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F-27

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F-27

Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Estimates

Ministry of Finance

Cabinet Office

Office of the Premier

Comité permanent des finances et des affaires économiques

Budget des dépenses

Ministère des Finances

Bureau du Conseil des ministres

Cabinet du premier ministre

1st Session
44th Parliament

Tuesday 29 September 2026

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44^e législature

Mardi 29 septembre 2026

Chair: Hon. Ernie Hardeman
Clerk: Lesley Flores

Président : L'hon. Ernie Hardeman
Greffière : Lesley Flores

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Tuesday 29 September 2026

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUES

Mardi 29 septembre 2026

The committee met at 0901 in room 151.

ESTIMATES

BUDGET DES DÉPENSES

MINISTRY OF FINANCE

MINISTÈRE DES FINANCES

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Good morning, everyone. I call the meeting of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs to order.

We're meeting to consider the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Finance, for a total of three hours. We're joined by staff from Hansard, broadcast and recording, and legislative research. From the ministry, we are joined by the Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy, Minister of Finance; ministry officials and staff.

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

Are there any questions from the members of the committee? If not, I am now required to call vote 1201, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement from the minister for up to 20 minutes.

Minister, at 19 minutes, I will say, "One minute," and at 20, I will say, "Thank you."

With that, the floor is now yours, Minister.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Merci beaucoup, monsieur le Président.

Good morning, colleagues. Good morning, members of the committee. It's so good to see you again.

I'm pleased to be here today to discuss the Ministry of Finance's 2026-27 expenditure estimates. Let me begin by extending my gratitude to the Chair and members of this committee for the diligence and commitment you bring to this important work. The mechanisms of parliamentary democracy, holding the executive to account on behalf of the people, are a cornerstone of our system. The estimates process is an important part of that accountability, and I'm pleased to appear before you today to speak to how our government is managing Ontario's finances responsibly and investing for the future.

Je suis heureux d'être devant vous aujourd'hui pour vous expliquer comment notre gouvernement gère les finances de l'Ontario de manière responsable et investit dans son avenir.

As this committee knows, our government reports to the public every 90 days through quarterly updates like the 2026-27 first quarter finances shared last month, the fall economic statement and the budget, because every tax dollar deserves respect and every tax dollar counts. The ministry's 2026-27 expenditure estimates are aligned with the 2026 budget and reflect our government's fiscal prudence, as well as our ongoing commitment to building a strong economic fiscal and investment climate for Ontario.

Through the estimates, we are ensuring that every dollar the ministry spends is managed responsibly and is aligned to protect Ontario by creating a more resilient and self-reliant economy, and protecting Ontario in these uncertain times. This means maintaining careful oversight of our spending plan, managing operating expenses and finding efficient ways that allow us to both unleash our economy and continue delivering high-quality public services without compromising fiscal sustainability. In short, these estimates show that we are about making every dollar count, respecting the trust of taxpayers and ensuring that my ministry leads by example when it comes to fiscal accountability and the management of resources.

As Minister of Finance, it's my responsibility to manage Ontario's finances in a prudent, transparent, accountable and sustainable manner, including making thoughtful decisions for today's priorities while planning for tomorrow, to ensure Ontario's economy remains strong, competitive and self-reliant in an increasingly uncertain economic climate.

At the same time, global conditions remain uncertain. Rising tariffs, trade tensions and conflict continue to weigh on economies worldwide, and Ontario is not immune. The uncertainty surrounding global trade policy, particularly in the United States, presents real challenges for our workers, our businesses and our economy. Yet amid these pressures, Ontario continues to demonstrate resilience. We are fighting for workers, for families, for businesses and communities by ensuring that they have the support needed to weather these challenges.

Our government's plan is clear, and our plan is working. Our plan will continue to prioritize strategic investments and initiatives that help our workers, our businesses and our communities build long-term resilience and prosperity.

Our plan will continue to protect Ontario by fostering the most competitive economy in the G7 and promoting investment, job creation and growth. This is how Ontario remains strong and how we combat any challenge in front of us.

Chair, our province's track record of prudent financial management has put our finances in a strong position. Following the 2026 budget, all four credit rating agencies affirmed Ontario's AA credit rating with a stable outlook. Particularly in a turbulent world, that is meaningful. That means less interest paid on every dollar borrowed, enabling more investments in our province's growth that help protect our workers, protect our businesses, our families and our communities. This reflects Ontario's commitment to maintain its targets for debt sustainability measures despite the economic and geopolitical uncertainties the province is facing. More so, Ontario's strong credit ratings, fiscal profile and approach to markets have all contributed to unprecedented global investor demand for the province's bonds. This confidence in Ontario's finances reflects our government's ongoing commitment to fiscal discipline and economic growth. This is something that we do not take for granted and will work diligently to maintain. Chair, simply put, we remain resilient.

Key measures of government financial health remain some of the strongest seen in over a decade. As reported in our government's 2026-27 first quarter finances, our fiscal outlook remains largely unchanged. As of the 2026-27 first quarter finances, revenue is expected to improve to \$232 billion—\$100 million higher than expected in the 2026 budget—while Ontario's net debt-to-GDP ratio is projected to remain unchanged at 37.7%, which is amongst the lowest in 20 years. Program expense is projected to be \$227.1 billion, increasing by \$100 million from the 2026 budget, while the deficit projection remains at \$13.8 billion.

Ontario's real GDP decreased by 0.1% in the first quarter of 2026, following a 0.3% decline in the previous quarter.

Chair, we know that these global challenges can weigh on short-term economic output, causing growth to be uncertain between quarters. The good news is that the economic indicators suggest that growth has rebounded in the second quarter of the year, and we're still on track for the year as a whole, according to the private sector. And I can add that Ontario's labour market has shown signs of resiliency in the second quarter of the year, with employment up by 62,000 jobs. The unemployment rate continues to trend lower, at 6.9% in August.

In summary, these metrics show how our prudent fiscal management continues to deliver results for the people of Ontario—results that include investments to grow Ontario's economy and protect critical public services such as health care, education and infrastructure.

Chair, we are committed to keeping Ontario's debt-to-GDP rate on a sustainable trajectory and maintaining the lowest interest on debt-to-revenue ratio in decades.

So while fiscal stewardship is at the heart of what we do, our work extends far beyond the balance sheet. We are taking decisive action to protect Ontario's workers and businesses from external shocks, especially from the impact of tariffs and global economic headwinds.

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As an immediate response to tariffs, we announced \$30 billion in relief and support to help businesses and keep workers on the job, as well as measures to build long-term resiliency and prosperity. Some of these measures include launching our tax action plan, new infrastructure, financing opportunities for First Nations, and investments in critical minerals and critical technology platforms to help businesses navigate challenges from trade disruptions and transform Ontario's economy.

We launched the first phase of the Protect Ontario Account to provide support to Ontario-based businesses that have been affected by higher tariff rates. Through it, up to \$1 billion in liquidity support will be provided and has been provided to protect workers and operations by helping manage working capital challenges, such as meeting payroll, lease payments and utility payments.

We also recently announced expanding eligibility for the Protect Ontario Financing Program and the Ontario Together Trade Fund to protect workers and businesses targeted by the latest US trade actions. The Ontario Together Trade Fund will ensure we can continue to deliver critical support for small and medium-sized businesses by enabling them to pivot production, build new sales partnerships and expand trade.

Chair, when you come right down to it, our plan is to protect Ontario. It's about creating the conditions for business success, which is why we also invested \$20 million in the protect Ontario workers employment response centres, also known as POWER centres, to provide access to training and upskilling to workers affected by or at risk of layoffs—and a \$40 million Trade-Impacted Communities Program supporting municipalities, economic development organizations and industry groups responding to trade disruptions.

WSIB premium rates were further reduced to the lowest level in 50 years, which is estimated to bring an additional annual savings of approximately \$60 million for Ontario employers this year.

We're protecting Ontario, and that means protecting Ontario workers, jobs and businesses. We're continuing to provide much-needed support and relief during uncertainty while creating the best economic conditions to encourage and attract new investment. These investments reflect a coordinated effort to protect Ontario's workers and businesses and increase the competitiveness of our economy.

Speaking of increasing the competitiveness of our economy, our government is also delivering on the province's tax action plan to make Ontario the best place to invest in the G7, and lower costs:

- by cutting small business corporate income tax from 3.2% to 2.2%, which took effect this year to ensure small businesses continue to stay resilient;

- by cutting the rate by more than 31% for over 375,000 Ontario small businesses, to benefit from an additional \$1.1 billion in corporate income tax relief over the next three years;

- as well as by allowing businesses to accelerate the income tax deduction for the cost of depreciable assets in parallel with changes announced by the federal government.

As mentioned in the 2026 budget, these changes lower the cost for capital investments in a broad range of assets. These tax measures are contributing to nearly \$10 billion in estimated cost savings and support for Ontario businesses in 2026, of which \$4.8 billion goes to small businesses. We're also reducing red tape for these businesses, saving over \$1.3 billion in annualized compliance costs and delivering 1.8 million annual hours of savings.

And Chair, we did not stop there. We also continue to lower costs for families and all those who call Ontario home through several major relief programs. To continue to make life more affordable for Ontario's families, we have provided \$12 billion in support for families and individuals this year alone.

As an example, we are providing further temporary relief for homebuyers by removing the full 13% of the harmonized sales tax for all eligible buyers of new homes valued up to \$1 million, for a maximum rebate of \$130,000 in relief to eligible buyers. The amount would be maintained for new homes valued up to \$1.5 million. This is providing \$2.2 billion in total tax relief for homebuyers in Ontario.

Additionally, we permanently cut the gas tax and fuel tax by 10 cents per litre, and these cuts have saved households \$2.3 billion to date.

We've also saved drivers \$94 million annually by removing tolls on the Highway 407 East, and we've removed tolls on Highways 412 and 418.

As reported in the 2026 budget, our government is saving commuters \$1,600 a year by extending the One Fare program for an additional two years, to continue keeping costs down for daily transit users in the greater Toronto and Hamilton area and southern Ontario.

Ontario is growing, and our government is investing to make Ontario the best destination to live, work and play, now and for decades to come. This government is investing \$236 billion over 10 years to build, repair and expand critical infrastructure, making it the largest provincial capital plan in Canadian history, on projects like transit expansion, education infrastructure, high-quality critical services, recreational facilities, affordable housing, and municipal and community initiatives, just to mention a few.

It is safe to say we're protecting the people of Ontario day in, day out.

And to continue meeting the needs of growing communities, we're supporting the repair, upgrade or construction of new sport and recreation facilities across the province by investing an additional \$300 million over six years through the Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund, contributing to a total of \$500 million.

Making these strategic and thoughtful infrastructure investments contributes to our province's growth and puts many, many people to work.

Protecting Ontario also means protecting the services people rely on.

That's why we invested over \$1.1 billion in additional hospital funding for 2026-27.

It is why we are investing \$3.4 billion in our primary care action plan, to connect everyone in the province to a family doctor or primary care team by 2029.

And to help reduce out-of-pocket expenses for teachers, we've established the Classroom Supplies Fund, with \$66 million per school year for elementary school homeroom teachers to order up to \$750 in class supplies annually. It is our plan that is focused on student success and a back-to-basics approach that strengthens student achievement and prepares them for rewarding careers.

All these supports help create safe and burden-free foundations that help the people of Ontario to continue to thrive.

As I highlighted when we released the public accounts, global economic conditions are becoming increasingly challenging, while the relationship with our closest ally and friend, the United States, has changed, with tariffs taking direct aim at our economy—tariffs that disproportionately impact Ontario's workers and businesses. Thankfully, we're able to respond to these changing needs because of our responsible fiscal management. That's why we've provided \$30 billion in relief to support businesses impacted by tariffs, and we're actively monitoring the situation to ensure that workers and businesses who need support receive it.

But we need to continue our prudent and disciplined approach to managing Ontario's finances. Families and businesses across Ontario are tightening their belts in the face of economic uncertainty, and governments should, too. Ontario is doing its part, as demonstrated in yesterday's public accounts. But Ontario cannot act alone. We need the federal government to work with us to continue investing their fair share in the public services Canadians are counting on and to direct 100% of the tariff revenues to tariff-impacted workers and businesses.

Nous avons besoin que le gouvernement fédéral travaille avec nous, qu'il continue à investir sa juste part dans les services publics sur lesquels comptent les Canadiens et les Canadiennes, et qu'il consacre 100 % des revenus provenant des droits de douane aux travailleurs et aux entreprises qui subissent les conséquences de cette mesure.

The federal government receives 100% of the revenue from counter-tariffs and roughly two thirds of the personal income tax and 60% of the corporate income tax. This puts them in the position, more so than provinces, to provide additional targeted support to protect our workers and our jobs. Additionally, several fiscal transfers for critical services, including mental health, home care, labour and housing are coming to an end or being reduced. These are programs that the government of Canada committed to.

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On top of that, the Canada Health Transfer from the federal government is set to fall by 40%—from 5% to 3%—precisely at the time when our health sector warrants the support.

In the meantime, our government will continue taking a focused, disciplined and responsible approach to our spending so that we can protect our finances, and protect

our workers and families across Ontario. For that, our government's plan to protect Ontario and its people is unwavering today and for generations to come. Our plan is responsible. Our plan is forward-thinking. Our plan deals with the exigencies of today, but also builds for future generations—unprecedented infrastructure investment leading the way across Canada; removing barriers to inter-provincial trade; faster permitting; cutting regulations; building for the people of today and for tomorrow for generations, all the while putting Ontario on the—

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

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: —strongest fiscal track that we've seen in decades—the lowest debt-to-GDP in over a decade; the lowest interest-expense-to-revenue that we've seen in four decades.

The management of our fiscal position has yielded two—not one, but two credit rating upgrades, precisely at the time that most sovereign nations and sub-sovereigns are feeling the pinch on their fiscal plans. Our deficits are around 1% of GDP—amongst the lowest in the developed world, along with the federal government—much lower than the United States, the UK, Germany, France, and even Japan. This is what fiscal, prudent, responsible management of your money, taxpayer money, means.

With that, I thank you, Chair, I thank the members of the committee, and I look forward to your questions.

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

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

As always, please make your comments through the Chair.

Ministry officials and staff, please state your name and title when you are called on to speak so that the proceedings can be accurately recorded in Hansard.

With that, we will start the questions with the official opposition. MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, Minister Bethlenfalvy, for being here today.

Thank you to the staff for all the hard work you do for the Ministry of Finance.

I want to start off by reading out a quote:

“The most recent report from the Parliamentary Budget Officer reaffirms that our provincial debt is out of control....

“We will fight to reduce the debt so that we leave a legacy of financial sustainability to this and future generations.”

Who said that?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Could you read that again?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Sure.

“The most recent report from the Parliamentary Budget Officer reaffirms that our provincial debt is out of control....

“We will fight to reduce the debt so that we leave a legacy of financial sustainability to this and future generations.”

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Parliamentary Budget Officer being the federal one?

Ms. Jessica Bell: It was you. It was you, in 2018.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Wise quote.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I thought you would like it.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I do, I do.

Ms. Jessica Bell: It was you, and it was said in 2018 in response to questions about our debt.

What was Ontario's debt when you first came into office, Minister?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you for that question, and thank you, MPP Bell, for your thoughtful questions over the last few days.

I think what's important is, the debt relative to what? What do the markets look at? I worked at a credit rating agency for a number of years. I worked in the bond markets for a number of years. They look at the debt relative to your economy.

If you look at the economy in 2018, which we inherited—\$825 billion; it's now almost \$1.3 trillion. Our debt-to-GDP that we inherited in 2017-18 was 39.2%; in public accounts, we printed at 35.7%, and a few days ago, we printed 36.5%.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'll just give it out in basic numbers—because we do know what our debt is. We knew what our debt was back then, and we know what our debt is now. Our debt in 2017-18 was \$323 billion. At that time, you were quoted as saying, “Our provincial debt is out of control....

“We will fight to reduce the debt so that we leave a legacy of financial sustainability to this and future generations.”

It's a very good goal.

What is our debt today?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: So you would agree, MPP Bell—because you understand numbers—that our debt has actually decreased relative to the economy.

Ms. Jessica Bell: What is our debt today?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Our debt today is about \$450 billion, against an economy of almost \$1.3 trillion. Everyone knows that's how the markets look at your fiscal health. And they decide whether to lend you that money.

Guess what markets are doing? They're lending us money at the lowest borrowing rates we've seen in decades. We have the lowest borrowing costs in Canada for 30 years—the first time in decades borrowing 30-year money—and a third of it we've been issuing 30-year bonds prudently, at very low interest rates. It's prudent fiscal management.

Ms. Jessica Bell: When this government came into power, you made a commitment to us that you would reduce the debt—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: And we have.

Ms. Jessica Bell: —and eight years later, the debt has gone up by \$150 billion.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: You can't look at it in absolute terms, MPP Bell. You know that.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Your name has become “the half-a-trillion-dollar man.”

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: No. No one looks at it that way.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Well, they are the facts—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Those are the facts—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. I'm going to keep going.

Every year, the government says they have a plan to reduce the debt. Every year, the debt grows. Your plan to reduce the debt is not working.

What is the government's plan to reduce the debt? What are you going to do differently moving forward?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: MPP Bell, credit rating agencies upgraded our debt—S&P and DBRS. Don't you think they look at the same debt metrics? They see our fiscal profile improving. Look at markets. They're lending us money at the cheapest levels in over a couple decades. This matters.

In fact, our interest expense went down by almost \$700 million last year, and our interest revenue, which every credit rating agency market participant looks at, is some of the lowest in the history of the province. It's certainly as low as we saw in the 1980s. That was the last time.

So I think the markets are telling us that our borrowing is prudent, that it has been going down.

But let me tell you why we're borrowing. The vast majority of our borrowing is for infrastructure.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister Bethlenfalvy, I'm going to keep asking questions. We're going to be going back and forth all day. So you're going to have a lot of opportunities to get your talking points out.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It's not a talking point. It's the facts.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. I think you can agree that reducing the debt is important. It continues to be important. But when I look at the estimates, what I see is not a credible plan to reduce the debt.

I want to talk a little bit about the upcoming deficits that we're seeing. The deficit for this year is \$13.8 billion. The deficit for next year is \$6.1 billion. And then magically, suddenly, we're going to make a surplus in 2028-29 of \$0.6 billion.

I don't think your Conservative government has a credible plan to balance the budget and reduce the debt, but I'm going to give it to you—what changes between now and 2028-29 are going to take place to allow the government to move from a \$13.8-billion deficit to a surplus? What is going to be done differently?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Our goal is, of course, as you know, to achieve a balance. But we live in the world we are in, and I think you would admit that the world is a challenging place right now. The cost of oil, which is an input for a lot of Ontario businesses; the price at the pumps for individuals; the tariffs from the US are impacting Ontario's economy.

In that context, we're not willing to compromise on the investments into our health care, our education, our post-secondary or our justice system. We're going to continue to make those record investments. But at the same time, what's so important is that we continue to build infrastructure.

I think you could agree that we inherited a massive infrastructure deficit—not because of you, but the other government, the other party, the Liberals.

We need to keep building hospitals. We need to keep building schools. We keep needing to build transit. We need to keep building energy so that we can continue to be a sovereign and proud province.

In that context, the deficit, while it's much higher than I would want—I'd like to see lower deficits; it's the world we live in—is still one of the lowest in the country and in the developed world, at 1% of GDP or thereabouts.

Ms. Jessica Bell: The goal is to get from a \$13.8-billion deficit to a \$0.6-billion surplus. How much of this change is going to come from spending restraint?

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Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, as you know, we want to make sure that we continue investments in those areas that I just mentioned. I've said frequently that we want to make sure that the money gets to the front-line health care workers, social workers, teachers, for the benefit of the patients, students and most vulnerable. There's a lot of administration that goes out with that money, so we constantly look at ways that we can invest that money more efficiently, by looking at the administrative side. As you've seen in our budget, I'm sure, we have highlighted a number of management actions to look at finding efficiencies. I'm sure you saw on page 141 that we have the leanest and most effective and efficient—thank you very much—public service in Canada, working extremely hard on behalf of all taxpayers in this province.

Our goal is to continue to drive good outcomes, whether it's for students in the classroom, patients—with lower wait times in emergency rooms, surgeries, attachments to family doctors—and of course, our most vulnerable.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I did ask you a pretty—I'm just trying to think of this in the most practical terms. We have a huge amount of debt. The government, in the estimates, has made a commitment to reduce the deficit and to get to a surplus in order to look at our debt and address it. I'm not hearing from you any specifics around what kind of spending restraint is going to happen.

