased demand. That's something that I think is important for Legal Aid Ontario to look at and address in order to promote access to justice for everyone.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Is there anything that you haven't been asked today by the government members that you think would be useful for us, as a committee, to know about?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I guess just emphasizing that I've got a lot of experience managing workplace issues, organizational restructuring, and assessing legal risks. I think those experiences will really allow me to contribute positively to the board of directors with respect to issues like human resources, organizational effectiveness, employee relations—as well as recognizing the distinction between the board's oversight responsibilities and management's responsibilities for day-to-day operations.

I am very well aware of and conscious of, like I mentioned, the Legal Aid Services Act, which sets out the requirements of board members to act honestly and in good faith, with a view to the best interest of the corporation, as well as the duty to act in a financially responsible and accountable manner as a member of the board. I would like to emphasize that I have been made aware of those obligations and am prepared to comply and fulfill those obligations.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One minute.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Okay, we're good.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Over to the official opposition: MPP Gates.

MPP Wayne Gates: Welcome, Connie. How are you?

Ms. Connie Cheung: Good, thanks.

MPP Wayne Gates: These are questions we always ask everybody.

Do you belong to a political party?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I do not.

MPP Wayne Gates: Have you ever donated to a political party?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I have not.

MPP Wayne Gates: Have you ever worked on a campaign?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I have not.

MPP Wayne Gates: What have you been doing all this time?

Ms. Connie Cheung: Other things.

MPP Wayne Gates: Can you describe your career experience that is relevant to the mandate of Legal Aid Ontario?

Ms. Connie Cheung: Absolutely. During my secondment, when I was at the Hudson's Bay Co., I was managing the entire workforce of the company. It was during a difficult time, when there was a pandemic, there were health and safety mandates ongoing, there was a lot of restructuring going on, which impacted employment of many employees. I think that experience has really allowed me to understand identifying priorities when it comes to organizational needs, as well as long-term objectives.

I think managing Legal Aid Ontario's workforce strategies and employee relations are key aspects of the organization, because Legal Aid Ontario's ability to deliver its mandate ultimately depends on its people, including its employees and its relationship with the broader legal community. I anticipate that there are challenges with respect to attracting and retaining talent, compensation issues, managing employees. I think my experiences working in-house at another corporation as well as advising clients on a day-to-day basis will allow me to look at those issues in a manner that not only assesses legal risk but also for the well-being of the organization from a long-term perspective.

MPP Wayne Gates: I see that who you work for now is really an employer-side labour law firm since 2018. Is that accurate?

Ms. Connie Cheung: Yes, that is correct.

MPP Wayne Gates: Can you tell me what kind of work your law firm does?

Ms. Connie Cheung: We primarily advise clients, management side, on labour and employment issues, so wrongful dismissal litigations, responding to human rights applications. From a unionized context, we also advise clients on collective bargaining, workforce planning, grievance arbitrations. We also have members of our firm who practise health and safety—so defending charges under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, as well as

appearing before the WSIB, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, with respect to claims from employees.

MPP Wayne Gates: On your LinkedIn profile, it says you worked at the Hudson's Bay Co. for over a year, but your public appointments application did not include that experience. Can you explain why?

Ms. Connie Cheung: That arrangement was a secondment to fulfill a maternity leave there. I was never formally employed as an employee at the Hudson's Bay Co. It was simply a secondment, where my firm effectively loaned me to the Hudson's Bay Co. for a year and a half to do some work, to return back to private practice.

MPP Wayne Gates: We all understand what happened with the Hudson's Bay Co. when it comes to workers—

Ms. Connie Cheung: I know. It's very sad.

MPP Wayne Gates: —including their pensions.

As a lawyer, it seems your experience is mostly with employers and big corporations.

Do you have any experience working as a lawyer with people in poverty, with disabilities, or seniors?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I don't directly advise in the field of labour and employment, because my firm only does management-side work. We do only represent management.

However, I think it's important, throughout my practice, to understand the interests of all parties, as well as plaintiff-side parties. That could include members of groups that you just mentioned. Oftentimes, I think there is the perception that, as lawyers, we like to go to a trial and go to hearings—but oftentimes, it's finding a meaningful resolution through things like mediation and facilitated negotiations. So I have had experiences with mediating and negotiations and discussions with those members of those groups.

MPP Wayne Gates: I appreciate that, and you already answered that—but my question was, have you ever worked with people in poverty, with disabilities, or seniors?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I wouldn't say I have never—there are a number of my clients, even though they are on the management side, who do have disabilities, who I would represent as well.

MPP Wayne Gates: I would take that as a no, but that's just me.

Do you have any experience working in social services or volunteering with the community groups that tackle poverty?

Ms. Connie Cheung: No, I do not.