I think it's safe to say that we are not playing Monopoly here. You cannot raid the bank when I'm going to get a snack from the kitchen. This is a government. And something has to give.

I want to talk about health care. It's safe to say, we can both agree, that the two biggest expenses within the government are health care and education—it's about 60% of what the government spends. So when we're looking at spending restraint, it's safe to say that if there's going to be a reduction in how much we're spending, some of it is likely going to have to come from either health care or education.

I want to look at health care first. Overall, health care spending is going up; however, it is not going up at the rate that is needed to maintain current health sector service levels, when you factor in population growth, aging, and health care inflation. Health care funding is going up, but what people are seeing when they go to the emergency room or they're looking for a family doctor—they're seeing a decline in services. That's what the projection is, according to the Financial Accountability Officer. So you've got a challenge. Health care funding needs to go up

in order to maintain service levels. But then you're here today saying you've got a plan to get to a surplus by 2028-29.

So my question to you: Is this government going to cut health care funding and reduce health care service standards in order to reach a surplus by 2028-29?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: No. And that is a complete sentence.

MPP Bell, you know the numbers. The health sector funding went up 7.2% in 2025-26. We've made record investments. When we inherited the health care budget, it was \$54 billion in 2017-18; it's now over \$100 billion. So major investments have been made. You quoted the FAO, and the FAO's—their metric is 4%, is what the rate should be. So we're overinvesting in health care, as we should. We had a huge population growth.

We're going to continue to support our front-line health care workers, look at scope of practice, look at a whole range of measures, in partnership with the health system. We're investing in primary care, which is going to help with preventive care—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm going to interrupt you here.

So what I heard from you is a clear answer that this government is going to maintain existing health care standards.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: What I said is, we're not going to cut. You asked me, "Are you going to cut?" And I said no.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Good. I'm pleased. That's why I'm asking the question. I do want clarity.

Can this government commit to maintaining existing health care standards?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, you had the Minister of Health here yesterday to ask her those questions.

We are going to continue to invest in health care in multiple areas. Let me be very clear about those areas.

Acute care: We've got a massive investment in building new beds, which is acute-care beds. We've got a huge \$3.4 billion in primary care. And we've got a multi-billion dollar investment in home care. These are all investments that we are—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm going to interrupt you here because I only have three minutes left.

So, to be clear, you're not cutting.

In order to maintain existing health care service levels, the government would need to increase the amount of money they're giving to health care, moving forward, to 4.4%, and right now you're on a track of 3.2%. So can this government increase funding to health care to ensure that health care service standards are maintained?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: To be clear, I think if you're suggesting a cut from \$100 billion to something less than \$100 billion, that is not going to happen.

What people want from us is results. They want to see emergency wait times improve. They want to see surgical wait times improve. They want to see not only attachment to a family doctor, but they want access to a family doctor. All those metrics we monitor very closely. In many areas, we're seeing improvements in those areas, but that doesn't mean the job is done. So we'll continue to make invest-

ments in health care to transform our health care system, with more primary care, acute care for those who need it, and home care, as we transform the health care system.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Just to be clear, when the Financial Accountability Officer looks at health care standards, they're not pulling standards out of a hat. They're looking at how many doctors there are per thousand people, how many nurses there are per thousand people, how many hospital beds there are per thousand people, how many long-term-care beds, how many personal support workers. They have some pretty standard metrics that are used to compare provinces and to look at our health care system nationally. So they're pretty clear standards.

My question to you is, if you're not going to cut health care funding significantly, then how are you going to get to a surplus by 2028-29?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I can't imagine anyone would cut the \$100-billion investment, which is a record investment.

So, no, we're going to continue to invest in health care to achieve the outcomes.

One area that I didn't mention is agencies. We're looking at agencies. We've announced we're taking a look at agencies. We're looking at various measures that can add efficiency and effectiveness to help us with the expenditure management.

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

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: The second thing I would say is, the things that we're doing—unprecedented investment in infrastructure. That's boosting our economy. Interprovincial trade, getting rid of barriers, faster permitting so we can get shovels in the ground, and cutting red tape so that businesses can make the capital investments and have certainty in this province—that's how you get to a more robust fiscal profile.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, it is challenging, given the very large amount of the government's budget—the government has a huge budget—that we only have about 45 minutes on our side to ask some really genuine, important questions about what you're spending your money on and whether these figures add up and make sense. And I'm not hearing credible responses to very basic questions that I'm asking you.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, that's in the ear of the beholder.

We're out every 90 days, MPP Bell, telling the public how we're spending the money—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That ends the time for that question.

We'll go to MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you to the minister for being here today.

Minister, you talk about being transparent, and I certainly like that idea. But I notice that when you talk about the rating agencies, you always fail to mention that there was a downgrade in 2025, from a "positive" outlook to "stable," by Moody's. Could you tell me why you don't talk about that?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, remember that it was “stable” under our government. They put us up at “positive.” And then, something called a trade war evolved. We can’t control external shocks to the system—the pandemic. I think having an AA rating from Moody’s is a testament to our government’s fiscal management—and it’s “stable.” As you know, many provinces are not on “stable”; they’re on “negative.” Through the pandemic, through the tariff challenge, we’ve been able to maintain our ratings.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Sorry, Minister—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I don’t fail to mention it. I point out that we’ve seen the credit rating upgrades, which you fail to mention.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I’d like to reclaim my time.

I certainly have heard you talk about the upgrades. What I’m asking is why you fail to talk about the downgrades. When you talk about being transparent, you are not actually talking about the downgrade that the province got in their outlook, and I think that’s an important thing for taxpayers to understand—that there has been a change in the outlook, based on a number of factors in the province. You mentioned tariffs, of course. But the importance, I think, of being transparent, is that you give a full set of facts. So I’m really just asking why you fail to mention that downgrade when you talk about rating agencies.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It’s a change in outlook, but it’s not a downgrade.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: A change in outlook, sure.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: And number two: Credit rating upgrades, categories—S&P and DBRS—which has opened up new investors, which has driven our borrowing costs down. That never happened under your government, when you were in power in the previous decade.

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Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Minister, I wasn’t here at that time.

I would just encourage you to make sure that you’re giving out a full set of facts when you talk about the rating agencies.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I think I have.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I will continue to remind people that the outlook was downgraded in 2025. That’s an important thing for them to understand.

I also want to talk about transparency as it relates to the debt reduction strategy. I will quote the Auditor General here, who says that the debt burden reduction strategy has not been fully implemented “due to the province not clearly demonstrating how debt will be managed.” Again, we’ve heard you talk about the debt. We know that the debt is on the rise and that it will continue to rise in the next number of years, given the challenges that the province is facing.

I wonder if you could actually lay out here, for us and for the Auditor General, what your debt reduction strategy is.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: As you know, the debt has actually gone down. It has gone down from when—you weren’t there, but you are part of the party that was in power at the time. The debt-to-GDP was approaching 40%; in the public accounts, it was 36.5%. That tells you

debt has gone down because, as I mentioned, at the time we took over, the economy was \$825 billion; it’s now approaching \$1.3 trillion. Those are facts. You can’t change those facts. Our fiscal profile has improved.

You also can’t deny that we’re in a different world right now. Our most trusted ally and trading partner, the US, is engaged in what I think is the wrong policy. I’m a free trader, not a protectionist. This is the world we’re in. We’re not going to relent on investing in our social infrastructure, that being health care, education, justice, and post-secondary education, in that environment.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Again, the debt burden is climbing—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: As I just said, it’s going down. So we’re going to have to agree to disagree.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: The debt burden is climbing—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: You know the numbers. You understand this.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: —according to the FAO’s outlook. It will continue to climb in the coming years, and I think that the taxpayers of Ontario deserve to hear that from you directly. I think that would be—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: And with respect, they hear every 90 days from me.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Excuse me—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: The previous Liberal government did not go out every 90 days.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Chair?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One at a time.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I would just like to highlight that the debt burden is rising in the next number of years, according to the FAO and the expenditures that will be coming. I think it’s important for you to be talking about that to taxpayers. So I will continue to ask you to be fully transparent about what is happening with the debt and, again, to accept the Auditor General’s conclusion that the government does not have a debt burden reduction strategy. I think that is very clear as we continue to see the debt rise, going up to over half a trillion dollars. It’s a big number to say. So I think that we need to hear that from you. We need to hear about that.

Again, the question is, how will you get to the balanced books as you are forecasting in the next two years, given all of the uncertainty around tariffs and trade that you are talking about? I think that is, again, something that is a bit of a fiction and a fantasy, kind of like the tunnel under the 401.

Again, I would ask if you would please comply with the Auditor General—and your own law, actually—for the government to have a debt burden reduction strategy and talk about how you will reduce the debt.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: A couple of things: First off, I should mention, congratulations on putting your name on the ballot for the leadership. I know that it’s not easy to put your name on a ballot—all of us—and equally to run in the leadership. So I very much respect that.

Not your fault, but your problem—the Auditor General did not give a clean opinion to the previous Liberal government.

We’ve achieved—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Excuse me, Chair.

Again—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: We've achieved—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: The question I'm asking is, why the government has not provided a debt burden reduction strategy—looking forward, Minister, not backwards.

Thank you for your kind remarks.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Chair, she—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If I can call both parties to order—ask questions, answer questions, but both have to be given time to do that.

Carry on.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It is important to look in the rear-view mirror.

We just received our ninth clean opinion from the Auditor General.

Number two: I'm out every 90 days, and when I'm facing the media every 90 days—and more than that in between—they're asking me all these tough questions and I'm answering them.

And thirdly, how are we going to continue our fiscal path? It's because we have a plan. We have a prosperity plan that involves a record amount of infrastructure investment; getting rid of red tape; faster permitting; building energy infrastructure, like in my riding, in Pickering, with the refurbishment of the nuclear reactors, which the previous Liberal government didn't do. We welcome support from every party on this, because this is not about partisan politics; this is about building Ontario.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I would like to just note that the minister has not answered the question about the debt burden reduction strategy.

In fact, the debt has gone up. The debt ratio will go up to close to 40%, according to the forecast. So debt-to-GDP is going to rise, and I think, again, it is important for the Minister of Finance to be transparent about that with the taxpayers of Ontario—I guess not today; maybe we'll look for that in the future.

I'd like to move to another topic.

Minister, the Protect Ontario Financing Program is a bit of a mystery. You talk about a billion dollars being made available to organizations so far, but we can't see, actually, how much has been made available, how much has been repaid. Could you talk a little bit about that in real numbers?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Sure. I welcome that question.

We came out with our \$30-billion plan to protect businesses and workers, and we continue to execute against that plan. We moved early to rebate WSIB premiums for employers, some \$2 billion; provide tax deferrals, some \$9 billion; and give access to the Protect Ontario Account, a billion dollars, of which money has gone out the door to help with liquidity, and the Ontario Together Trade Fund, where money has gone out the door to reposition and pivot to new markets. So our government continues to make those investments.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I just want to clarify: You're saying \$1 billion has gone out the door?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: No—I said a billion dollars available, and companies have applied for and received approval for that funding.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: My question is, how much money has gone out the door?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, you'd have to ask the Minister of Economic Development, who's responsible for that. He was here yesterday, so I'm sure you asked him that question.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I'm sure you must know that number. Could you—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I don't have that number at my fingertips, but—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Maybe one of your staff has that number.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Between supporting, for example, Algoma with \$100 million—not only that, but we've—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: So \$100 million?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: No, no, more than that.

At the same time, we've expanded the definition to incorporate the companies in section 338.

This is a very fluid situation. We continue to receive applications. We continue to approve funding. And we continue to provide a range of supports for businesses. The good news is that these companies are pivoting. The federal government is a key part of this. The counter-tariff revenues are significant. They get 100% of the tariffs, so it's primary that the federal government also supports the tariff-impacted sectors. And we have a good dialogue with the federal government.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Again, I don't think we have a clear answer yet of how much money has actually gone out the door to support companies. We've heard that a billion dollars has been made available. My question is, how much money has gone out the door?

My sense of the tariff relief—you talk a big number, but actually, very little has gone out, and it's mostly temporary relief. They have to repay the money. So I would like to just—

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: Thanks, Chair. I'd love to have the member point to the section in the estimates binder for finance specifically about this—because the line of questioning that she's asking about is a program that is run by a different ministry. That is not in scope for the Ministry of Finance. He is not the person who is responsible for the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, who was here yesterday. That line of questioning would have been more appropriate for that ministry. This is not part of the Ministry of Finance—it's not part of the estimates submission for it.

I would ask that the member stick to our standing order—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): That is a point of order. And I'm sure the member will get back to the estimates that we are hearing today, in their line of questioning.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Yes. Thank you, Chair, and thank you, MPP Smith. I think the important point to remember is that the minister was here, gave his opening remarks, and talked about the Protect Ontario Account, so I think it's fair game to ask him questions about it.

Again, I would like to understand—

Mr. Dave Smith: Point to the estimates—

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Minister, I would like to understand the amount of money that has actually gone out the door to support Ontario businesses during this very important trade war.

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order, Chair: You just ruled on this, telling her that—

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

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Mr. Dave Smith: You just ruled on it, and she has chosen to ignore your ruling.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): We just recommended that she get back to it. She is now asking a question. The minister has an opportunity to answer it.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Mr. Chair and MPP Bowman, the Protect Ontario Account money is flowing out the door. Ontario Together Trade Fund money is flowing out the door.

The POWER centres, which—we have one in Hamilton. Devastating impact of the Stelco decision—but we have the POWER centre, which was part of that Protect Ontario plan that helps working with unions and municipalities. That's what the POWER centre—protect Ontario workers employment response centre. We have a member from Hamilton right here who can speak to that.

These are the numbers on the ground, where we're actually working with workers, working with affected people. Protect Ontario fund is a part of that.

Perhaps the deputy might want to add a little bit to it.

Mr. Gadi Mayman: Thank you very much.

Gadi Mayman, Deputy Minister of Finance.

Since the launch of the program, 36 applications have been received, totalling just under \$100 million; 18 of those applications have been approved. That represents about \$40 million, in addition to the \$100 million that the minister mentioned, on Algoma Steel support.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you. I appreciate that answer.

Again, the government talks about \$30 billion in tariff support, and in reality, maybe \$140 million has gone out the door—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: No, no.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Again, Minister, I'm happy to have you talk about that. I think, under section 1209—economic policy—this is absolutely within your jurisdiction. So I would appreciate to understand how much money has actually gone out the door, across programs, to support Ontario businesses and workers during this very troubling trade war.

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

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I think, MPP Bowman, I've been very clear that with the \$30 billion of supports, multiple dollars have flowed. I would point you to the Ontario Together Trade Fund, which is being well-received by those who need the funds and want to pivot their businesses and reshore and attract new markets—I think exactly what they should be doing.

But let's not forget that 100% of the countermeasures tariff revenue goes to the feds. The majority of personal income tax is collected by the feds, and it's a partnership—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair.

I would, again, just ask the minister to stick to what this province can do under his Premier and his leadership around supporting Ontario businesses.

And what I'm hearing is that, so far, at the most, \$140 million has gone out the door.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: No, you're hearing incorrectly. It's a multi-faceted, multi-billion dollar program—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Then I would love to hear the number.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I would tell the member not to tell the minister how to answer the questions, but to ask the questions and wait for the answer.

The time is completed on this question. We will now go to the government. MPP Lahey.

MPP Susan Lahey: Through you, Chair Hardeman: It's a pleasure to be here today. I am the new MPP for York-Simcoe. I would like to acknowledge my predecessor, the Honourable Caroline Mulroney, for her dedication and commitment to York-Simcoe, which includes East Gwillimbury, Bradford, Georgina, part of King and Lake Simcoe—all the way up to Indigenous peoples of the First Nations of Georgina. It's a privilege. I'm deeply honoured to be representing all of the residents of York-Simcoe.

My question for you is with regard to supporting small businesses. Small businesses are major employers across communities in Ontario and are often particularly sensitive to increases in operating costs as well as economic uncertainty. Our government has reduced Ontario's small businesses corporate income tax rate from 3.2% to 2.2% this year, providing tax relief for more than 375,000 small businesses. My question is, how does this tax cut fit into our government's strategy to continue to make Ontario self-sufficient, competitive and resilient?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, thank you, MPP Lahey, and congratulations on your election victory. The people have spoken, and they put their trust and confidence in you, so congratulations.

As I was just mentioning, it's not just the \$30 billion in relief through our Protect Ontario strategy; we're providing additional support. Not even included in that number is the small business tax cut that you just mentioned, some billion dollars of relief over three years for small businesses. It's helping 500,000 businesses, I believe is the number, across Ontario—a significant amount of small businesses. But it doesn't just stop there.

We moved early on the Ontario Made Manufacturing Investment Tax Credit to help our manufacturing sector

with a multi-year tax credit to incent investment in capital equipment in a range of industries.

But it doesn't stop there—with the recent announcement of the mega deduction, as it's so called, which we championed, by the way, in 2018-19. Vic Fedeli, when he was finance minister, championed that with Bill Morneau. That was the first—call it a “super deduction.” We worked together with the federal government to accelerate depreciation for capital investment. It was a five-year agreement, and of course, with that expiring, the new government has followed our lead yet again—got a super deduction last year, and now the mega deduction, which is a significant incentive for manufacturers in a broadening category of industries to make capital investments, precisely at the time that we need that type of investment here.

I was fortunate, along with the Premier and others, to participate in the investment summit that was housed right here in Toronto a couple of weeks ago—over \$100 trillion of investment, in addition to \$500 billion of announcements of our own pension funds, and banks and life companies who announced additional incremental investment into the Canadian economy. We're seeing the conditions for economic growth, of which small business is an important part. By this tax deduction, an approximate 31% tax deduction—it's going to help a lot of businesses not only stay in business but also reinvest in their businesses in these challenging times.

I'll remind you, the previous Liberal government increased taxes, they increased fees, they got credit rating downgrades, but even worse, they didn't build anything.

So we're investing, and yes, our debt is going up, lower relative to our GDP—which is the metric that everyone looks at. I know my members opposite who asked those questions previously understand that. It is helping us not just for today's generation, but for future generations.

When you don't build, you fall behind. Let me give you a concrete example of that in my riding. We have one of the fastest-growing regions of Ontario, in Durham, and a big, growing population in Pickering. We have a seniors' community, an aging community, where no long-term-care beds were built in almost a decade before we came into power. Think about that for a second—zero in Ajax, in Pickering; people being on wait-lists. Since we got into power, we campaigned on building 58,000, with 30,000 new, 28,000 renovated. We're halfway there. And in my riding, we're going to open, in a couple of months, a 200-bed facility, the first one built in decades, in Ajax: Lakeridge Gardens, a 320-long-term-care bed facility for Ontarians who really need it. That's where we're investing in infrastructure.

We're looking at investing in infrastructure, because we had to catch up, because there was a lack of investment in hospitals and roads, schools—in fact, schools were being closed—subways, energy. We're catching up and we're making even bigger investments and at the same time providing tax relief for businesses and families.

You referenced the small business tax cut—that's in addition to a number of other tax cuts. The gas tax cut, which is helping a lot of small businesses, which includes

the diesel tax cut, combined with our tax move on energy earlier in our mandate—10 cents a litre. We cut the small business tax—I mentioned the corporate tax cut—but we've also cut personal income taxes through the low-income individual and family tax credit. So we have cut personal income tax.

We have cut the HST. We cut the HST for purpose-built rentals. So we increased the stock of rental apartments in Ontario. We cut it by 13%. We advocated for that. The federal government, after a year of advocating, agreed and said that is the path to go to get more purpose-built rental stock in Ontario, and it's working. The numbers show that it's working tremendously. But we didn't stop there. We provided an HST tax cut for first-time homebuyers and then made it for all new home builds. The numbers are starting to come in. It's stimulating a tremendous amount of purchases by young families and others buying their first home. The policy is working, and we're able to do that because we have good fiscal—prudent, responsible—management of taxpayers' money.

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Is the job done? No. We're going to continue to move forward, putting more money back into small businesses' pockets, putting more back into families' pockets and, at the same time, having a plan to deal with the impact of tariffs through the Protect Ontario fund, where money is flowing; through our POWER centres, where money is flowing; through skills retraining, where money is flowing; through the Building Ontario Fund, where projects are being done; through a number of measures that are providing liquidity and support for our workers and businesses. And, as I mentioned, over 62,000 new jobs in just the last quarter alone, in the face of such great global challenges—that's a testament to the resilience of the Ontario people. Where we can help, like cutting the small business tax, we will continue to do so.

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

MPP Monica Ciriello: Thank you, Minister Bethlenfalvy, not only for the opening remarks indicating not only where we're going but how we're preparing for tomorrow, but I also want to say thank you for coming to Hamilton. I'm the MPP for Hamilton Mountain, and when the tariffs were imposed and the trade agreement was ripped up, you were there on Monday morning walking the line with the Steelworkers, talking to them about how we are going to help them through this tariff challenge.

As much as I would like to unpack that, there's something else that's really impacting Hamilton, and that is HST on new homes and what our government is doing for housing affordability. It's a continuing concern for families across Ontario, and I know you talked about it a little bit in your opening remarks. In our budget, our government removed HST for eligible homebuyers, providing up to \$130,000 in provincial relief on eligible new homes valued up to \$1 million, with relief continuing for homes valued up to \$1.5 million.

Could you provide an update on how these programs are expected to continue and add additional housing construction across the province in cities just like Hamilton?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, MPP Ciriello, for the work you're doing in the community. You were there with me as we walked the line in the steel plant, as we talked to workers, but you were also there when we made announcements on helping builders with development charges through relief for municipalities, which is stimulating construction activity. The Minister of Housing has made multiple announcements; he's out on another one today, I believe.

In partnership with the federal government, when we work together, then we get further. That \$8.8-billion deal is another example of how, when you work together, whether it's protecting Ontario—it's not just a provincial responsibility; it's a combined federal-provincial-municipal-First Nations responsibility, and we're seeing great progress on that.

To your question about the impacts of our policies; specifically, on providing relief for new builds in Hamilton and beyond—8,410 new homes were sold across the province in the three months ending June 30, up 130% from the year before. That's very significant. The additional 4,765 year-over-year home sales were directly attributable—and those are incremental—to the HST program which began on April 1 and took full effect this fiscal year.

So we are protecting Ontario, whether it's the \$30-billion fund where we continue to have multiple dollars flowing, but also in tax measures like the HST, which is stimulating not only affordability for many families who dream of home ownership, but also for our construction industry, keeping our construction workers at work building those homes. Let's not forget the construction workers. Let's not forget the investments for down the road to incent more building so we continue a good supply. It's not just the HST for first-time homebuyers and for new builds, but it's also, as I mentioned, the HST for purpose-built rental. These are the types of measures that really have an impact on people's lives.

At a time when our economy is not only challenged by the tariff trade policy from south of the border, but energy prices, which are at very high levels, which has a big impact on Ontario businesses and families because, Ontario being a manufacturing hub, fuel cost is a huge input—and also for 16 million people who have to get from A to B, take their kids to school, take them to the hockey rink, go to a job, who often rely on having to go from A to B and fill up their tank. I think that is another reason why we're so unrelenting in investing in transit and infrastructure to move people, to think about tomorrow, not just today.

Again, if the previous government had taken that—you can see just the numbers; they're facts, how much infrastructure investment was done. It was a drop in the bucket, at a time when our population is growing, our economy is growing. And all this is self-fulfilling—the more you invest in people through lower taxes, lower business taxes, higher infrastructure spending to move people, to have social policy in hospitals, good social infrastructure along with economic infrastructure.

Maybe I can end on this: Just about 10 days ago, I was in Pickering—nine days ago, eight days ago. I keep correcting myself. It seems like yesterday.

Interjection: Maybe it was.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It was probably yesterday—announcing the refurbishment of four nuclear generating stations. That's visionary. And people are already at work, have been at work on the site doing the pre-work. The amount of skilled trades that it will require to actually do that refurbishment—the pipefitters, the boilermakers, the iron makers, the welders and the engineers—you're talking about, when you add it all up, almost 30,000 jobs, to refurbish those four nuclear generating stations.

We're the envy of the world in Pickering. They say, "What? You've got nuclear?" They want to build nuclear. We've got nuclear, and that will provide life for the next 50 years. That's going to provide stable, good-paying jobs and job security for thousands—thousands—of workers just in Pickering.

Then you go down the road a little bit and you get to Darlington, where we're the first of any nation to build more than one—and the first small modular reactors. That's another 18,000 jobs.

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

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: And then you go down the road to Wesleyville, where we plan on building the largest nuclear generating station on planet Earth.

And if you go to the Bruce Peninsula, they've got eight generating stations and they're on their fifth refurbishment—they plan to do the next three and then recycle to the original ones. This is putting tens of thousands of people to work. It's green, clean energy. It's going to fuel industry. It's going to give people energy security in a very uncertain world about energy supply. And it's going to require a lot of operating jobs once they're refurbished and they're built—so ongoing, we're talking about generational job security that fits into the overall architecture.

You started on the HST cut that we made that's helping families and affordability. We're also helping them with good-paying jobs. That's how you protect Ontario. So it's not just about one program, as the member opposite was trying to delve into; it's all the continuum of our strategic plan on how to position Ontario—

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

MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Just to conclude what I've already talked about so far—I've asked you some questions about the debt. The minister had difficulty acknowledging that the debt has increased. I asked you questions about the deficit and how we're going to get to a surplus by 2028-29, which is the government's own stated goal, and I'm not hearing a lot of clarity there on how we're going to get there. You did make a commitment that health care funding will not be cut, but you did not make the commitment that health care standards will be maintained at their current level. So I'm still on the hunt of how we're going to get to this reduction in the deficit to 2028-29—if it's not

health care, then the next thing you look at is education, because that's the second-biggest spending item for the government.

When I look at what the Financial Accountability Officer is saying about education, they're pretty clear. They are saying that education funding needs to go up faster than what it's currently going up, for current service levels to be maintained, when you factor in inflation and population growth and all that.

As a parent of two children in the public school system, I talk to a lot of parents. I go to all my schools. I hear a lot from education stakeholders. I would say that the service standards in our schools right now are not great. Class sizes are very big. We are seeing cuts to staff. And we're also seeing learning outcomes not meeting the kind of provincial standard that you'd expect.

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I was, honestly, shocked by the EQAO results that came out recently, showing that over 50% of grade 6 kids are not meeting the standard in math. I actually took a look at what the standard is for math for grade 6, and I encourage you to do it. It is spectacularly low. It is not advanced fractions that we're talking about here. So it's pretty alarming.

Back to the questions—and these are similar to the questions that I'm going to ask you about health care. They're not surprises here.

In order to meet that surplus by 2028-29, is the government going to make cuts to education funding?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: If you look at the public accounts, you can see that education funding rose by over 6% a year for the last four years. Health care funding rose—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Moving forward—estimates are about moving forward.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: You say this every year: "What about the FAO?" It is a point-in-time projection. They don't have all the numbers. They're unaudited and—I'm not going to speak to their methodology.

Of course, I'm going to be out in the fall economic statement—so you can see, at that point, those are our projections.

Let's look at the facts and the reality. Four years in a row, you sit here and you say, "What about the FAO report?" I say, look at the numbers: education, up over 6% a year—justice, over 10% a year; health care, over 6.6% a year. Just look at the facts and the track record, all the while reducing the deficit and debt burden—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Help me out here, Minister. Whenever I talk about the past, the Chair looks at me and says, "You can only talk about the future," essentially. So if—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: So let's talk about the future.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes. My question is pretty clear. I'm trying to work out—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: My answer is clear.

Ms. Jessica Bell:—where that surplus is going to come from.

Are you going to cut funding to education?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: As the track record said, we've increased the investments. We're going to continue

to invest in education—in fact, it has gone up over \$40 billion.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Are you going to increase funding in order to maintain existing service levels in education?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: We've made a commitment to increase, and support people right across this province. We continue to increase funding for teachers, increase funding for schools.

Wait for the fall economic statement—it's not that far away—and you can see our official projections.

I say, look at our track record. And the public accounts are an excellent example of that commitment, not just for the last year or two years or three years or four years. I think that speaks to a trend of what this government is doing to invest in its education system.

Ms. Jessica Bell: So what I'm hearing is, "Wait and see." I'm not getting any clear answers here, and I honestly think that's a concern.

Health care and education are the bread and butter of the services that a provincial government provides. And if we're going to address this deficit and address the debt, then I'm curious to know—I think a lot of people are curious to know how you're going to get there.

So if it's not going to be changes to service standards, then let's take a look at taxes.

Will there be an increase in income taxes between now and 2028-29?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Stay tuned for the fall economic statement. Those are the projections.

Again, look at our track record. We have been cutting taxes. I just highlighted about a dozen taxes that we've cut. I could highlight another 12 tax cuts or tax credits or fee reductions or—because we believe fundamentally that the path to economic prosperity, a higher standard of living, is not by taking money away from people and businesses; it's giving them more money to invest in themselves and in their businesses.

Ms. Jessica Bell: You can't have all the cakes. It doesn't work like that.

When I look at what the Financial Accountability Officer is projecting, they're saying that the government's forecast for revenue generated from personal income tax is \$25.7 billion higher—sorry; the government's revenue from personal income tax is \$25 billion higher than the Financial Accountability Officer's. So the government is looking at bringing in an additional \$25 billion in personal income tax—than what the FAO has estimated in order to reach this surplus.

How do you get this \$25.7 billion in personal income tax if you're not going to increase income taxes?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: As I've said before and multiple, multiple times, the FAO—we appreciate their work, but it's a point in time, with unaudited numbers. They don't have the full picture. The full picture is called the fall economic statement and the budget. Those are the numbers—and we go out every 90 days to update on those numbers.

Ms. Jessica Bell: The Financial Accountability Officer uses the fall economic statement and the budgets to deter-

mine its own projections, and what they're saying is that there's a big gap between how much revenue you say you're going to get and what they think you're going to get—\$25 billion.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Every year, they put out projections, and then I put out our projections, and the public accounts gives you the detail on those. The world changes; interest rates change.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, every year, you come here and you say you're going to balance the budget, and every year, you project further and further and further and further out on when the budget is going to be balanced. That's what happens every year.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: MPP Bell, I think you would acknowledge that our economy has been impacted by the trade tariffs, and Ontario—

Ms. Jessica Bell: These issues existed before the trade war.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: And a lot of progress was being made: some of the lowest debt-to-GDP in 15 years—if that isn't progress, I don't know what is—two credit rating upgrades, with the previous government, who got downgraded. I know that because I was at a credit rating agency in 2009 and downgraded the province of Ontario. They didn't have a path to balance for eight years.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I want to ask you some specific questions.

Can the government commit to not raising personal income tax over the next three years?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: As you know, a finance minister doesn't speculate on future tax policy.

I want to be crystal clear. You've seen our government have a track record for eight-years-plus now on reducing the tax burden, not increasing the tax burden—as other governments. We've chosen a different path. We've chosen to believe in individuals, believe in businesses—that they are the best people to decide how to spend their money, and not to take their money away and increase taxes. We may have a philosophical difference about that. But at the end of the day, we have a track record. We've gone to the people three times on that track record, and we'll continue the path that we got elected to do—which is to make life better for the people of Ontario, to set the conditions for businesses so that they can prosper and grow and we can continue to put people to work right across this great province.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Help me out here. Focusing on the issue of revenue generation: Is the government looking at increasing the corporate income tax rate?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: MPP Bell, you'll just see that the federal government and we have supported the accelerated depreciation, which will have an impact on reducing the corporate revenue within Ontario.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Is the government looking at increasing the capital gains tax?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Again, MPP Bell, I'm not going to speculate on taxes.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm looking at the two biggest expending items in the ministry—you're promising that

it's essentially going to be what you say in the budget. Then I'm outlining some of the most common ways that you would raise new revenue, and you're saying here either, "Well, I'm not going to answer your question" or "Look at our track record. We always reduce taxes." To me, it just doesn't add up, and I think a lot of people are wondering about that, including the Auditor General. They're seeing the debt go up and up and up and up, and they wonder who's in charge here.

Do you want to be the trillion-dollar man? I don't understand—I know you don't want to be.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I want to be the person who builds Ontario, gives families a chance for success, positions businesses for success. And that's what our government is doing.

The Auditor General, by the way, has just given us a ninth clean bill of health. That's transparency. That's disclosure. That's good fiscal management.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I want to go to the Protect Ontario Financing Program. I was interested in the line of questioning that MPP Bowman addressed—I did take a look, and that is part of the Ministry of Finance; it is fully in scope. And I'm happy to share that with the Chair.

You did throw out a few interesting numbers that I just would like clarity on again. The Protect Ontario Financing Program has up to \$1 billion, and so far, there have been 36 applications that have been approved—I just want clarity on this—18 of those applications have had money received, about \$40 million has been released, and then an additional \$100 million has gone to Algoma Steel.

Is that an accurate summary of what you said earlier? I don't know your name.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: First, before the deputy, if I may—

Ms. Jessica Bell: The deputy. Sorry. I apologize.

Could we have the deputy just—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Yes, and if I may first, though, we made this—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I just want clarity on that.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Yes. We made this program available, and it is there to help companies who need the help. They have many other sources of availability for liquidity. Some of it comes from the province. Some of it comes from deferring taxes. Some of it comes from other sources.

I'll pass it to you, Deputy.

Ms. Jessica Bell: You're going to be able to talk so much you're going to be—don't worry.

Can you give me some clarity on those numbers?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: Yes. The numbers that you quoted are what I'd said. The only clarification, I would say, is that 36 applications have been received; 18 have been approved. What I will say, of the 36 applications, five of them were received since the section 338 tariffs took effect, and the government expanded the program to include those.

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Ms. Jessica Bell: I read that. Okay, so 18 have been approved and, of them, \$40 million has rolled out?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: Yes, \$40 million plus the \$100 million for Algoma Steel.

Ms. Jessica Bell: And Algoma Steel is one of those 18?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: No, it is not. It is separate.

Ms. Jessica Bell: So it's separate. It's \$140 million, total, out of the up to \$1 billion that has been announced. Would that be correct?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: Yes.

Ms. Jessica Bell: And these are loans or grants?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: These are loans.

Ms. Jessica Bell: When you're giving out these loans, I'm curious to know if there are any conditions attached to them.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Yes.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Can you elaborate on what those conditions are?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: They're on the website. You can look into those. The purpose of those is to provide, as we've said repeatedly, help with payroll, to help bridge—that has been effective. But it's not in isolation. It is important that we defer taxes. It's important that we provide the WSIB premiums. That's real money that's going back into these same businesses.

Ms. Jessica Bell: So I'm just—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: If I may, we're also helping them pivot, because it's not just liquidity for the short term. How do you pivot to new markets? We're hearing about alcohol companies that are looking at new markets outside of the US because they're facing a ban right across Canada. It's a multiple—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I don't get a lot of time to talk to you.

I'm curious about what exactly those conditions are that you've put on these loans to these companies. Is there a requirement, for instance, to not fire anybody?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: There are conditions in terms of term to repay, like the time to repay, the interest rate that they pay.

Deputy, do you have anything else that you want to add on that?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Their condition is that, if you get this money, for instance, if it goes to—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I don't negotiate these deals, as you can imagine. In partnership with the Ministry of Economic Development, they've brought parameters and, of course, I fund it.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Let's not overestimate how much power you have in this province, okay? Let's see here. Are there conditions to ensure that if a company gets a loan, there is a guarantee that they cannot lay off workers during that period?

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes or no? It's a simple question.

Mr. Gadi Mayman: The program does include strict safeguards to protect public funds. Businesses have to go through and provide their financial records, and all of the loan applications undergo a thorough review. It cannot be used for executive bonuses. It cannot be used to refinance existing loans or non-operational expenses.

Ms. Jessica Bell: And is there any kind of commitment to ensure that workers aren't laid off if the company gets government money?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: That is not part of the program, no.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I don't believe so.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. Of all of these 18 applications, how many of them are American companies?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: They're all Ontario companies.

Ms. Jessica Bell: They're all Ontario-based companies?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: That's correct.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Are they Ontario-owned companies?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: You would have to ask the Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade.

Ms. Jessica Bell: We know that an Ontario-based company can also be an American—

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

MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I would just like to talk about the comments related to what the previous Liberal government built. I'm very proud to list some of the projects.

The Toronto-York Spadina subway extension opened in 2017; the UP Express, which many of us take; Mississauga Transitway; Viva bus rapid transit in York region; the GO Transit expansion; new stations Gormley GO and Mount Pleasant GO; Highway 407 East was built; Highway 404 extension to Keswick; the Highway 417 widening in the Ottawa region; Highways 11 and 17 improvements in northern Ontario; the Rt. Hon. Herb Gray Parkway Windsor-Detroit corridor; the Pan Am Games infrastructure; the athletes' village here in Toronto; the aquatic centre in Scarborough.

Hospitals: St. Michael's Hospital redevelopment; Women's College Hospital; Bridgepoint Active Healthcare; Trillium Health Partners' Credit Valley expansion; Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital; Humber River Hospital; Southlake Regional Health Centre expansion; Royal Ottawa mental health centre; Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre; St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton redevelopment; London Health Sciences Centre upgrades in my hometown—that's great; and 30 other major projects completed.

Schools: Bur Oak Secondary School; St. Brother André Catholic High School; Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School rebuilt in Aurora; Rick Hansen Public School in Aurora; Forest Run Public School in Maple; Milton District High School; Earl of March Secondary School addition; Longfields-Davidson Heights Secondary School; multiple new elementary schools in Barrhaven and Kanata—those are big growth areas. So, 700 new schools, build-to-repair additions and 4,000 repair renewal projects—just to make sure the record is clear on that.

Minister, I would like to talk about the small businesses. You talked about it a bit earlier. One thing that you didn't talk about was how difficult it is still—in fact, impossible—for some small businesses to qualify for Protect Ontario financing. Thousands of small businesses do not qualify because they do not have at least 10 employees or \$2 million in sales. I'd like to understand why your gov-

ernment did not reduce those minimums to protect thousands more Ontario businesses that certainly employ an important number of workers in our province.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, MPP Bowman, you came up with a list there, but I think if you talk to any Ontarian, they will walk around and say there wasn't enough construction. In fact, you closed 600 schools, just a fraction of the subways and transit was built, the hospitals—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Chair?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: —we're catching up on an unprecedented scale—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If I could just—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I also forgot to mention the Ontario Line that the previous government started and this government had a very hard time finishing.

I'd like to just move on, though, from projects, because—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I'll stop at this point. The exercise we're here for is to do the estimates for the Minister of Finance. In the opening remarks, the committee will have heard that all must talk through the Chair. It seems that we can't find—and we've been lenient with that over a period of time, because it works a lot better if you can have a discussion with the minister. But if we can't get along by asking questions and answering questions, we will revert to "everything must come through the Chair, and the Chair shall decide who is speaking and who isn't."

With that, we will go back to MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Again, through you, Chair: I would really like to understand why the government has not expanded eligibility for small businesses to qualify—those that have under 10 employees or under \$2 million in sales. That's the question on the table at the moment, Chair.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Chair, through you to the member opposite: We've supported small businesses in a big way. Obviously, we profiled the small business tax cut; that's the second tax cut we've given to small businesses in our eight years. We expanded the threshold, as well, so that more small businesses don't pay any tax, and we continue to work with the CFIB and others who have been very supportive. We've been working together not just through the pandemic, but through the tariffs to support small business. I would think that this government has done more for small business than any government.

What slows down a lot of small businesses is red tape. That's why we have a Minister of Red Tape Reduction. I hear from a lot of small businesses how powerful that is. I also have talked to a lot of convenience stores. Opening up alcohol to convenience stores, to small businesses right across the province has been a powerful stimulus for our small business community.

So this government, whether it's through various relief measures like deferred taxes, which many small businesses participate in; whether it's cutting the small business tax, increasing the threshold or expanding their opportunities for investment—this government has been unparalleled in supporting small business.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: First of all, I just need to correct my record, in all the excitement: It was the Cross-town that the previous Liberal government started and this government had a hard time finishing.

I would just like to talk again about small businesses. The previous government cut it in half. This government has cut it by about 30%. You know, Minister, that I tabled a bill twice to cut small businesses by half and to increase the income threshold. Certainly, small businesses welcome the smaller tax cut, but I would, again, just like to understand why you have not—again, the question on the table is why you have not expanded support to additional small businesses that have fewer than 10 employees and under \$2 million in sales.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: For sure, there are a lot of supports in place for small businesses. Our small business associate minister was here yesterday, and she talked about the small business centres that we've invested another \$40 million in, supporting small businesses. We work very closely with the small business community. We've cut taxes by about 40%, because there was another tax cut from 3.5% to 3.2%, which was roughly 8%—combined with the 31% and change, it's almost 40%, so a significant tax cut for small businesses.