MPP Wayne Gates: Do you think that you have the necessary background to advocate for workers and people who are living in poverty?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I think I have the necessary qualifications for this particular appointment.

MPP Wayne Gates: I believe no—but okay, I'll respect your answer.

Do you think that Legal Aid Ontario currently has the resources it needs to meet its responsibility to the public?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I think that Legal Aid Ontario has done a lot to meet its objectives and fulfill its obligations to the public. I think, as with any organization or

community, there's always work that can be done to further improve its operations.

MPP Wayne Gates: Do you agree with the cuts that have been made to legal aid by the provincial government?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Smith with a point of order.

Ms. Laura Smith: The questions should be relevant to the individual's qualifications. It's out of scope.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): MPP Gates, could you really try to make it relevant or rephrase it? Thank you.

MPP Wayne Gates: I think it is relevant. You can't say you want to be part of legal aid when you don't have the resources or the funds to do your job properly. What we've found in the province of Ontario, particularly in my office in Niagara—we deal with legal aid quite regularly—is they're hurting because they don't have the funds. They can't help people who are living in poverty. They can't help people even through mediation. I'm from the labour movement, so I know all about those types of things. You can't cut legal aid and then say you can provide a service. I'll leave it at that.

Would you be prepared to advocate to the province for additional funding if you found it clear that it was necessary to provide high-quality service? Yes or no is fine.

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Ms. Connie Cheung: I don't think that would be something that would be up to me to determine exclusively.

MPP Wayne Gates: More complex applications to Legal Aid can take weeks to process. What do you think should be done to ensure people get timely access to justice?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I think access to justice is an important aspect of legal aid. Like I mentioned earlier, I think the challenge is not just simply promoting access to justice but also identifying whether we have the resources to do so. I think as a member of the board, I would review that with other board members to identify priorities and resources and how we can best fulfill promoting access to justice.

MPP Wayne Gates: Do you think there is anything Legal Aid Ontario can do to help people get their cases resolved more quickly, when you're considering the serious court backlogs, which you should be aware of as a lawyer, especially with the firm you're working for?

Ms. Connie Cheung: My understanding is that Legal Aid Ontario has published a five-year strategic plan, and part of that outlines a plan and a path to strengthen the organization, innovate service delivery and provide services to clients to navigate the legal system in a timely and accessible manner.

I would be looking to work with board members and reviewing that strategic plan and whether or not that aligns with the organization's mandates and objectives.

MPP Wayne Gates: From your answers—and again, I don't have a lot of time to ask questions—it really doesn't look like you have the experience dealing with vulnerable people in poverty. That really is the issue when it comes to legal aid. These are people who can't afford a lawyer.

They're going to legal aid to get help. But you don't seem to have that experience.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): One minute.

MPP Wayne Gates: You have great experience dealing with the employer side, the labour relations side, the mediation side, the arbitration side, but it has absolutely nothing to do with people who are using legal aid.

Ms. Connie Cheung: Respectfully, I think I would disagree. To sit on the board is to truly understand what the objectives are. I think my experiences can be applied to the role. That's why there is a collective board of directors, not just me sitting alone on the board. I think we all bring something different to the table with respect to our experiences and our professional expertise.

MPP Wayne Gates: I can appreciate that, but when you don't answer the fact that the cuts to legal aid are hurting people in poverty—they're hurting my community that I represent. We cannot continue to cut legal aid. You have to have a good understanding of what people are going through, what it's like to have no food at the end of the week, what it's like when you can't afford to pay your rent, what it's like to be evicted out of your home if you're a senior—

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you very much.

MPP Wayne Gates: Those are the types that legal aid deals with—

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you, MPP Gates.

Over to the third party: MPP Smyth.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Thank you for being here.

What I wanted to ask you is, how would you bridge that gap between your corporate legal experience and the day-to-day realities of really vulnerable clients who depend on legal aid?

Ms. Connie Cheung: Thank you for your question.

I don't currently serve on the board, so this would be, obviously, a new experience for me. I think I would really lean on the other members of the board to get a better understanding of the overall functions and structure of the organization. I don't really necessarily view my experiences as purely representing management.

I think some of the transferrable skills I have, with respect to negotiations, proactively reviewing policies, making proactive changes to ensure that employees in the workplace are safe and healthy, are areas that I could bring to my role—but a lot of it, I understand, is going to be education and learning and taking the time to truly understand the inner workings of the organization, which I am committed to doing if I were appointed.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: What kind of cases do you expect to be working on at Legal Aid Ontario?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I think, on the board of directors, I wouldn't be directly representing or providing services as a lawyer. So it would really be about reviewing, like I mentioned, the strategic plan that the board has had involvement in developing and making sure that it's carrying out its mandate effectively.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: You talked about the advocacy for additional funding, and you were asked about that as well, but you said you'd have to look at the resources to do so and identify priorities.