I want to come back to the convenience stores. The previous government had lots of opportunity to expand the purchase of beer and wine in convenience stores and never did it. It was our government that got it done.

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Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Minister, you mentioned increasing the income threshold that is eligible for the small business tax relief. Could you expand? I don't recall reading that there was an increase in the income threshold.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: That was done a couple of years ago. I'd defer to the deputy as to the specific timing. But the phase-in—we changed that. It's in one of my budgets, so I'll refer you back to one of my budgets.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Deputy, do you know if there was an increase to the income threshold?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Maybe the phase-in.

Mr. Gadi Mayman: The phase-in? I don't know. Maybe the—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Is there a tax person here we can ask?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I've been here a couple of years—four years now—and I don't recall there being an increase to the income threshold.

Mr. Chris Pearce: Good morning. Chris Pearce, assistant deputy minister for taxation policy.

I think, for the small business rate, there has been an increase to the phase-out rate. So for a small business to qualify for the preferential rate that the government of Ontario provides on small business income, the first \$500,000 worth of income qualifies for the small business rate. However, that rate phases out over time based on the taxable capital that the business has available on their balance sheet. That was increased from \$15 million to \$50 million.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you.

Minister, I'd like to move to housing now. We know that Ontario is not building enough homes to solve the affordability crisis. Housing starts have been declining long before US tariffs; they have been declining in Ontario for five years. This year's pace of construction of 66,000 is 34% below your government's peak of 101,000 units, so it's a significant decrease.

Ontario is building 4.1 homes per 1,000 residents, the second-lowest in the country, Minister, after Newfoundland and Labrador. Quebec is building 6.1 per 1,000; Alberta is 9.5 per 1,000, more than double what Ontario is building; BC is 7.5, almost double—so one and a half to two times the number of homes compared with Ontario.

Could you please explain why we can't get homes built and make housing more affordable for Ontarians?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, the evidence is coming in that, actually, construction activity and the movement of homes is happening. It's through a series of measures. I highlighted the HST 13% tax cut, which we championed with the federal government and got them to support. It's having the policy effect.

It's not just that aspect; it's also the development charge deal, which is a 10-year deal. You're seeing significant announcements, an \$8.8-billion announcement. Whether it's Mississauga—I think they're up in Barrie today—all parts of Hamilton, all parts of Ontario, municipalities are working together to stimulate the activity of building new homes.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I think, again, the reality is that your policies are not working. Ontario is building 4.1 homes compared to Quebec's 6.1 per 1,000 residents, Alberta's 9.5, BC's 7.5. So I think it's very clear that the Ontario government's plan to get housing built is not working and it's leaving young people very disappointed in their futures.

I want to move to health care. We've had some questioning this morning about health care and whether or not there will be cuts to services. I appreciate MPP Bell's line of questioning around that. It is, again, something that's of interest to the people of Ontario. This government, or the Conservatives, ran on ending hallway health care. In fact, it has gotten worse. We've now got closet health care; health care being done in closets in hospitals.

We know that we are hearing about layoffs of nurses, front-line workers. We're all wondering, how is that going to make health care better? We saw in Niagara Falls on Sunday that Ontario is on track to lose 2,500 nurses, 2,400 hospital beds, so I think that people have justification in being concerned about deterioration in our health care system.

We have a government that says they will balance the books and has missed that promise six times, Minister.

So, again, trying to reconcile the path to balance with cuts in our public health care worker numbers, how are we going to provide the health care that Ontarians need when we're cutting nurses and you've spent so much money that we are in deficits for the next few years?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It's so nice to see the Liberals and the NDP find a focus on a path to balance,

because we haven't heard that from those parties for a long, long time. It should be the aspiration of all governments of any stripe to respect taxpayers' money and not borrow and burden future generations.

Let's take a look at some of the facts to your question, MPP Bowman. Before we took over in 2018, over four years, the increase to the hospital budget was 8.7%; it's a little over 2% a year. Whereas over eight years—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Sorry, Chair—thank you. I would like the minister to answer the question about the cuts—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, I am answering the question. This is health care.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: —the current cuts to health care in terms of the nurses as well as the current projection around the path to balance.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): He is answering the question that he was asked. You may not like the answer. If you want him to stop, though, you can ask another question.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: And over the eight years, we've invested in hospitals to the tune of almost 60%, which is just over 7% a year. So there's a bunch of catch-up, but it also underscores our commitment to investing in health care. And that's as evidenced in the budget, the most recent budget, of a \$100-billion-plus investment in health care, up from \$54 billion—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Minister.

I'd like to move on to the spending on health care. You've heard me say, I'm sure, that never has a government spent so much to deliver so little—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Haven't heard that. Haven't heard that.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Well, you may be spending more—we're not getting the outcomes.

A billion dollars went to private nursing agencies because of your Bill 124, that drove nurses out of the profession. So we are hiring back those same nurses in hospitals at three times the cost. That is not a fiscally responsible use of taxpayer money.

The other thing I would like to just point out is that you talk about balanced budgets. This government has yet to table a balanced budget. The last time a budget was tabled that was balanced was during the Liberal government.

So I would like to just come back to: How will you balance the budget? When will you balance it? Will it be at the expense of health care for Ontarians?

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

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: For the record, Chair, if you look back, we did balance the budget—a \$2.1-billion surplus. Last year, it was a \$1.1-billion deficit; the previous year—\$600 million. So our fiscal track record is pretty good. But we're in the world we are in right now.

In terms of our health care investments, you heard from the Minister of Health yesterday, who's undertaking a massive investment and transformation of our health care, leaning into primary care. That is not an insignificant investment, to not only attach everyone to a family physician, but also to get access to that family physician—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair.

Just to, again, set the record straight here: What I was saying was that the government has not tabled a balanced budget. They have been lucky and got a couple of years of balance.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: So results don't matter?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: They have had a couple of years of balanced books, thanks to federal transfers and increase in tax revenues.

But my question was about—have you tabled a balanced budget? And the clear answer to that is no.

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you, Chair. I'll try to play by your rules and speak through you.

I was heartened when I came in that the minister mentioned investments in moving people around. I apologize for being tardy this morning, but traffic was murder and—no accidents, sheer volume. I digress.

It does lead me to my first line of questioning about municipal support programs. We know that they're increasing by \$34.1 million this year. I'm curious about how much of that increase is going directly to municipalities through the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund and how much is attributed to other municipal programs.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, MPP Brady, for your work and that question. And I'm sorry you had to go through the congestion. But of course, we're building so much in Ontario: highways, transit, condos, housing, like this province hasn't seen in a long time.

In terms of the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund, she's absolutely right. We increased that from half a billion to \$600 million—so, a 20% increase. Of course, that predominantly benefits rural communities across Ontario. A lot of that money is going to rural communities to help them with infrastructure and other types of funding that they require.

Of course, we have the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund, which we doubled five years ago.

And of course, of the \$8.8 billion in the development charge fund that we are working on together with the federal government, over a billion has been carved out for rural communities. So we very much value a number of our communities outside of urban centres. It's not "either/or" in this province—I mean, it's "and." We're trying to help all 444 municipalities.

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Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I'm curious whether the minister can tell me how the ministry determines whether municipal funding is keeping pace with the actual cost pressures that our municipalities are facing for infrastructure like roads, bridges, water, waste water and other infrastructure. I'm continuously hearing from both of my counties that they are underfunded, and I'm just curious—can you tell us if that is accurate?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: No, that's not. But it's their job to advocate for more funding, and that's exactly the right thing to be doing. That's why we have not only the Association of Municipalities of Ontario meetings, so we have tremendous access to all government, cabinet minis-

ters and caucus members—we do the rural Ontario. We all attend. We've been having a record amount of delegations.

As I said, in AMO, just recently in August, the increase in funding for municipalities has been 60%. That's the largest increase to municipalities in terms of transfers, I believe, in the history of Ontario—since 1867. So, significant support, and it's not just the transfers; there are a lot of non-specific transfers in communities: building hospitals, building schools, building a lot of other things—roads, as you mentioned—that aren't even part of that 60% increase over the last six years.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Does the ministry have a measure of the infrastructure gap that we are facing across municipalities, and if so—we know that it's a provincial/federal duty to fill that gap, but what is our provincial share?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, first off, I think it's fair to say—and I don't have the figures right at my fingertips—that we have a chronic infrastructure deficit that we faced for decades and decades and decades. And it's this government that's trying to tackle that issue not just with new builds, but also state of good repair. So we've put in unprecedented amounts—over \$30 billion in our last budget—in our capital plan just for roads, bridges and highways, in addition to some of the supports that I just mentioned.

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

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Also, to invest in municipal infrastructure through what we call the housing-enabling waste water and sewage facility. There are multiple areas where municipalities—because not every municipality has the same need, or some don't have development charges. We programmed it so that there are multiple access points for those types of funds—for rural, suburban, urban type of municipalities.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: There's this idea that municipalities are punished, depending on who their member of Parliament is. Can you please comment on that?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I'm not aware of that.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Municipalities are funded based on need; not on who represents the riding?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Absolutely. And we have an objective public service who adjudicates. We set the parameters of the program, and they adjudicate the distribution of the funds, regardless of—

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

We'll now go to MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you, Minister, for being here this morning to speak with the committee.

I would like to ask you about credit ratings and Ontario's fiscal position. When I go out and about in Wellington-Halton Hills I hear from everybody, and they want government to be good stewards of taxpayers' money. I will always stand up, defend and advocate for the hard-working taxpayers of this province, and I know you do the same in your role.

The members of the opposition, Chair, can comment from the sidelines, but when you look at the record, it's clear.

Like you mentioned, Minister—two credit rating upgrades Ontario has received under this government, compared to downgrades under the previous government. We won't even talk about the Rae days.

My question to you about those credit ratings: Could you explain what factors credit rating agencies consider when assessing Ontario, and why maintaining strong credit ratings matters to the taxpayers of Wellington–Halton Hills?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you for your leadership in your riding, and thank you for inviting me to the chamber of commerce there. I think I was the first Minister of Finance in some time to go visit the chamber and the small businesses that represent your community. Thank you for your service.

I led a credit rating agency, so I know how they think not just here in Canada, but globally. It's important that you start with a plan. Do you have a credible plan? Number two, do you execute against that plan? And number three, what is the evidence of the fiscal management? It doesn't happen overnight.

That's why, in 2009, after six years of the previous Liberal government being in power, the credit rating agency I worked for at the time downgraded the credit rating of Ontario—and it wasn't just the company I worked for; the other credit rating agencies did the same thing, repeatedly. At the same time, taxes were going up and credit ratings were going down. Our government has done just the opposite. Taxes are going down and credit rating is going up.

I've had the privilege to be in this chair for a number of years and table a number of budgets. That credibility, that stability, that vision of a plan and executing of that plan are extremely important to not just credit rating agencies, but markets—the people who want to get their money back. And not only do they want to get their money back; they want to get it with a coupon. I want it to be the smallest coupon possible.

We're blessed that in the 30-year term, no other province borrows as cheaply as we do—in fact, for many years now. And the deputy was the former head of the Ontario Financing Authority—issued a significant amount of 30-year bonds. Not every country or subnational can actually borrow for 30 years. But Ontario not only borrowed in the 30-year term successfully, not only did a third of the borrowing, particularly each year, particularly when interest rates were at 100-year lows—so good forward fiscal prudence and management—but also at the lowest spreads that we've seen in decades here in Ontario. As I said in public accounts, the interest expense was \$700 million lower than was forecasted, and that's through a confluence of actions, not least of which is prudent management of the liquidity of the province.

But I would also highlight another thing that is important to credit rating agencies and markets: your ability to borrow money around the world.

For the first time in the history of the province, the province of Ontario was able to issue 30-year bonds in the euro market—so, issued and denominated in European

currency at very attractive rates. Just think of that: Because of the credit upgrades and the pool of investors fostered over time, building relationships and credibility—they're not only wanting to get a return on that 30, but they want their money back in 30 years, and they believe in Ontario, that there it's a stable rule of law, a credible fiscal plan and a credible economy going forward. So it's not just the credit rating—but it's a good measure of credible, independent views of the creditworthiness of Ontario. And we're going in the right direction. You look across Canada; many provinces are going the other way. We see in parts of Canada that it's potentially even an election issue. So we have to respect taxpayers' money. We have to think about future generations and the debt burden.

I will end on this: We have reduced the debt. I know it hurts for the opposition to hear that. They like to look at the absolute number, but everybody, and I mean everybody—the trillions who borrow money—knows that it's, what are you using the money for, and in relation to what? Your economy. And on those metrics, the vast majority of our borrowings have been to borrow for infrastructure. Also, everybody knows that to build the Ontario Line—you have to borrow that money up front, and it's for the benefit for future generations. So we're able to access those markets at the lowest borrowing rates. The vast majority of our borrowings are for infrastructure, which is helping today's generation and future generations.

That's why, in part, credit ratings matter so much. It's a vote of confidence in the fiscal and economic management of the province.

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

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you for your presentation. Thank you for being here, and thank you for your leadership and passion for Ontario. You are almost neighbouring my riding. I watch your leadership and your activities, not only for Durham, but for Ontarians. They are counting on you.

Minister, I would also thank your wonderful team and deputy minister and all your teams here—and ministry staff as well.

My question is in regard to affordability.

Minister, you know that one of the most important, pressing issues Ontarians are facing is the rising costs and affordability. Whether its groceries or going to the gas pump or when you are paying the bills, we understand families are feeling the pinch at their house. They are expecting our government to do more and support them. I know we are doing so many things in different areas to bring affordability to families.

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Can you tell us what are some of the most impactful affordability measures that we have taken in recent years, and how were we able to afford them?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you, MPP Kanapathi, for your leadership in your riding and for your constituents. I've seen you in action, and you are relentless in supporting your constituents. And I know that first-hand because you come and talk to me a lot about championing for your constituents.

I think you raise a fundamental point, because when we talk about debt and we talk about deficits and we talk about big numbers, many people go exactly to your point—they do in Pickering, they do in Markham, they do right across Ontario: the cost of living, the cost of gas, the cost of housing, the cost of food. It's a challenging environment, and we understand that.

If we look just in Durham, for example, right next to your riding—the member opposite mentioned building the 407 East. What you forgot to mention is, they put tolls on it.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: What about the tolls?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: And 412 and 418—the only tolls in all of Ontario; 16 million people—and put that on the burden of 700,000 people in Durham. They didn't do it anywhere else. They didn't do it in Mississauga when they were building those and all the other highways she was talking about. That's real money for people, and taking the tolls off has saved literally thousands of dollars.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: It's \$17,000 a year.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It's a massive amount, putting money back in people's pockets. This is a local issue, because nowhere else in Ontario did the burden of tolls hit individuals.

But do you know what else helped? In 2022, when this government had the vision and the leadership to cut the gas tax when no one else was cutting the gas tax—and we made it permanent well before anybody else. Again, I think the federal government follows our playbook quite a bit because they've just announced another extension of their temporary gas tax cut; of course, I and the Premier have advocated that they make it permanent because the cost of living matters today—not tomorrow, not yesterday; it matters today.

These are some of the measures that are so important. We can go beyond that.

We moved early to reduce the cost of fees when renewing your registration sticker. We made that move. That's not a tax. That's a fee.

The previous government kept upping and upping and upping the fees, to try to take more money out of the pockets of hard-working families.

The gas tax cut also helps businesses, particularly in food, because it's a big component of food affordability and production of food—going to the grocery store to pick up the food and put it in the trunk or carry it home. That's just one example on affordability.

We've talked about the HST cut to make homes more affordable for people. That's up to \$130,000 for the average price of a home, which is not far off a million dollars in this province. That's a lot of money. First of all, a million dollars is a staggering amount of money. But a saving of \$130,000—that is also real money for real people on the dream of home ownership, and it took this government to convince the federal government to join us, because our HST is linked. To the federal government's credit, they listened to us—but not just on the HST cut, because we said, "While we're at it, let's do development charges," and they agreed, where we have a 50%-50% cost-sharing

on reducing development charges so more homes will be built. You're seeing announcement after announcement by community, whether it's Hamilton or Barrie or Mississauga, or right across Ontario. I can't keep up with Minister Flack and the number of announcements with the federal government. Let me tell you, when you work together on the cost of living and when you work together on affordability and get housing built, that helps people in their day-to-day lives. So we'll continue to look at all aspects of affordability.

I will end on this: the most vulnerable. Did you know, MPP Kanapathi—and I know you do—that since the Ontario Disability Support Program was put in place, it wasn't indexed to inflation; or the Guaranteed Annual Income System for low-income seniors was not indexed to inflation? We are the first government to index those payments to inflation, to give our most vulnerable people in Ontario a fighting chance. There's always more to do, but it was this government who put more money in the pockets of the most vulnerable in Ontario. And we will continue doing that.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Minister, for bringing all the hopefulness to us and to the committee and the people of Ontario.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: Minister, we've talked about some absolutes, and there have been—I'll refer to it as "inside baseball"—conversations about credit ratings, about debt ratios and so on. There are people who are watching this who aren't economists—it's just the average person.

I'm going to make an analogy, and can you let me know if I'm correct on it and expand on it a little bit?

I bought my first house in 1990. My interest rate was 15.75%, and my debt ratio when I bought that house was at 40%. I only paid \$75,000 for it. I borrowed \$60,000 when I bought it. Before I got into politics, I bought a house in Peterborough. I paid \$310,000 for it. My interest rate was 3%, and I borrowed about \$150,000. So I owed \$120,000 more, but my debt ratio was only 27%. When I look at it from the perspective of the average person, the average person who has been able to buy a house understands those numbers.

When we're talking about the provincial debt and credit ratings and so on, is it fair to say that it's similar to the investment in a house, when the interest rate on your mortgage goes way down? You might borrow a little bit more money to buy that next home, and your debt-to-income is similar to debt-to-GDP, because GDP is effectively how we measure the income for the province.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: Is that a similar or a fair analogy—to say it's like having the mortgage on your house and that you're in a better place, even though you might owe a little bit more money?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I think it's a perfect analogy. You want to keep your borrowing costs as low as possible.

I think about the progress that we've made. In the year that we took over, the previous years, the average 10-year yield—and this is maybe also complicated, getting into the

weeds—it was 1.79%; it's now almost 4% for 10-year yield. Yet we have some of the lowest interest and borrowing costs in the last few decades. That's through good fiscal management.

Any household knows that if they can pay less interest, they'll have more money to pay down the principal, more money to take their kids to a movie or go on a vacation. And that's what we've been striving to work on every single day since we got elected in 2018—

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

MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I want to just clean up some of the loose ends that we've been pursuing a little bit with the previous rounds of questioning.

My first question is to the Deputy Minister of Finance, Mr. Mayman, and it's just to clarify: Of the 18 companies that have received funding, how many of them are US-owned?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: I don't have that data. But the most important point is that they're Ontario-based and they employ Ontario employees.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I would like that that information be shared with this committee at a future date.

Mr. Gadi Mayman: I would think that the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, which has oversight of that program, would be the better one to ask for that.

Ms. Jessica Bell: When I ask that question and I don't get an answer, I'm left to conclude that there are some companies in that list of 18 companies that are US-owned. That's my natural conclusion, because if they were all Ontario-based and Ontario-owned, I believe you'd be proud to say that they were. That's the natural conclusion I have from the response that you've given me. Is that reasonable?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: No, because I would suggest that that would be a question that would be better directed to the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade, in that they're the ones that have oversight of the program.

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I'm giving you this answer because I do not know the breakdown of ownership; not because I have a suspicion that one or more are owned by American or other foreign companies.

Ms. Jessica Bell: But the Ministry of Finance does have some say over this program as well, correct?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: And in creating the program, the purpose was to support Ontario-based companies to ensure that they could make it through—if they are companies that could otherwise have continued to survive and thrive and employ Ontarians, that they would be able to continue to make it through in spite of the trade war.

Ms. Jessica Bell: But you did come here with specific information about this program, correct?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: I have.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Do you know the names of some of the companies that have received funding?

Mr. Gadi Mayman: I know the name of one of the companies that received funding, because we were involved in that directly at the Ministry of Finance. We were not involved directly in the assessment of the other companies that applied.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay.

I want to go back to the question around balancing the budget in 2028-29. Is the government looking at increasing taxes to achieve this small surplus by 2028-29?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It's the same question; I think you're going to get the same answer. Deficits are not desirable in the long term. Our goal is to balance. We'll update our numbers in the fall economic statement.

Again, this is the environment we're in right now. We just posted a \$13-billion deficit, which at one point was \$6 billion lower than the \$14.6 billion we had projected in budget 2025.

I think that's what the people of Ontario elected us to do—to be good stewards of the taxpayer money. I've just highlighted numerous examples where we've put more money back in the pockets of people, in part to help with the cost of living and affordability—really significant, literally billions of dollars back into their pockets.

We've also put money back in the pockets of businesses, including through the \$30-billion tariff support program to help businesses navigate the tariff-impacted environment that we're in.

We're going to continue to focus on being prudent with taxpayer money. We're going to continue to update those numbers, as we do every 90 days.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I didn't get an answer the first time I asked the question, and then I didn't get an answer the second time I asked the question.

I'm looking at the budget. Do you honestly think that you are going to balance the budget by 2028-29?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: We work on updating the forecasts four times a year. We just did the first quarter results in August. We're in September, so less than 45 days ago, I updated the projections for the fiscal year, and those are the numbers.

We'll be updating the second quarter through the fall economic statement, so that will be another opportunity to look at our projections for the future.

Of course, we're in an environment that's very fluid right now.

Ms. Jessica Bell: So how—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: MPP Bell, you have to admit that we're in a pretty fluid environment, and even if we weren't—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Through the Chair—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: —you would have to wait for the fall economic statement.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Further questions?

Ms. Jessica Bell: The budget comes out; we all read the budget; we assume the numbers are accurate.

How confident are you that we will reach a balanced budget by 2028-29?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: We're going to do everything we can to achieve our goals. But as I've said numerous times, the world has changed and you have to acknowledge that. The tariff policies from the United States change. Just today—tonight—there's a new set of tariffs; a ban on certain products is going to go into effect.

What the people of Ontario want, MPP Bell, is a government that speaks to them frequently, updates the numbers frequently, and has a credible plan. And we have that credible plan. We've defended that plan, and—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Minister, I agree. I think that Ontarians want fiscal responsibility and good public services.

That's why when I come here today and I ask really basic questions around, "Do your numbers add up? How are you going to generate revenue and pay for all these services?"—you're not giving me any answers that give me credibility that the numbers add up. And when I ask you straight up, "Do you actually think you're going to balance a budget by 2028-29?", you can't answer the question. You refuse to answer the question. So I question whether you yourself even believe your own numbers.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: With respect, Chair, I've answered the question. She just doesn't like the answer.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I didn't get a specific answer.

I want to talk about interest rates. The reason I am looking at interest is because there is a serious consequence to not paying the debt.

My first question to you is, what will Ontario pay in interest on our debt in 2026-27? How much are we paying to have this amount of debt?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I don't have my glasses on, but I believe it's about \$17 billion.

Ms. Jessica Bell: That's a lot of money.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It's \$17.2 billion—now that my glasses are on—

Ms. Jessica Bell: It's \$17.337 billion.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: —which is in the budget that you're referencing over and over again, with facts and numbers.

Ms. Jessica Bell: And you stand by that number, but not the other one?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: No, I stand by the numbers that were printed in the 2026 budget that we updated in the first quarter, that we'll be updating in the second quarter and so forth, in a very transparent way.

Ms. Jessica Bell: How much interest, Minister, are we going to pay on our debt in 2029-30?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: MPP Bell, do you know what interest rates are going to do tomorrow?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Well, there's a projection, and I'm curious to know if you know what that projection is.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: A point in time—I'll ask the deputy—I think our forecasted average borrowing rate is 4.1%. As you know, around the world interest rates have been gapping up; that's through external forces. I mentioned that our 10-year rate is about 4%; the US rate is over 5%, so it's a big difference. But what really matters is that we, in that context, have a good fiscal plan.

Let me just say that, through our actions repeatedly to manage taxpayer money in a prudent way, we have one of

the strongest balance sheets we've had in decades so that we can withstand global impacts to our fiscal situation.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Interest payments, going by projections, by 2028-29 will be \$19.7 billion. It's going up. It's a lot of money. In fact, the FAO projects debt servicing to be the fastest-growing major spending area, above everything else. It's going up 8% a year, more than double everything else. Do you think that's a concern?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Global interest rates: Can you tell me where global interest rates are going to be tomorrow? This is where prudent fiscal management and—I can't underscore the point enough—issuing 30-year bonds takes the refinancing risk of a third of the portfolio out of the equation. For people at home, what does that mean? That means lower borrowing costs, lower risk so that we have the fiscal firepower to be able to adapt to current events. The world is a pretty turbulent place right now.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Let's talk about this issue, around what would happen if interest rates went up. If interest rates went up, what impact would that have on how much we pay in interest and how much we have in debt? What are some estimates here?

Maybe this is a question for the deputy minister.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I can kick off, and maybe the deputy, if he's so inclined, can weigh in. But we do—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm specifically asking you, how do you prepare—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: MPP Bell, you've got a government that is transparent every 90 days, for eight and a half years. That's coming up to 34 quarters that we've been out every 90 days.

We provide the sensitivities to interest rate moves in the budget—so we say "if interest rates were higher" or "if interest rates were lower." And we also give a scenario or a calculation of what each 1% change in interest rates costs. It's probably about \$700 million, maybe a bit more.

Mr. Gadi Mayman: It would be \$0.9 billion, but that would be in the absence of any change in the borrowing strategy that the province would undertake. And given that the province has issued, as the minister had said, almost a third of its debt in a 30-year term, that gives flexibility. As the yield curve goes up—so as the interest rates go up—there's flexibility that the Ontario Financing Authority, which borrows on behalf of the government, can choose where it can meet investors best. It can go to lower interest rates, a shorter-term borrowing program, because there's so much flexibility that has been built in. So, the raw number, if nothing else were to change, would be up by \$900 million if interest rates were to go up by 1%. But I would not say that the Ontario Financing Authority would not respond to that and find ways to save, as it has over the last number of years.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Help me out here: With the \$900 million—that would be the increase in the cost of paying back the debt each year?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: That's the borrowing cost. Don't forget, if it goes down 100 basis points, that's \$900 million lower—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm hoping. My mortgage is up for renewal, but I'm not sure—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One at a time.
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Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: These are the facts. In the public accounts, the interest cost was over \$700 million lower than we had forecast in the 2025 budget. It goes both ways. But it's prudent disclosure to say, "If it goes up or down, this is the impact on the borrowing cost."

Ms. Jessica Bell: Yes, I did look at the impact of an increase or a decrease in interest rates on our budget and also on our debt. As you can imagine, some of the numbers, when you project it out, can be pretty alarming.

What worries me is that tough economic times could be ahead for us. Interest rates could go up. And I'm worried that the government is not doing enough to prepare us for these tough times, given that we already have a lot of debt and we're already paying a lot of money on interest.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, you should be very happy this government is in charge, because we lowered the debt burden. MPP Bell, in 2024-25, the debt-to-GDP was 35.7%, the lowest in over a decade—in the public accounts we just published, 36.5%. We haven't seen debt-to-GDP numbers like that in over a decade. When we came into power, it was 39.2%.

The external environment is what's putting pressure on those numbers. What's mitigating the external pressure is our plan and our fiscal management. And if we hadn't taken those actions, then we'd be in a lot worse trouble, like in the 1990s and in parts of the 2000s.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I think that's pretty much the conclusion to the questions that I have for you.

What I take away from these conversations is that—I asked you some really practical questions around, "Are you going to address our debt? How are you going to do that?" What I take away from this is that there's a real reluctance to share some basic information about what the plan is, and I am left to conclude that the government is not engaging in fiscal responsibility and that you are bad with our money.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, you can say that. I don't think anyone believes that.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm not sure. Buying those private jets?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Further questions?

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm concluding.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): You have 1.1 minutes left.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Can I take up the 1.1—I bet you not.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If the member doesn't want it—MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I'd like to continue the conversation around the interest expense.

Certainly, when the Conservatives were in opposition, the finance critic at the time did like to talk about the absolute numbers.

So, coming back to that absolute number—the "half-trillion-dollar man"—debt interest costs will grow 8% per year, on average, where we've got education only growing

by 3%. And we know that investing in education is so critical to the economy.

I wonder if you could talk about how you feel about that disproportionate rise in interest costs, compared to the investments that you'll be able to make in things like education, which are so important for our economy.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: That is why it's so important to have a good fiscal plan.

You will recall, MPP Bowman, in 2017 the average 10-year rate was 1.79%; today it's 4%. That's just the government of Canada yield.

The world has changed. Interest rates are higher. But by issuing 30-year bonds, by borrowing primarily for infrastructure, by reducing the deficits significantly over the last four years, by having a fiscal plan and an economic plan to deal with the challenges—the \$220 billion in infrastructure spending: That's real jobs, construction jobs. The nuclear in my riding—those are real jobs, whether you're an engineer or a skilled trade.

You should come out to some of these events and see the support we get for investing in people's lives and in infrastructure that's going to pay off down the road.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: You talk about jobs, Minister, and sadly, the unemployment rate in Ontario has been rising under your government, long before US tariffs. It was around 5.8% when you took office, and it has been up over 7%. We've got the second-highest—it has been the highest at times—youth unemployment rate in the country.

I certainly hear from my constituents that people are worried. They're worried about their futures. They're worried about being able to find a job.

I'm wondering if you could comment on how the investments that you're trying to attract, which are actually below what they have been in the past, will create jobs for those young people.

I tabled a youth career fund this year. That was defeated.

So I don't see any concrete action this government is taking to actually help young people find work in this province.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: What I hear from young people all the time is that they want an opportunity.

We're making significant investments in education. Clearly, in the post-secondary, investing in STEM and skilled trades and the like is investing in the jobs of not only tomorrow, but today.

What we do see is that the unemployment rate has gone below 7%; it's coming down—so 6.9%.

At the same time, fortunately, we have many tools at our disposal that we're acting on, like interprovincial trade. We're leading the country and removing barriers. You would appreciate us joining the passport system. For the first time in a couple of decades, a finance minister in Ontario has agreed to join other provinces, cut red tape, cut barriers so companies can access capital more efficiently in this province.

We're also the first province to get rid of all party-specific exemptions to our Canadian Free Trade Agreement. No other government in Canada that I'm aware of

has done the same thing through legislation so that we can have free trade in Canada.

And finally, on the internal trade, we've removed barriers for the purchase and sale of alcohol in this province.

This is what the youth look at: job opportunities, education, good-paying jobs through infrastructure and the support of this government.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: And yet, despite all of that rhetoric, I will call it, we've not had a long-term unemployment rate in this province below the national average since 2022. So long-term unemployment is a challenge and people are feeling it.

I want to turn back to alcohol. You talked about the alcohol being in convenience stores. I will remind taxpayers how much money that costs them. If you had waited just one year longer, it would have cost taxpayers zero dollars to get that alcohol into stores. Instead, you cancelled a contract, and taxpayers were on the hook for between \$1 billion and \$1.4 billion. I don't think that's a fiscally responsible use of taxpayer money.

You mentioned, in your opening remarks, the plan for homeroom teachers to get some money, which came out of the education budget—it was not new money—to buy supplies. You gave that as a sole-source contract to an American-owned company, Staples. I'm wondering if you could comment on how that helps Ontario businesses. And why did you not allow for there to be a competitive process when, in your own RFPs, you are talking about making sure that we are buying effectively and using taxpayer dollars effectively? I hear teachers talking about how the crayons that they buy through that website are three or four times as much as they could buy them from a local dollar store. So how is that a good use of taxpayer money?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: On the first question: You say, "Why didn't you wait a year?" People have been waiting a hundred years. They're tired of waiting to open up choice and convenience in the alcohol system. And I've heard from over 5,000—we've opened it up.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: You certainly could have waited one more year, then, and saved a billion dollars.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Your government didn't open it up completely—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: We opened up, yes.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: You didn't open it up, didn't get it done.

I've talked to the convenience stores—many—and there are some 5,000 that now can distribute wine and beer. They tell me their revenues are way up. They've been able to hire more people. MPP Bowman, they've been waiting a long time. Independent grocers have been waiting a long time. The world hasn't fallen apart, and I will see what the numbers say, but I think the job creation and GDP will have gone up. Certainly, hearing from the convenience stores, their revenues are up. They say it's a game changer.

On the second point, my understanding is that it was a competitive procurement. It was the best deal, according to the minister. I'd remind you that the company involved has 10,000 employees in Canada, of which a significant

amount are in Ontario. So go talk to those Canadian workers, Ontario workers who support work in that business. Just because they're owned by another, we're not going to say, "The market economy is going to shut down. You can't open a business in Ontario because you're from somewhere else." That's not how the market works. These are Canadian jobs. These are Ontarian jobs. It was a competitive process.

I think it really is benefiting teachers. We're hearing from a lot of teachers who are very thankful; who had to, for many years, out of their own pocket, pay for these supplies. They now have the support of this government to be able to buy those supplies through that \$750 card.

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Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Yes, and they're buying those supplies at three to four times—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: No, you're picking one example out of a thousand.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman:—what it would cost if they bought somewhere else.

I'll move on, though, Chair.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Not fair.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Back to unemployment: More than 600,000 workers in Ontario are still unemployed—young workers are 200,000 of that total. I want to just again highlight that some of the plans that you've been talking about are clearly not working for those workers. We've got young people moving to Alberta, to Nova Scotia, to the US, to the territories to find work—more people leaving Ontario than coming to Ontario. So I think we need to be transparent with Ontarians about that.

I want to come back to transparency. We know that you talk about transparency. But we've got, under your government, significant changes to the freedom-of-information laws, which have some significantly limited transparency. We've got deals like the settlement with Craft Kingmen Rail (East). We don't know the amount of money; the opposition has been asking for how much that was. I would say that transparency scores are pretty low under this government.

So I will give you a chance here. Could you share how much the settlement to Craft Kingmen Rail (East) was in the estimate for that this year?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I'm going to just touch for a second on the first: Unemployment, at 6.9%, is down 0.8% this year—one million new jobs since 2018, and 119,000 new jobs created just this year to date.

On the FOI: I don't have any specifics on what you're referring to.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Yes, it's interesting; no one seems to have the specifics. This government sent a cheque for probably at least \$120 million to Craft Kingmen Rail (East), owned by a friend of the Premier, and yet no one seems to be able to answer this question. We've asked it in the Legislature. I'm asking it again here, because it should be in the estimates. How much money is going—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: In the finance estimates?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Absolutely. Why not?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Why not? It's not—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: You're the finance minister. You are responsible for the books of the province, and I think someone from the government should be able to answer that question.

So I'll give you another chance. Can you tell us how much taxpayer money went to settle that lawsuit?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: That's not in my ministry. I don't know that file, and I don't have the specifics. I assume it's in—I'm not even sure which ministry it would be in, but you're free to ask them.

On your point about transparency: I'm out all the time in front of the media. In fact, I did a press conference on Thursday; I did one on Friday. I'll probably see some media outside after here. I'm out every 90 days. I'm here today. I'm going to be out on the fall economic statement shortly. We just did public accounts. I can't think of another example of transparency at that level, of any government.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I guess the Auditor General, when talking about the Skills Development Fund—just to remind everybody, billions of dollars of taxpayer money ran through a process that she called not fair, not transparent, not accountable.

I certainly think there is room for improvement on the scores around transparency. I'm sure in your heart of hearts, Minister, you would agree with that.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I'll agree with her nine clean opinions in my heart.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Will you agree that the process for the Skills Development Fund was not transparent?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: That is a process that's ongoing and that benefited numerous workers in this province, so I think it has been a tremendous success.

And do you know what? We're not going to relent in helping workers retrain and reskill in this province—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair.

The minister would like to accept one finding of the Auditor General and doesn't want to acknowledge the other. The Auditor General said the process for the Skills Development Fund was not transparent, not fair, not accountable.

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: We're discussing the estimates for the Ministry of Finance.

I understand that the member has been a member for—this is her second term. Perhaps protocol could give her a briefing on how estimates work, because she hasn't learned in the four-plus years that she has been here so far.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I would refer that the discussion that has been taking place is a discussion across—but it was agreed to by both participants. So it's not a point of order.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I would ask that member Smith maybe not talk about my ability to ask questions here.

I think I am a capable member of provincial Parliament, and I would respectfully ask that you withdraw those remarks.

Mr. Dave Smith: No.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Let's move back to transparency, because the minister talked about it. As I said, the Auditor General, who he likes to reference on a regular basis, called the Skills Development Fund process not transparent and not accountable.

So, back to your point, Minister, about being transparent: Why will this government not be transparent about some of the numbers that this government has spent on things like Craft Kingsmen Rail (East)?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: MPP Bowman, you had the minister in charge here yesterday. That's the appropriate minister to ask those questions to and to reflect on those answers.

I'm here to say the audit, which I sign off on—I'm part of that process. This is my ninth time on that audit. I'm very proud of the nine unqualified opinions. I'd remind you that the previous Liberal government had two qualified opinions—not clean. Other provinces, even as we speak, don't have clean audit opinions. So I'm very proud of that fact.

Back to transparency: I don't think you've had a Minister of Finance in a long time—certainly not in the previous government—that's out every 90 days.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Well, again, coming out every 90 days—it's a point in time, as you like to refer, Minister.

I think taxpayers deserve answers to questions that their representatives are asking. And we do not have answers to questions around things like what the government is spending on certain things, like that settlement that I referred to.

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: We still do not have an answer today on how much money has actually gone out the door for the tariff relief. The government likes to stand in front of the cameras and talk about a big number, but the actual amount, from what I'm hearing today, is actually quite small.

We know that small businesses here in this province are hurting. Small businesses under this government are closing at a faster rate than they're opening. We used to have 66% of private sector jobs coming from small business; it's now down to 60%. I think expanding eligibility for the programs that you have in place to small businesses with under \$2 million in sales and fewer than 10 employees would be a way to meaningfully support those businesses through these very troubling economic times.

I would like to just get a sense of how much money is actually going out the door—we see here in the numbers that it's like \$1,000. Basically, the Protect Ontario financing account is simply a vehicle for liquidity, and it's getting repaid. What are we actually spending and investing here in Ontario?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): That concludes the time.

We'll now go to MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I was heartened that the minister, in earlier remarks, said that he wants to set families up for success.

In my riding of Haldimand–Norfolk, parents cannot access child care spaces, and spots for care are not keeping

pace with the needs, especially in rural communities. Families tell me it's hard to stay in town when they see spots opening in urban, larger areas. And that's a concern for an area like mine.

We know that this government has signed a \$3.6-billion extension of CWELCC. But we're nowhere near the promised \$10 a day—parents are telling me they're paying somewhere between \$19 and \$22. I'm looking at the numbers in estimates, and I'm hard-pressed to understand or find what the financial commitment is from this government over the coming months to move us closer to that cute “\$10 a Day” slogan.

Can you tell me exactly what the government's commitment is to CWELCC right now?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: MPP Brady, as you know, the federal government made certain financial commitments; they expire. And our minister has been very clear: If the federal government doesn't stand up to their commitments and support those commitments that they made to us, the impact will be on the child care costs.

Our government is funding those child care spaces. We're building a significant amount of child care spaces.

The federal government also has a number of other time-limited investments in mental health and home care that are expiring in a few months—and the mental health has only grown in need over the years.

This is precisely not the time for the federal government to walk away from child care commitments, walk away from mental health funding commitments, and impacting our most vulnerable and seniors' commitments through home care.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I agree with all that.

You did say that the province is funding spaces. To what tune are we funding those spaces?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: You'd have to ask the Minister of Education specifically, but I do know that we have—I believe it is a \$30-billion education capital plan. I'll ask the deputy minister to fact-check me as we're talking. And that plan is, MPP Brady, really focused on building new schools, repairing schools, and adding child care spaces.

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I've made a number of announcements in my riding—and I'm sure you have too, in your riding—where there are new child care spaces.

I've got to tell you, for a decade, there were no new schools being built—certain district school boards didn't build anything—and our population was growing.

Communities are welcoming our building plan. It's significant—I believe it's \$30 billion, and that is part of our 10-year capital plan. We're going to continue and invest not only in those new schools, but also in the child care spaces that are necessary.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I would love to see some of those new schools in Haldimand–Norfolk, with child care spaces.

I will move on, though.

The Protect Ontario Account Investment Fund—I apologize; I might have missed initial questions on this subject: I personally believe this is a significant departure

from government simply providing grants or subsidies. I feel that we're putting public capital at risk with the expectation of generating an economic return. I do understand that if companies scale up and they are profitable, then it's a win for the taxpayer, but we know high-growth sectors also carry high commercial failure rates.