You're not dealing with the corporate world here. You're dealing with legal aid, with vulnerable people, identifying issues, and if you have the resources and timely access to justice. All that works really well if there is accurate funding available.

How would you work to help Legal Aid Ontario bridge that gap for the people who are struggling, who are not part of the corporate legal world? Could you see yourself suddenly in an advocacy role—for more money for an organization that helps people who are often in deep, dire straits?

Ms. Connie Cheung: Based on my understanding of the role, like I mentioned, the act talks about having board members act honestly and in good faith with the views of the best interest of the corporation, and that the board would be acting in a financially responsible and accountable manner. Those would be the guiding principles that I would use in fulfilling my role. Whether or not that includes advocacy, I think, is not within my ability to decide. I would rely on other members of the board to decide what further roles I need to take to fulfill those mandates.

MPP Stephanie Smyth: Community legal clinics—we've all dealt with them. They do a lot of heavy lifting for tenants and for low-income people and families. How do you plan to listen and work with those clinics, the lawyers and the front-line staff to see what they need from the board?

Ms. Connie Cheung: I think a lot of it is going back to education and getting a better understanding and communication with clinics to understand what their experiences have been and what the issues they've faced are. Only with that level of understanding and education would I be able to work with the board to identify the gaps that need to be filled there.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Thank you, Connie, for coming in, especially in person, and sharing your story with us.

Now we will consider all the appointments. You're welcome to stay in the back of the room or go about the rest of your schedule for today and find out later.

We thank you for putting your name forward.

Ms. Connie Cheung: Thank you.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Let's do the concurrence. We will now consider all five intended appointees—first, with the appointment of Peter Leo Van Loan. Can I have a motion, please? MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: I move concurrence in the intended appointment of Peter Leo Van Loan, nominated as member of the University of Toronto governing council.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Concurrence in the appointment has been moved by MPP Smith. Any discussion? MPP Gates.

MPP Wayne Gates: Recorded vote, please.

Ayes

Dowie, Rae, Sandhu, Laura Smith.

Nays

Gates, Gilmour, Smyth.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): That carries. Congratulations to Peter.

We will now consider the intended appointment of Paul Moreau. Can I have a motion? MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: I move concurrence in the intended appointment of Paul Moreau, nominated as vice-chair of the Algonquin Forestry Authority.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Any discussion? MPP Gates.

MPP Wayne Gates: Recorded vote, please.

Ayes

Dowie, Gates, Gilmour, Rae, Sabawy, Sandhu, Laura Smith, Smyth.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Wow, unanimous. Hurray. That carries.

We will now consider the intended appointment of Karen Restoule. Can I have a motion, please? MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: I move concurrence in the intended appointment of Karen Restoule, nominated as member of the Ontario Energy Board board of directors.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Any discussion? MPP Gates.

MPP Wayne Gates: Recorded vote, please.

Ayes

Dowie, Gates, Gilmour, Rae, Sabawy, Sandhu, Laura Smith.

Nays

Smyth.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): That carries.

We will now consider the intended appointment of Michael Thomas Cvitkovic. Can I have a motion, please? MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: I move concurrence in the intended appointment of Michael Thomas Cvitkovic, nominated as member of the Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology board of governors.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Concurrence has been moved by MPP Smith. Any discussion? Seeing none, are the members ready to vote? All those in favour? All those opposed? That carries.

Congratulations to Karen and Michael.

We will now consider the last intended appointment, Connie Cheung. Can I have a motion please? MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: I move concurrence of the intended appointment of Connie Cheung, nominated as member of the Legal Aid Ontario board of directors.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Concurrence has been moved by MPP Smith. Any discussion? MPP Gates.

MPP Wayne Gates: Recorded vote, please.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): Recorded vote has been requested. Are the members ready to vote?

Ayes

Dowie, Rae, Sabawy, Sandhu, Laura Smith.

Nays

Gates, Gilmour, Smyth.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): That carries. Congratulations, Connie.

MPP Sabawy?

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Can I ask to fix the vote?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): It's too late. That's okay.

The last item of business is the extension of one certificate. The deadline to review the intended appointments selected from the August 14, 2026, certificate is set to expire September 13, 2026. Is there unanimous consent to extend the certificate by 30 days?

Hearing a no, that concludes our business for today. The committee now stands adjourned until—

MPP Alexa Gilmour: Can we speak on that?

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): There's no debate on it, unfortunately.

MPP Wayne Gates: There should be.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Well, we've got to change the standing orders for that.

The Chair (Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon): We will see you on September 24, 2026. The meeting stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1152.

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