Can you please tell us who ultimately bears the investment risk if these investments don't perform?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Well, the taxpayer, obviously. But this is the time to support those businesses, and I think the taxpayers believe that we're very prudent in providing liquidity support to those businesses. We continue to support workers.

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

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Again, MPP Brady, it's not just the Protect Ontario funding program, which has been very successful—because numerous companies have applied and, as you've said, they're getting approved. But we don't know what's around the corner. We didn't know 338s would be a tool that would be used. So we've expanded the number of companies that can qualify. The deputy minister talked about receiving and working through applications.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Surely to goodness the government would have done an analysis of the expected return on investment on that \$4 billion. Do we have a number?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: You're talking about the \$4 billion. We haven't launched the \$4 billion. We're monitoring the situation.

Our plan is to continue to protect workers. It's our top priority. We want to make sure that we've got the appropriate programs for the appropriate industries that are impacted.

If we had talked, I don't know, a couple of months ago—there was no ban on certain products. There was no 50% tariff on certain industries—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you. Your time is up.

We'll now go to MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you, Minister. Listening to your very thoughtful responses this morning, I come away feeling very confident and thankful that we have a Progressive Conservative government here in the province of Ontario to guide us through COVID, and now this tariff war, setting us up for financial success and stability going forward. I'm really, really encouraged by the comments.

We do have a deficit, and it has been referenced today. But as you mentioned, really, that deficit—what is it we're using that money for? It's infrastructure.

In my riding alone, we've announced \$9 million to expand St. Mary elementary school, \$2.5 million to expand Sacred Heart elementary school in Rockwood, \$6.6 million for water and waste water infrastructure in Centre Wellington. These are just a few of the things that have been happening in my riding in the last 12 months.

Minister, I was wondering if you could speak more about our historic capital plan to build a better Ontario for the future.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It's heartwarming to hear of those examples in your riding, because that's impacting people's lives.

Just to finish, because I ran out of time—it's a range, a suite of things that we're providing businesses and families to protect Ontario.

I do want to talk about the Ontario Together Trade Fund. That has helped 89 companies pivot and refocus to new markets, to reshore, invest in capital. And it has created—those companies—a billion dollars of investments and 10,000 new jobs. Think about that for a second. That's part of the Protect Ontario plan—10,000 jobs, \$1 billion of capital investments, to position them for future growth, given the tariff-impacted economy.

In terms of the infrastructure plan, when you add the private sector investment plus our public sector investments, \$235 billion—one thing I've learned over the years is that you don't slow down—good times, bad times; keep building. There are a lot of people who want to come to this great province, a lot of people who want to come to this great country, but we have to have the schools; we have to have the hospitals; we have to have the long-term-care homes; we have to have the highways and the transit to move people. That's what a responsible government does.

The shortfall of funding—no one questions the infrastructure deficit, but it's this government who took action, and meaningful, impactful action. We're talking about almost a quarter of a trillion just on the government's balance sheet, to invest in infrastructure.

We had the foresight to launch the Building Ontario Fund, our version of an infrastructure bank, and they've gotten up and running. They've done transactions in student housing. They've done transactions in affordable housing in places like Scarborough and Trent, and parts right across Ontario in long-term care. This is getting stuff built. I see the member from Peterborough smiling because he's happy to hear about Trent. Student housing is really important. But it goes beyond that.

I've been involved in a number of announcements with a number of First Nations, like in the Bruce Peninsula for the isotopes—a partnership with the Saugeen Ojibways, through the Indigenous Opportunities Financing Program, to do shared economic benefit for everybody. I stood with seven First Nations not that long ago, in July, in Darlington—seven First Nations who are co-investing with us in the small modular reactors in Darlington. That's true economic reconciliation. That's true economic prosperity for all.

So infrastructure is a critical component of our plan to protect Ontario. It's a critical part of moving this province forward. And it doesn't require one vote of support from any other country. This is all within our control. And through our prudent fiscal management, notwithstanding what some people try to fearmonger on, we have a stable credit rating and a stable investor base that's willing to partner with Ontario to build that infrastructure, not just in schools and hospitals and jails and long-term care—social infrastructure—but also economic infrastructure, which is so critically important.

The energy that I just talked about—and it's not just nuclear; it's wind and solar and renewables, it's storage

facilities, it's hydro, it's transmission lines—numerous investments in transmission so that clean, green energy can get to people and businesses, not only for today, but for future generations. But it goes beyond that.

Investing in critical minerals—the world wants all our critical minerals. We have them all in Ontario, and it took this government—rather than 20 years of talk, talk, talk over there—to actually get shovels in the ground for the Ring of Fire, shovels in the ground to build the Scarborough subway. Decades of talk, talk, talk, but this government is doing work, work, work, getting shovels in the ground—dig, dig, dig with the great workers in this province, along with partners and First Nations, municipalities, regions, the federal government, working together.

My parents came here as refugees from Hungary, with nothing but the shirts on their backs. They weren't looking for a handout. They were looking for an opportunity—an opportunity to raise a family, to get a good education, to feel safe in their communities.

Ontario had that golden age when they built infrastructure. They took care of their people. They built social infrastructure, and they built economic infrastructure. Just look at the vision of John Robarts to invest in nuclear facilities. That was visionary.

Here we are today with over 50% nuclear and over 90% of our electricity grid which is clean energy. There are places on the planet—Japan and Germany—that have over 20% of their electricity grid that is fuelled by coal. Not in Ontario—zero. We used to be a coal jurisdiction, but under the government of Mike Harris, they started the process of taking coal off the grid. Places like India and China are still on coal in a big way, 60% or 70%—the US is still 15% on coal. Ontario? Zero.

It's that kind of vision through generations that I think—that's the type of work we're doing today. We'll be long gone, but that school that you referenced, that hospital that you referenced, that public transit, that nuclear facility, that highway, that mineral mine which we've led the country on, critical minerals that go into technology—we'll all be gone, but the people who benefit from that will have the opportunity to be the recipients of our investments today. This is not a partisan comment. This is something that we all share together, I believe, in this room. Everyone has a job to do, but investing in that infrastructure is absolutely what we should be doing for today's generation and future.

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

MPP Susan Lahey: Through you, Chair: As the MPP for York-Simcoe, I said previously that I want to acknowledge all of the investments that the government has been making in York-Simcoe. Most recently, there was the announcement of the acute health care hospital coming to East Gwillimbury, as well as the distributed health network, with a brand new advanced health care centre both in Bradford and Georgina, which will be built over the next two to three years while we're designing and building a new hospital for the region—including, also, the Bradford Bypass. The former minister, Caroline Mulroney, was in-

strumental, after decades and decades of talking about the Bradford Bypass, in finally getting shovels in the ground.

My question is in relation to Ontario's competitiveness and business investment, which will be attracted by all of these investments around the advanced health care centres, the hospital, and around the Bradford Bypass.

In your introductory comments today, Minister, you mentioned at a high level some of the central elements of our economic strategy. Our government has repeatedly identified attracting investment and making Ontario a more competitive place to do business. I'm thinking also of Bradford, with all of the manufacturing and the factories that are growing, and we need to keep pace with that growth by investing.

So what does our government see as Ontario's key competitive advantages, and what are we doing to encourage businesses to invest, expand and create even more jobs here in Ontario?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you for that question and, really, the tour of your riding and some of the investments, be they highways, be they health care.

You can't have a strong economy without strong health care. That's why we've leaned into investing significantly more than previous governments in health care—and I've highlighted some of those today. To my knowledge, \$3.4 billion to attach every single person in Ontario to a family doctor is unprecedented. Our transformation to move to more home care—who doesn't want to age at home? To transform our system to deliver that home care at home, our great doctors, our PSWs, our nurses—that's what our transformation plan is all about. The acute care, to make sure that we have the capacity to take care of a growing and aging population when they need it most in an emergency, is so critical.

So what are we doing? What are our advantages in Ontario? Well, first off, a clairvoyant government, elected three times to execute against the plan and continue investing in that plan. Number two, but maybe really number one: the people of Ontario. We've got the smartest, brightest, hardest-working people on the planet, I believe, here in Ontario, many like my parents who came from elsewhere and just wanted the opportunity to earn an honest living. I believe that to be the Ontario way. And I think many who come here want to participate in the Ontario dream, the Canadian dream, those who are here and those who come from abroad—that they have an opportunity. An opportunity to get a good education—our EQAO scores improved, but as the minister said, more work needs to be done. He's very focused on student outcomes and supporting the teachers who provide the opportunity for them to increase their math, reading and writing skills. It means our colleges and universities, where we have a world-class—continuing to make unprecedented investments, \$6.4 billion over the next four years in our post-secondary education system. That's a significant investment welcomed by every college and university. I'd start with our advantage being our people and our talent.

I would say, secondly, providing the conditions for economic growth. What do I mean by that? Lower taxes—

we've talked about that. No government has cut taxes as much as we have, both personally and corporately. It means making sure that the path to yes or no on permitting is real-time—not 15 years to get a permit to drill a hole in the Ring of Fire, but two years, or better, to access that—regulations where paperwork doesn't drag you down and scare investment away, domestic capital and foreign capital.

I would say the world is looking at Ontario. The world is looking at Canada.

We just hosted the largest investment summit in Canadian history right here in Toronto, and I think it was a very successful summit. I give a lot of credit to Prime Minister Carney for organizing and leading the charge to profile Canada in Ontario, in Toronto. I would submit: Do it again, make it an annual occurrence, and make it in Toronto every single year.

Canada is on notice. The world notices Canada right now. They're talking about Canada, and when they look, they look at Ontario and they say, "What an opportunity in Ontario." Be it energy, be it critical minerals, be it AI, advanced manufacturing, our defence industry, our life sciences industry, our talent base, our health care system, our quality of life, investing in social infrastructure at unprecedented levels, cutting taxes—if that's not what a lot of people on this planet want, I don't know what is.

We can't do it alone. We have to do it together. We're working very closely with municipalities to build housing. We're working with the federal government to deal with the tariff situation. I remind you, 100% of the tariff revenue goes to them, so it's critical that they continue to support our lead in cutting small business taxes, our lead in providing liquidity through the Protect Ontario Account, our lead in cutting gas taxes. I've highlighted all those.

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

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: These are the types of advantages that Ontario has, and I think it will allow for a greater standard of living down the road, a greater growth in our economy, a greater opportunity for good-paying jobs, not just for today, but sustainable jobs.

I highlighted the Pickering nuclear station—30,000 jobs. Those aren't going away. That will take six years just to change the pipes—the steamfitters, the pipes are going to take six years. Those are good-quality paying jobs. And when they're done that, they'll move down the road to Darlington. When they're done that, they'll move down the road to Wesleyville. When they're done that, we need to operate, just in Durham, these nuclear power generating stations—a green, clean energy—that we can then not only use for domestic consumption but export to other states and other jurisdictions, as well as export that technology to the world.

These are the types of advantages that Ontario has. This is the vision this government has. I think, with the broad support of the public, which we have, we're going to continue executing against that vision.

MPP Susan Lahey: It's an exciting time and an inspiring time—to be living in York-Simcoe especially.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm just going to provide some concluding remarks.

Thank you for coming in here today, Minister.

What I've learned is that this government has record debt, very high interest payments, and no credible plan to balance the budget, even though they say they're going to do it. I have never seen a government that has spent so much and delivered so little. And, honestly, the answers that you have given to me today provide me with not a lot of confidence that the government is ready for what I can expect are some tough economic times.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Am I allowed to respond to the comments?

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Without a question? Yes.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I would just say that I respect you have a job to do. I respectfully disagree on the same set of facts, which I think I've demonstrated show that we have a plan. It's credible. The markets believe it to be credible. And it's for the benefit of all Ontarians, with lower borrowing costs and a fiscal plan that's sustainable.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Further debate? MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I just want to ask the minister if he knows which government closed the last coal plant in Ontario. It was the Liberal government.

Sadly, under this government, the energy generated from clean sources has decreased—it was 86% of the grid in the previous Liberal government; it's down to 84%, unfortunately. So, certainly, there's room for improvement there.

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I also just want to come back to investment in the province and the rate at which we're investing. We hear the government talking about attracting billions in investment, but those numbers aren't really reflected in what we're seeing from Stats Canada and the Ontario Financing Authority. Those numbers show that investment spending is down as a share of GDP, and that has been going on long before tariffs.

According to the Fraser Institute, the province has given up the substantial advantage it had in the 1980s and 1990s, when annual growth and business investment per worker, 4.5%, was above the rate in the rest of Canada, which was 1.8%. Sadly, between 2018 and 2024, under this government, real business investment per worker declined 0.8% per year, but other provinces like Quebec, New Brunswick, PEI, Nova Scotia and BC all had faster rate of investments in that same time. Minister, there's certainly work to do there.

Back to the capital plan and debt relative to the GDP: The average was 14.8% since 2018, but the high-water mark was under previous Liberal governments—15% in 2015.

It's important to see that the government is talking about these numbers, but again, we've got record unemployment in Ontario—600,000 workers, 200,000 young people. The plan is not working.

I would also just say that if we're doing a three-word repetition here, one that was forgotten by the minister was hide, hide, hide.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: What, what, what?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Hide, hide, hide. As I said, the—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: I come out every 90 days. That's not hiding.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Well, the Auditor General said—I'll just repeat it—that the SDF process was not accountable, not fair, not transparent.

There's room for improvement on transparency from this government. I can repeat it if you'd like, Minister. FOI changes are very problematic. Again, we don't have data on what this government is spending to give out to a good friend of the Premier's as it related to the half-a-billion dollar lawsuit that they brought against the government—failing scores, in my opinion, on transparency.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: We will have to agree to disagree. The \$235 billion of investments since 2018 and a million new jobs—the facts speak for themselves.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: The unemployment rate is up, Minister.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It's down.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: It's down slightly now, yes.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: And it ignores the world we're in.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): One at a time.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Since 2018, when your government took office—the unemployment rate at that time was 5.8%, and it's up to 6.8% or 6.9% right now. Again, when we talk about jobs created—as you've said on the debt, Minister, we have to look at it in the full context, and we're talking about the overall workforce looking for work, and the unemployment rate has gone up under this government.

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

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Thank you to the minister and the deputy and all the staff for your time this morning.

Minister, I just want to conclude by asking you to keep Ontario families who are struggling in mind, with affordability at the centre of all the decisions that you make. I hear it from families in my riding all the time—there is very little room at the end of the month, after paying for housing, groceries, utilities, child care, and transportation. These are not abstract numbers. These are families. These are people who are struggling. They're seniors who are worried about whether they'll be able to afford a home and young families who are also worried about where they're going to go and raise their young kids. As the Minister of Finance, you have the responsibility to ensure that Ontario's fiscal decisions do translate into real relief for those people in this province who are busting their hump trying to create a life here in this province. That's my last ask.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Any further debate? MPP Smith.

Mr. Dave Smith: Since the opposition has decided to defer all their time, I'm just going to throw out a thank you to you as well, Minister.

Just as a personal note, I am your parliamentary assistant, and I've had a number of people say to me, "Why did you want to be the parliamentary assistant to the Ministry of Finance?" I'll tell you what I say to everyone who asks me this—I think you demonstrated it today in how you answered things: The opportunity to sit at the tree of knowledge of someone like you is something that cannot be overlooked. You have guided this province in a wonderful way, as our Minister of Finance. When we look at your CV, there is no one in this province that I would say has a better background, a better ability to lead us through the unprecedented economic times. You were the Minister of Finance during a global pandemic. You're the Minister of Finance during a trade war. And we are in an enviable position amongst G7 nations, even as a sub-sovereign nation ourselves. You've done a fantastic job; I can't thank you enough for it. And I know that the people of Ontario appreciate what you bring to the table, because you guide this province in a way that no other could. Thank you.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: That's very kind. Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Any further debate? If there's no—

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Any debate on that?

Interjections.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: No, no. That was just a joke.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If that's the end of the debate, shall the committee consider the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Finance?

On vote 1201, ministry administration program: All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1202, regulatory policy and agency relations program, carry? Debate? Seeing none, all those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 1203, economic, fiscal and financial policy program, carry? Debate? No further debate. All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1209, tax, benefits and local finance program, carry? Debate? There is no debate. All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Vote 1215, Building Ontario Fund program: Any debate? If not, all those in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried.

Vote 1216, alcohol policy and marketplace modernization program: Any debate? No debate. All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Finance carry? Debate? There's no debate. All those in favour? Opposed? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Finance to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

We have concluded the consideration of the estimates for the ministry. I'd like to thank Mr. Bethlenfalvy and everyone here today for your participation and all the work you do to get us here.

With that, the committee now stands recessed until 1 o'clock.

The committee recessed from 1158 to 1300.

CABINET OFFICE

OFFICE OF THE PREMIER

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

We are meeting to consider the 2026-27 estimates of the Cabinet Office and the Office of the Premier, for a total of two hours.

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

We are joined by staff from Hansard, broadcast and recording, and legislative research.

This afternoon, we are joined by the Honourable Andrea Khanjin, Minister of Red Tape Reduction; and ministry officials and staff.

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

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

Minister, near the end, I will say, "One minute"; at 20 minutes, I will say, "Thank you."

With that, the floor is yours.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you, Chair. I want to thank the committee members for inviting me to speak before committee today. I want you to know that I am here in my capacity as Minister of Red Tape Reduction, to provide the committee with details on how our government is delivering on our plan to protect Ontario throughout ongoing US tariffs and the global uncertainty.

On behalf of Premier Ford, I will present the 2026-27 expenditure estimates for the Office of the Premier and Cabinet Office, including the work of the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs and the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction, as they show our government is carrying out on our mandate.

To begin, the Office of the Premier provides staff support for Premier Ford in his role as head of the executive council and head of the government of Ontario. It also provides leadership and coordination across our government on priorities that support people, families, businesses and workers across the province. It draws on expertise across ministries, bringing together advice and recommendations to support effective policy, stronger programs and better services for the people of Ontario. The work carried out by the Office of the Premier is essential in advancing our plan to protect Ontario and build a more competitive, resilient and self-reliant province for today and for the future.

Under Premier Ford's leadership, our government is taking a focused, responsible and fiscally prudent approach to strengthen the economy, navigate global uncertainty and protect the priorities that matter most to the people, including health care and education. We have made significant progress.

We know there is much work to do, and so the work does continue. That includes protecting workers and businesses affected by US tariffs, unleashing Ontario's economic potential, investing in infrastructure, keeping costs down and protecting public services, while maintaining fiscal responsibility. That commitment was reinforced this spring when my colleague—and you heard from him earlier today—Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy introduced the 2026 Ontario budget, *A Plan to Protect Ontario*.

The Office of the Premier provides the leadership and coordination needed to advance our government's mandate. Its work includes executive support, issues management, legislative affairs, policy and cabinet agenda planning, communications, administration and operations, public appointments, intergovernmental affairs and protocol. That role is especially essential when it comes to our response to what's going on with US tariffs and the global trade uncertainty. Decisions outside Canada can affect investment. It affects our integrated supply chains and workers in communities across Ontario.

Through its 2026-27 strategic plan, the Office of the Premier supports our work to protect tariff-affected industries and workers, support business growth and attract investment. It also supports our efforts to lower the cost of doing business, reduce barriers to trade within Canada, and expand trade and investment with non-US partners. The plan also brings together work on infrastructure, energy, housing, health care, education, public safety and community services. These priorities span ministries and require clear direction, coordinated advice and disciplined follow-through.

Working with Cabinet Office, the Office of the Premier helps keep ministries aligned with the comments our government made through its budget and many of our commitments. It coordinates with ministers' offices, while individual ministries remain responsible for the programs, statutory responsibilities, expenditures and delivery. This supports a coordinated approach to policy development, program delivery and communications, so our decisions can be implemented consistently and Ontarians can be kept informed.

To continue leading by example, across our government, the Office of the Premier has implemented a hiring freeze and reduced its staff count by 10 this year.

The Office of the Premier program is presented under vote 2401, and its expenditures remain subject to the fiscal administration and reporting requirements that apply across our government.

Next, I would like to talk about the estimates there before you for Cabinet Office.

Cabinet Office is the central agency that supports the Premier, cabinet, its committees, and Ontario's public service. It coordinates government business and helps align

work across ministries and their agencies. In support of the direction set by Premier Ford and cabinet, the non-partisan public service of Cabinet Office provides and analyzes advice and operational support required to implement our priorities.

Cabinet Office is led by the secretary of cabinet, who is also the head of the Ontario public service and clerk of the executive council. The secretary provides leadership to the Ontario public service, including its work to operate in a fiscally responsible manner and deliver provincial programs to a high standard. The secretary also supports the proper operation of cabinet and its committees. The secretary is also a source of independent, non-partisan advice to the Premier on government policy, communications with the public, and candidates for deputy minister roles that lead ministries and support ministers' offices. Cabinet Office is comprised of several divisions, each with a direct role in that work.

The policy and delivery division works with ministries to provide objective and strategic advice to the Premier's office on short- and long-term policy development and implementation. That advice supports cabinet decision-making and the operation of cabinet and its committees. The division also provides operational support, including liaison with the Legislature and support for the relationship between the Ontario public service and the Office of the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. Another important aspect is to identify financial, legal, operational and delivery risks related to key government activities and to provide recommendations before decisions are made. After approval, the division also monitors implementation issues and brings material forward for attention.

The policy and delivery division also helps ministries implement complex, high-priority initiatives using strategic innovation, lean practice and data analytics. Cabinet Office reports that this work has contributed to more than \$60 million in savings and more than 245,000 hours—or about 28 years—of administrative effort avoided through streamlined and improved services.

In the last reporting year, the division supported 20 ministries on 40 projects. Cabinet Office reported more than \$6 million in savings compared to obtaining similar service services externally, and an estimated \$12 million will be avoided in costs through in-house training, consulting and coaching.

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Next, cabinet communications provides strategic communication advice, support and analysis to the Office of the Premier and the secretary of cabinet. It also coordinates communication work between the Premier's office and ministries. Its services include strategic decision supports, cross-government communication and coordination, corporate issues management, media event support, media monitoring analysis, paid marketing and digital communications. Cabinet Office communication maintains ontario.ca and Ontario Newsroom, manages our government's social media channels, and coordinates enterprise communications supports with ministries that own and update program content. The division also supports

responses to freedom-of-information requests and public correspondence and provides logistical and event support for government of Ontario events and announcements. Whether coordinating Ontario's response to US tariffs and global economic uncertainty, supporting implementation of the 2026 budget, advancing internal trade initiatives, or supporting consistent implementation across ministries, Cabinet Office provides the coordination our government needs to act effectively and responsibly.

Cabinet Office is represented under vote 401 of your estimates for 2026-27. Its planned operating expenditure is just over \$77 million for central functions, including the work of the Ministries of Intergovernmental Affairs and Red Tape Reduction. This funding supports compensation requirements, targeted capacity, approved resource alignment and the continued delivery of functions that I've described a little earlier.

The Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs, included within Cabinet Office, supports the Premier in his role as Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs. It supports the Premier's interaction with other governments in Canada and internationally. This work is crucial as Ontario reduces interprovincial trade barriers, collaborates with partners and diversifies its trade and investment relationships. The ministry provides high-level policy analysis and timely intelligence on developments in other provinces, territories, the federal government, and international jurisdictions, including the United States. It also advises partner ministries, prepares protocol and briefing materials, supports meetings and missions, coordinates Ontario's position and tracks commitments requiring action by more than one ministry. Through that work, the ministry helps strengthen Ontario's relationship with its partners, advance our trade and investment interests, and coordinate responses when decisions by other governments are affected and Ontario workers and businesses need assistance.

Ontario completed its one-year term as chair of the Council of the Federation in July 2025, after hosting the annual summer meeting of Canada's Premiers. The meeting marked the Premier's successful term as chair and underscored his leadership and commitment to a united Team Canada approach during a period of unprecedented global change.

The ministry continues to support Ontario's participation in the Council of the Federation, meetings between Premiers and Prime Ministers, and other federal-provincial-territorial forums. It also supports agreements with other jurisdictions to increase internal trade, improve labour mobility, and remove barriers to doing business between provinces and territories.

Since April 2025, the ministry has worked closely with the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade and with all provinces and territories on practical measures to reduce intertrade barriers.

This summer, Ontario joined eight other provinces in a landmark Canada-wide direct-to-consumer alcohol sales agreement. The agreement expanded consumer access to Canadian products. It created new markets for participating producers, and it reduced interprovincial trade barriers.

The ministry continues to drive Ontario's US engagement strategy to strengthen economic ties. This has included 60 Premier-led engagements with US officials, targeted missions to key US jurisdictions and participation in strategic regional forums. It will continue to advance the strategy as Ontario manages changing US policy, legislative and regulatory conditions and the challenges and opportunities within the Ontario-US relationship.

Next, the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction—and I'm joined by my deputy minister, Maud Murray, to the right of me.

The Ministry of Red Tape Reduction, within Cabinet Office, coordinates regulatory modernization and burden reduction work across our government to make life easier for people and businesses and build a more competitive Ontario economy.

I could not do this work alone. As the minister, I'm joined by an incredible team—and two of them are members of this committee: PA Joseph Racinsky and PA Logan Kanapathi. I want to thank you for your incredible work. As a result, we've been able to deliver on some incredible policies that have been implemented and have been a game-changer for not just people, but for many local businesses.

As the Minister of Red Tape Reduction and as the minister in charge of the file, my focus is to ensure Ontario has the right rules in place and that those rules are properly enforced to protect people and support our economy. Cutting red tape means reducing unnecessary costs, duplication and delays, while maintaining protections for health, safety, workers, consumers and the environment.

Since 2018, we have introduced 17 burden reduction packages, passed 15 red tape reduction bills, earning Ontario a tie with Nova Scotia for second place in red tape reduction. Through approximately 700 actions, our work has produced an estimated \$1.3 billion in annualized compliance cost savings and 1.8 million hours in annual savings for businesses, individuals and the broader public service.

We're also reviewing more than 350 business-and-economic-development-related permits. And we are on track to eliminate and transform at least 35% of the business-facing permits by the end of 2028.

The ministry is also leveraging AI technology to support this work. Last year, Ontario became the first jurisdiction in Canada to launch Regulatory Intelligence, also known as REGi, a special AI-assisted tool that can scan more than 3,000 Ontario acts, regulations and forms for language that may warrant review. It supports staff research and does not replace human judgment or ministry accountability. We are building on that success with an AI tool that complements Ontario's One Project, One Process approach to mining and helps our province move critical mineral exploration projects forward more quickly.

Earlier this year, Ontario received its first-ever A grade from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business for red tape reduction, the highest grade in the province's history. While the A grade is a validation, it's not a finish line. It reflects real results. More than 14,000 regulation compliance requirements have been eliminated, and we

have the lowest regulatory burden per capita in all of Canada.

Our strategic regulatory reforms are helping make Ontario one of the top choices in the G7 for investment, job creation and business growth, while maintaining and strengthening important regulations that protect public health, safety and the environment.

The work we are doing today is about improving systems and creating a public service that delivers real, lasting benefits for people and businesses across Ontario.

The Office of the Premier, Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs, the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction will continue to be central to our government's ongoing efforts to protect Ontario.

Under Premier Ford's leadership, Ontario is meeting a period of economic geopolitical uncertainty with a clear plan to protect workers, businesses and communities.

Ongoing US tariffs are affecting key sectors. Global trade is changing the supply chains that remain under pressure. Despite those challenges, Ontario's economy remained resilient in 2025 and performed better than expected. Our economy grew by 1.2%, exceeding earlier projections.

Looking ahead, Ontario's real GDP is projected to increase by 1% in 2026, with a projected growth of 1.7% in 2027, 1.8% in 2028, and 2% in 2029.

Our prudent plan does not raise taxes. It does not cut services. And Ontario remains one of the only provinces with a path back to balance.

In budget 2026, the projected \$13.8-billion deficit in 2026-27 was improving to \$6.8 billion in 2027-28, before our modest \$600-million surplus in 2028-29.

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With that framework, we are increasing support for infrastructure, health care and education while providing tax relief to lower costs, improve competitiveness and support investment in job creation. Our government remains focused on protecting workers and businesses from tariffs and economic uncertainty, building critical infrastructure, keeping costs down for families and businesses, securing Ontario's borders and communities, and protecting the public services people depend on. The central offices covered by these estimates help coordinate that agenda, while program expenditures remain within the ministries that hold the mandate and spending authority. They bring advice together, support disciplined decision-making and help address issues that cross ministerial mandates. That co-ordination supports our record investment in infrastructure, innovation and public services, while maintaining a responsible path back to balance.

Our vision is clear: Protect Ontario workers, businesses and families today, while building a strong, more competitive and more self-reliant province for the future.

Over the past 18 months, ongoing US tariffs and rapid changes in global markets have—

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

Hon. Andrea Khanjin:—shown how quickly decisions beyond our borders can affect communities here at home.

I want to thank the committee for allowing me to be here today. Ontario has benefited from global trade for

generations, but the geopolitical tensions and the disruption to our supply chains won't prevent us from continuing to work harder for the people of Ontario through the three offices I'm here to represent today. Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you, Minister, for your presentation.

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

As always, make sure your comments go through the Chair.

Ministry officials and staff, please state your name and title if you are called on to speak, so that the proceedings can be accurately recorded in Hansard.

We will start with the official opposition. MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Thank you, Minister Khanjin, for being here today, and thank you to staff for the hard work you do to support these ministries.

I noticed in your presentation that you mentioned some of the important responsibilities of the Cabinet Office and the Premier's office. Some of those responsibilities include providing the Premier and cabinet with information to help them make big decisions, like acknowledgement of risk, legal consequences and strategic advice. Is that correct?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: That's correct.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Good.

In 2025, Elon Musk's company, Starlink—well, they had previously won a \$100-million contract to provide satellite Internet services to rural and northern Ontario, and then, once the trade war began, the Premier made the decision to cancel the contract.

Before the Premier cancelled this contract, did Cabinet Office and the Premier's office provide the Premier with an estimate of the cost of cancelling the project?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I think what we need to look at, which is within the estimates here today, is how those three offices coordinate to fight this global tariff war that we're in, to diversify our markets and to keep relations with the United States, while ensuring that we have buy-Ontario policies.

If you look at the execution of our buy-Ontario policies—whether it's vehicle procurement; whether it's the recent directive issued by the Minister of Municipal Affairs—we're putting Ontario providers and procurement and businesses and suppliers ahead, so that we can help secure those jobs for multiple generations, and so that we can make and build things here in Ontario and Canada, which we used to do really well at—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I don't disagree with you.

My question is, was the Premier briefed about the consequences, the costs, of cancelling the contract before the decision was made? Simple question: Was he briefed?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, I'm here to talk about the three estimates.

I would say, as someone who comes from a rural community, the broadband rollout has been working. More people are being connected to Internet, which they rely on, and there's definitely more work ahead to connect more

people to local broadband, but that's because of the leadership and investments of this government.

Ms. Jessica Bell: It would be pretty concerning to me if the Premier made these decisions without considering the cost and consequences.

One consequence is that rural and northern residents don't have access to reliable broadband Internet. We have now learned that reliable broadband Internet was promised in 2025, and now we learn they're not going to get reliable broadband Internet until 2028.

My question to you is, before the Premier cancelled the contract, did the Premier's office or the Cabinet Office provide him with information on the consequences of cancelling this contract?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: You well know—you've been at this committee and elected for a number of years, and you know that is not within the estimates of the Premier's office. Even in my opening remarks, I mentioned the votes that are before you today as an estimates committee.

I could certainly speak to what is in estimates; for example, the trade MOUs that we have secured thanks to the Premier being able to deliver the Ontario message south of the border.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I think one of the issues that we have here is that the Premier made a decision—possibly without considering the consequences and the costs of that decision—and now here we are, a year later, and we're wondering, how much was the kill fee? It's a valid question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I wouldn't characterize it that way.

Ms. Jessica Bell: How much did it cost to cancel the contract with Starlink?

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: In the member's remarks, she just pointed out that this was a decision from more than a year ago. It's not within the scope for estimates for the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction, Premier's office or Cabinet Office. I would ask that the member stick to what we are discussing today, and that is the estimates for these three offices for the current year.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I do ask the member to refer to the estimates that are before us.

Ms. Jessica Bell: There is a track record with this government, when it comes to cancelling contracts, of being careless and negligent with the consequences of doing it. I worry that the Starlink contract is an example of that, just like the cancellation of the Beer Store was an example of potentially not thinking through the consequences and the cost to taxpayers.

It's also the broader issue around secrecy. A lot of decisions that cost a lot of money that we, as taxpayers, are paying for are kept behind closed doors when a lot of people have some pretty basic questions around how much these things are costing. It doesn't seem like we're getting answers today from this minister.

My next questions are focused on freedom-of-information requests, which is the responsibility of the Cabinet Office.

Over the last few years, it's safe to say that this government has been plagued by quite a bit of scandal.

We have had the greenbelt scandal, where it came to light that some Conservative Party insiders made some secret deals with developers to allow them to build on greenbelt land and potentially would have set them up to make up to \$8 billion in profit. The government backtracked on that once that information was revealed.

And now we have the Skills Development Fund, where money was being doled out to businesses to provide training—including an adult entertainment firm. It has now been revealed that up to 80% of the recipients of that fund were also donors to the Conservative Party. So that's not great.

And lately, we've had the example of the Premier buying a private jet—hiding the purchase through a different ministry—at a time when people cannot afford mortgage payments or car payments.

Instead of cleaning up your act, the government has decided to double down on secrecy.

In April 2026, the government passed Bill 97, which excludes records held by the Premier's office, cabinet ministers' offices, parliamentary assistants and political staff from Ontario's freedom-of-information laws. The change applies retroactively to records dating back to January 1, 1988. I don't know why you would want to help the Liberals in this situation, but you did. Records are retroactively not available to the public back until 1988. I find that this is an extraordinary and undemocratic move, and that freedom-of-information laws are an important check to government power.

My next questions are focused on the cabinet's role within the freedom-of-information process.

So, just to confirm, the Cabinet Office processes freedom-of-information requests for Cabinet Office and central political offices and is responsible for cross-government coordination. That's correct?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Yes, that's correct.

I'd also say that we have completed nearly twice the amount of FOIs as BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba combined. We actually have a higher compliance rate than the federal government. And 95% of FOI requests are unaffected by the changes that you alluded to in your question.

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Ms. Jessica Bell: I have a question related to the details around the number of freedom-of-information requests that you have just brought up.

How many freedom-of-information requests has the Cabinet Office received in the past year?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: You will note, similar to before, when it comes to Cabinet Office FOI requests or the entire process, what we are doing is we're constantly changing and upgrading the turnaround time. You can imagine that we do receive, as I mentioned in my previous answer, more requests than all those different provinces combined, and despite that, we're still able to turn them around at 88% of the timeline.

Ms. Jessica Bell: So you're obtaining an 88% timeline; you know that you're receiving more requests than other governments.

How many requests are you receiving?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: To respond to the amount of requests that we're receiving—we're constantly making updates and improvements on the turnaround time. I don't know if you've heard of technologies like SharePoint or Power Apps, but we're engaging with those two types of technologies in order to improve the turnaround time.

As you know, there's about 45 calendar days that every person or every ministry, including Cabinet Office, has in order to respond to those requests.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm going to ask you this question one more time, because the other two times I've asked it, I haven't gotten a specific answer: How many freedom-of-information requests has the Cabinet Office received in the past year?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I can certainly walk you through the process of how FOIs are done—

Ms. Jessica Bell: I don't need to know the process. I would like to know how many you've received.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: We do receive several requests, and I'm sure happy to pass it over to Deputy Fuller to talk about that. But I would say that—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. Let's pass it over to Deputy Fuller, then.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —there is lots of time in terms of—

Ms. Jessica Bell: My question very specifically is, how many—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If the member will allow the question to be answered.

Ms. Jessica Bell: This is the fourth time I've asked it. It's a simple number question. How many have you received?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm giving you the lead-up to your answer. I want to make sure you understand the context of what you're asking. But I'm happy to pass it over to Deputy Fuller.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Alexandra Sutton, deputy minister of communications and intergovernmental affairs in Cabinet Office.

It's 152.

Ms. Jessica Bell: And how many of them have been refused?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: As you know, through the access-to-information process, there are only two things that you can do through that legislation, which is you can ask for an extension—because of two reasons: it's an elaborate request and/or a third party needs to be consulted. Those are the only two exemptions under the FOI request legislation, as you're aware. Sometimes those extensions are needed because you have to consult a third party, where their privacy might be in the request.

Ms. Jessica Bell: So you've received 152. I asked you specifically how many of them have been refused, and a decision has been made to not answer that question.

My question to you is, will Cabinet Office publish quarterly figures showing how many requests resulted in full access, partial access, no records, or a refusal?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: As you know, through the act itself, it's about how you comply with the request. And if you need more time to comply with said request, there are two sections of the legislation where you can ask for additional time—one being it's a complex request; two being you need to consult with a third party. Within the legislation, in terms of the amount of FOI requests we receive, those are the two responses that are available when someone is working on an FOI request. Having said that, to make things less cumbersome, you will notice—in getting back to the estimates at hand—there have been improvements being made to that. As you mentioned, if you're getting a number of requests, if they're cumbersome, what are we doing to allow for more things online?

Ms. Jessica Bell: Let's talk about improvements here. If an applicant doesn't get the information they think they're entitled to get, they can go to the Information and Privacy Commissioner to file an appeal.

Last year, the Information and Privacy Commissioner issued a record number of orders to the government requesting that they hand over information. In some cases, ministries aren't even responding to the commissioner's requests. It doesn't seem like it's working that well for people. It might be working well for the government that's trying to hide another scandal, but it doesn't seem like it's working so well for people.

My question to you is, can cabinet work with ministries to ensure full compliance with the Information and Privacy Commissioner's orders to release information?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm happy to pass it over to Deputy Fuller for that question, but these are the improvements we're making. I'm happy to have the deputy elaborate on some of the improvements that I've mentioned.

Maybe you can build on them, as well.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Thank you for the question.

You note our compliance rate, which is less than our target of 100%. We have seen an increase in terms of the complexity of those requests. We have been looking at technology, working across the system in order to determine best practices to try to improve that, by using technology to our advantage, in terms of processing times and ensuring that requesters get the information they need.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I don't think stonewalling is best practices, and I certainly wouldn't call it an improvement.

How many orders to release information has the Information and Privacy Commissioner issued to Ontario ministries and agencies?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, we're here to talk about the estimates before us, and we're explaining to you via the estimates, via the line items that are before you, the improvements that are being made via Cabinet Office with respect to access-to-information requests, as Deputy Fuller—I think I may have called you Sutton by accident; my apologies—has outlined.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: No, I'm talking about a broken FOI process. People are going to the Information and Privacy Commissioner to get access to information that they are legally required to have. We're seeing a record number of

appeals, and we're seeing ministries not even responding to the commissioner's requests—legal requests—to share information that people are entitled to.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: This is why we have to—

Ms. Jessica Bell: Now I'm going to ask the question: How many of these orders asked for by the Information and Privacy Commissioner has the government not complied with?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Let's be clear about what you're trying to get at here, and that's—accountability has never disappeared; it's not disappearing. Records held by ministries or agencies or the broader public are always subject to FOI. That has never changed, whether it was the update to legislation that hadn't been updated in 40 years—and when it comes to FOIs, robust—

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

MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you to the minister for being here today.

I wonder if you could share with us the total payroll in the Premier's office.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I will talk to the estimates. I think you might be referring to, potentially, public accounts that came over a few weeks ago or so, but as you'll see through estimates, it's, I believe, \$2.4 million.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: No, what I'm actually asking about is the total amount of money spent on staff who work in the Premier's office.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: You'll see within your estimates—it's the same response; if I see it here as well, it has been that same amount that you can see within the estimates that are before you.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Yes, the estimate has been the same since 2019: \$2,007,100 for the salaries. It has been the same number, yet we know from the Ontario sunshine list that the total amount of salary is at least \$8.145 million. So I'm wondering if you would be prepared here to share that number and the total payroll of all of the staff in the Premier's office.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: As I mentioned in my opening remarks—

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Point of order, Chair.

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

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: We're here to discuss the estimates for the ministry and for the Premier's office. The question does not pertain to the estimates in front of the committee.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: It certainly does. It's vote 2401.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I would just reiterate that we are here to speak to the estimates, and I'm sure the member is going to do that.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Yes, absolutely.

Again, as I've said, the salaries and wages section of the vote item 2401 has remained at \$2,007,100, and yet we know from publicly disclosed information—publicly available information—that the number is actually much higher than that, that it's over \$8 million. So I'm wondering if the

minister would care to explain what the full cost of the payroll for the Premier's office is.

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Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I think this is a good example of the Premier's office leading by example.

As I said in my opening remarks, there has been a hiring freeze. There's a staff reduction of 10. We've been very clear; we're expecting everyone to do more with less as we fight this unprecedented global trade war that Donald Trump has started.

That is a reflection of the work of the Premier's office and the goal of his to protect Ontario, travelling south to secure those relationships. And certainly, the work of the Premier's office continues to double down on trade relations and bringing investments. This is an office and a team that has brought \$235 billion of investments—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Minister. We're talking about the estimates here, so I'll just come back to that.

I believe this is another example of the government hiding actual numbers. The estimate that is before us is an allocated number. It's after allocations to other ministries—that's what I've heard in previous years. And once again, this year the government refuses to actually say how much is being spent on the Premier's office.

We do know, from the Ontario sunshine list, that that number is at least \$8.145 million. I think it's very clear that the estimate provided here is not a reasonable estimate. It's after allocations.

So in the spirit of transparency, which I know this government likes to talk a lot about, I think it would be very welcome for you, Minister, to share the actual number that is being spent on payroll in the Premier's office.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: You have a number—very transparent—that you've quoted yourself, that's within the estimates. There's also—yes, you mentioned this—the sunshine list, also a public website that you and anyone can go to. You have public accounts—also a public document available to the people of Ontario to access.

The Premier is the most accessible Premier in this province. People have his cellphone number. There's no better accessibility than that—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: We don't need to talk about—we can talk about the Premier's cellphone again. I'd love to talk about that.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —but, again, the Premier's office is leading by example.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, there has been a hiring freeze. There's a reduction of 10 staff members.

The number—in terms of salaries—that you're inquiring about is very much reflected in the estimates, and you can see that line item in vote 2401.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Right. Again, we'll just summarize that the estimate provided to us has been the same, even though the number of people has gone up from—I believe it was 18 in 2018, and it's up to 50 people now, a significant increase in the number of people working in the Premier's office. So, of course, the salary costs have gone up, and the government chooses to not

share that information here in the estimates. We'll leave it there. Once again, this year we will not get an answer to that question.

In total, the amount of money that has been actually spent on Premier's office salaries is about—sorry. The difference between what you report here in the estimates and what is actually spent is about \$24 million. I think that's a lot of money. I think taxpayers deserve to hear from the government themselves, versus having to go to the sunshine list.

You talked about the Premier's phone records, so let's just come back to that. We know that FOI requests related to the Premier's phone records continue to be denied, even though, he admits himself, he uses it for government business. I wonder how much time and energy is being spent by staff in the Premier's office to continue to hide the Premier's cellphone records.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I wouldn't characterize it that way. But I love that in a global trade war, the Liberal Party leader is more concerned about HR than actually protecting Ontario jobs.

Do you know what the estimates show you? Let me bring it back to the estimates—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Sorry, Chair—thank you. I would like to reclaim my time.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): She asked the question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —and I will answer your question.

The Premier is relentless in his mission to protect Ontario. This is a Premier who has a \$220-billion plan to protect Ontario's jobs and this economy. He has a \$30-billion relief fund, brought \$235 billion back to the economy—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Back to the question here—it's her time.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: And we're bringing these investments.

You're concerned with HR in the Premier's office.

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair.

We've heard from this government that they care about how every tax dollar is spent. That's what we're here to talk about today, Minister.

With respect, we're not talking about the trade war today. We are talking about what this government is spending on the Premier's office and the Cabinet Office. So I would like to get some answers to those questions.

We know that there's at least \$24 million that does not get shown through these numbers since you've been in government for eight years. I'm just highlighting the fact that once again, we hear "transparency," but we get obfuscation instead.

Let's move on, because it's clear that the government will continue to try to hide the number of taxpayer dollars that are being spent in the Premier's office, and—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Sorry, Chair. That's implying motive, which is part of our standing orders.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Order, order.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Sorry, Chair. I think the word "hide" is not a problem word.

We know that the FOI laws are allowing the government to hide the Premier's phone records. The privacy commissioner has delivered a number of orders for the government to comply with, for releasing information. That means you should be releasing it. You should be complying, and you are choosing not to, so I'm not sure what words you would choose other than "hide."

Let's go to the increase in staff budget. The staff raises in the past year were over 10%, according to reporting. Given that many Ontarians are facing job losses, are facing increased economic pressures and stagnation in their wage growth, I'm wondering how the government justifies a 10.9% increase to the salaries in the Premier's office.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, I wouldn't imply a motive of any kind here.

What I will say is, when it comes to jobs, no one has been standing up for Ontario jobs more than this Premier. Take investments that he has brought into this province—Linamar, a \$1.2-billion investment, over 2,000 jobs; Chapman's, over \$200 million in investments, 200 jobs; Ferrero, a \$445-million investment that has increased 500 jobs in Ontario; Vianode, \$3.2 billion and 300 jobs—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. We're talking about estimates.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: This is a Premier who will do whatever it takes to increase jobs here. So if you want to talk about jobs and employing Ontarians, I'm happy to talk about jobs and employing Ontarians, because there has never been a Premier who is standing up more for this economy. It's highly unprecedented. This is a Premier who has lowered small business taxes, who has never raised a tax—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I think we're—

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I'm not sure we want to talk about the record of this government on jobs. The unemployment rate has gone up under this government, from 5.8% when it took office to just under 7%. I think we've talked about that significantly this morning. We can certainly talk about it again if the minister would like.

I would like to focus on what's in front of us today, which is the estimates for the Office of the Premier and the Cabinet Office.

So let's move on to the Cabinet Office. Minister, your ministry's budget sits with Cabinet Office. The salary budget is \$62.3 million this year; it's up again.

How many of the people paid from Cabinet Office are political staff who work for the Premier, and how much of the \$62.3 million is spent on those staff?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: So as you'll see in vote 2401 of your budget—that is how much is spent on staff salaries.

Again, you have the Premier's office, who are consistently leading by example, whether it's out there negotiating trade agreements, bringing investments back home, or whether it's the hiring freeze in the Premier's office. They're constantly doing more with less, but despite that, being

able to bring home \$235 billion of investments; much of that, I would say, is recent. It's the Premier's office staff who support him to go and negotiate with places like Texas, being able to bring investments back—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Excuse me, Chair.

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: The question on the table is, how many of the staff in the office are political staff? Just a number, please.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: We're talking about estimates.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the Premier's office has a freeze in place now, and there's a staff complement that is a reduction of 10.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: No, I'm talking about the Cabinet Office. I'm asking, how many of the people paid from Cabinet Office are political staff who work for the Premier?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, Cabinet Office is separate from the Premier's office. Certainly, there's an advice situation, where Cabinet Office provides advice to the Premier's office, but it's two separate complements of staff. You'll notice even in your vote items, the vote on estimates for Cabinet Office is a separate vote than the Premier's office.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Yes, and that's what I'm asking about. I'm asking about the number of staff in the Cabinet Office who are political staff—just a number of people.

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Hon. Andrea Khanjin: The Cabinet Office is not part of the Premier's office. The question you're asking is out of frame because Cabinet Office is through the broader public service, as I mentioned. They provide non-partisan advice—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: We are reviewing estimates for the Cabinet Office.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Yes, I'm referring to the line item on the Premier's office.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): If I could just cut in, I think the questioning is going in the wrong direction. The member does not have a right to imply things that she is not entitled to. They are working at Cabinet Office. For you to call it anything different is inappropriate and unparliamentary.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I'm just trying to understand the nature of the work and the role of the people who work in Cabinet Office. What we heard this morning is that they are giving advice. I assume some of those people—or I shouldn't assume.

I will ask you again, how many of those people are political staff, if any, in the Cabinet Office? Is it zero, one, two?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: The Premier has the Premier's staff. Cabinet Office has the Cabinet Office staff.

Deputy Sutton, if you want to talk about your staff, you're more than welcome to, but again, it's separate.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Thank you for the question.

In terms of Cabinet Office, our role is to provide non-partisan advice to the Premier and to also support the secretary of cabinet and the cabinet.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I will come back to the topic of the jets. Did the Cabinet Office staff give any advice to the Premier about buying a jet?

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

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: The used Canadian aircraft you're referring to is not within our estimates, and you did not refer to that before, so I don't know why you're saying you referred to it before. You have been referring to the Premier's office staff, who have been fighting relentlessly to secure more investments into this province and create more Canadian jobs.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: As I mentioned this morning, sadly, the percentage of GDP that is happening here in the province on investment has actually fallen under this government; we are behind other provinces. So, again, you've certainly got your work cut out for you because you're quite behind on that.

I want to touch on the minister's view on the \$500 billion in net debt—the decisions that get made, many of them being advised by, I presume, the Cabinet Office or the Premier's office staff, to get us to that very large number. Some 40% of the new debt is coming from operating deficits—

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

MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Good afternoon to the minister and all the staff who are here to support you this afternoon.

Just on a point of order: The minister, a few minutes ago, said that this is a Premier who has never raised a tax. I take exception to that, as I represent the majority of Ontario's tobacco growers, and they remember well the Premier ushering in a tax increase in both 2018 and 2019. So I take exception to that statement. But I'll move on.

Minister, more than \$52 million is allocated directly to Cabinet Office, and your mandate includes monitoring the delivery and implementation of the government's priorities. What are the actual performance indicators used to determine whether the Cabinet Office is succeeding in that role?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you for the question.

As I mentioned, an example of that would be the 60-plus Premier-led missions to the United States. As a result, several MOUs have been signed south of the border by many governors when it comes to things like investments and building that relationship, because we need—as you may have read in Fortress Am-Can, the approach is twofold. Yes, we have a \$30-billion fund to help Canadian and Ontario companies specifically diversify their markets, but the reality is, the two-way trade between us and the United States is in the multi-billions. So part of it in terms of KPIs is, can we get more MOUs signed through the work that intergovernmental affairs does?

The trade missions we do—we saw just recently when the Premier was in Texas and he was able to go to three different states—Dallas, Houston, Austin. He brought back billions of dollars in investments, and it's still counting. It could be up to \$6 billion at this point, just by that single trip in 24 hours alone.

Just yesterday, he talked about energy security in Alberta and, again, securing more investments not just south of the border, but across Canada too.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I understand across the border, across Canada—with respect to Ontario, do you know how many government commitments are currently being tracked by the Cabinet Office and how many of them are currently behind schedule?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: The Premier is really big on key performance indicators. So I'll answer your question twofold: One key performance indicator for mandate items are things like—before your estimates today is the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction. We have two key performance indicators: time and money saved. We're at about \$1.3 billion in money saved and—

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Okay, but my question is actually on the number of opportunities or the number of commitments that are being met or are not being met; not what the indicators are. So that was the first question. The second question is a number question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: We track in terms of—every minister has performance and mandates they're responsible for, and I would say we're probably about 85% of the way through. I'm happy to have Deputy Fuller talk about how it's measured. But altogether, I would say we were given a clear mandate by Ontarians. We're delivering on that mandate. The amount of jobs we've been able to secure—

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Sorry, Chair, we're straying from my question. I'll move on, though.

Your services line is budgeted at about \$7.56 million this year; that's down from about \$8.9 million over last year's estimates. What services have been reduced or eliminated to achieve the \$1.3-million reduction?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, we have a lean excellence team, so the reduction you're talking about is just from doing things smarter and better. We often say we're working smarter and better for businesses, and that's a great example, in the line item and estimates that you've outlined.

Deputy Sutton, who has now joined me—

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

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —I know I've been referring to Deputy Fuller—can also talk to you about some of those accomplishments, as well.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I'll just ask a question so we can jump right to that: Does that reduction include consultants, professional services, polling, research, communications or any other external contractors?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: What you'll note, and I mentioned it in my opening remarks as well, is that with the lean excellence provisions we've put in place, we have been able to find \$60 million in savings. That's more than 240,000 hours that have been saved, and that equates to about 28 years.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Does it include consultants in polling and communications?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, part of Cabinet Office is internal communications. Part of the saving is also to bring consulting in-house.

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

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: Thank you, Minister, for that presentation. Thank you for being here with your wonderful staff and your team. And thank you for your leadership—the Premier's leadership and your leadership—in bringing effectiveness and efficiency into many sectors. I've been privileged and honoured to be working with you and seeing first-hand how much value you're bringing to the table, especially for Ontarians. We could talk about hours and hours, \$1.8 billion in savings for the taxpayers every year, and 1.2 million hours for the taxpayers every year, saving time—amazing, amazing. Your leadership and the Premier's leadership would be commendable.

I have a couple of questions, Minister. We'll talk about some good-news stories.

Minister, one thing we see in the estimates is official travel-related expenses for the Premier's office: Council of the Federation meetings in Ottawa and PEI; Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers conference in Quebec City; and various official visits to the United States, including Washington, South Carolina, Michigan, Utah and Texas. Can the minister please explain how this official travel supports our mandate to protect Ontario?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you to my great colleague and my parliamentary assistant for the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction for that question.

This is a good example of, when you look at the estimates, and the value that is having your number one salesperson for Ontario investments and jobs—and that is the Premier and his team. The Council of the Federation meetings, there's a few of them—in Ottawa and PEI—and they really showcase the federation's unity. I think this is a time when every Premier across this country and the Prime Minister are united when it comes to trade diversification. It took, unfortunately, this crisis, in terms of a trade war, to start bringing down a lot of the inter-provincial trade barriers. When Premier Ford was chair of the federation, he brought that to the table, to say, "We have to look internally in Canada to do what we can to break and reduce those interprovincial trade barriers." We're seeing those results, and that will help things like improving affordability. They'll improve our public health care system. You look at the as-of-right changes that Minister Sylvia Jones has championed so that we can recognize credentials from other provinces in Ontario in something like two business days. It's through these meetings that the Premier really emphasizes the agenda, which is protecting our economy, and not doing it just in Ontario, but doing it on a national stage so that we can ensure that we have a stronger economy coming out of this than we do coming in.

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That's the whole point of Fortress North America. Fortress North America seizes on that opportunity we have as Canadians, as Ontario, to communicate how we can strengthen relations with the United States but also diversify markets.

Let's remember what got us into this, and that is the United States wanting to walk away from any interdependency with China and/or its proxies, which then made them

look at different trade routes they had. So we need to remind them that the strongest trade they have is with their neighbours, us Canadians, and Ontario to a certain extent. You saw those conversations in the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers meeting—the Premiers’ conference in Quebec City—and different visits that the Premier has taken to the United States, as reflected in the estimates.

Mr. Logan Kanapathi: On the same topic, Minister, in regard to the official travel of the Premier’s office, my constituents would like to know what these meetings accomplished. Respect for tax dollars is an important cornerstone of our government. So can you please explain how the success of these travels is measured?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, the ROI, the value for taxpayer dollars, whenever any of these types of trips happen, I would say, is—when was the last time we heard of a Premier who went to a state like Texas, the second-largest economy in the United States? Within that one trip, he went to Houston, Austin, Dallas and brought home, just in real time, \$462 million in investment when it came to a direct contribution by waste management announcement. There’s a potential \$6 billion more in investments that may come out of that trip alone. I would say that this shows that it’s the Premier who has the right priorities in order, which is to do whatever it takes to protect our economy. That includes bringing in investments and then turning those investments around to help Ontarians, with a \$30-billion tariff relief fund.

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

Now I’m passing it over to my colleague PA Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you, Minister, for coming here this afternoon. I really appreciate being able to work with you in the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction and to learn from you. It has been a fantastic 12 months. I’m really proud of all the work that we’ve been able to accomplish this past year in reducing red tape for the people of Ontario.

Yesterday, during the estimates hearings, I asked the Minister of Labour about the trade war in the United States that we are faced with—the trade war that we did not cause, the trade war that we did not ask for, but the trade war that we find ourselves in nonetheless, and all the instability that that creates.

I also want to ask you about the Premier’s travel, going down to Washington, speaking with the decision-makers in Washington. Why is that important to do—for the Premier to be in this trade war that we find ourselves in, where workers and the businesses in this province, and in the United States, are caught in the crosshairs? Why is that work so important?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: That’s a good question.

Your riding is no different from mine. It’s a tough time, and a lot of folks want to know what the government and the Premier are doing to help them.

I would say an example of good work that has been done is also—you look at the memos of understanding that have been signed through the Premier’s leadership. There

was a memo of understanding with Maryland alone that grew trade by \$2.39 billion in this province in 2020. We re-signed it, in our wisdom and with the Premier’s leadership, so in 2023 we were able to see an investment of \$2.69 billion. Now we’re working towards the implementation of another memo of understanding which would reflect the 2025 numbers. We don’t have those investment numbers yet. But it shows you that that strengthened relationship pays dividends not only for our economy but for the American economy. That way, none of us hemorrhage jobs. We should be focused on bringing those jobs to Ontario and doing whatever it takes.

Again, those particular outreach elements and trade missions that the Premier has led, or our Minister of Economic Development—they’re another way that we’re defending Ontarians, another way that we’re bringing investments back to this province. I think, if you look at the results since 2018, for instance, that’s how we got to bringing home \$235 billion of investments. I have one in my riding: Northern Transformer. They’re based out of Vaughan, but thanks to their particular investment—over \$200 million has been invested, and they’re creating 151 jobs. The ripple effects on that manufacturing—the energy security that it’s going to provide, not just in places like my own, but across the continuum and the supply chain that is Ontario.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Going to the estimates, specifically with the Premier’s office: Talk to me a bit more about how the Premier’s office is leading by example, doing more with less, and why it’s important to set that example from the top.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Yes, I think that we have to commend his team. We have a number of MPPs and ministers in our government. Think about the number of people who have the Premier’s cellphone number. We need a really strong and mighty team with the Premier’s office, but they’re constantly doing more with less; I want to pay kudos to them for doing so. If I need to send a message at 1 o’clock in the morning, sometimes I get a response. As a mom of two, I might be up doing mom duties. I know many of the folks in the Premier’s office take their duties very seriously.

Under the leadership of the Premier and his chief of staff—again, they’ve led by example, putting in place a hiring freeze, reducing the staff complement at a time when many Ontarians have to make tough choices. We are bearing that with things like the small business tax cut, the gas tax relief that this government has made permanent—all things we’re doing to reduce the cost of living but also change and improve how government functions so that there is more value for money. We are getting good return on investment for a taxpayer-funded-run government.

I’d say, between the amount of investments the Premier has been able to bring—and that doesn’t happen alone. He is our biggest general right now; he is our general in this economic trade war, and certainly we can’t disseminate our general without his soldiers. His soldiers are strong and marching well. We can depend on them to continuously do more with less and run a lean, mean machine.

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

MPP Monica Ciriello: Thank you to the minister for being here today, and your incredible team, and for the work that you are doing to find efficiencies across our province.

When you were in Hamilton not too long ago, we had been able to make some pretty great announcements about reducing red tape, cutting through some bureaucracy and really finding efficiencies in work for dollar, especially in Hamilton.

I'm going to pivot a little bit, because I know you talked a little bit in your opening remarks about advertising and the work that advertisement does to ensure that the people of Ontario know the benefits and the services that are truly available to them from this government. I would like to know what is being done to ensure that we are also getting value for money with these ads, along with all of the other work that you are doing in your ministry.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I appreciate it.

I think it's important to note that advertising is information, and we're constantly informing and being transparent with Ontarians about how this government is protecting them, what services are available to bring down the cost of living. We don't just stop there, whether it's the breast cancer screening campaign—we know early detection is good—whether it's employment opportunities through Ontario Parks or through skilled trades, what have you. These are all things that we are advertising to Ontarians, that are available to them.

The ads are working; the number of impressions is into the millions. I will say, two that really stand out to me, when we do advertising campaigns in other jurisdictions—in the United States, we ran a health care recruitment campaign; it got about 63.7 million impressions. And if that wasn't enough, we were able to actually recruit 600 nurses and physicians as a result of that campaign. Again, at a time when we're constantly trying to connect more people to primary care, and we have an ambitious goal, by 2028, this is an example of an ROI of—there's value for money in terms of getting those health care professionals here just simply from an advertising campaign.

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We also need more investments here, and that has been a subject of much questioning. If you look at some international ads we've run on things like Invest Ontario—as a result of those Invest Ontario ads, we've been able to see an increase of 600 request-to-convene meetings with Invest Ontario on a year-to-year basis. I would say that is a success. We'll continue to build on that, because we have to do everything we can not only to strengthen our services like health care here through those advertising campaigns, but also the investment opportunity those campaigns provide.

MPP Monica Ciriello: Thank you for the fulsome answer.

I think that it's mind-blowing—63 million impressions certainly shows that advertisements are working. I know one advertisement that spoke volumes was the Ronald Reagan ad—the It's Happening Here ad. We know that it performed exceptionally well.

I know when I'm at the doors in my community in Hamilton—just like you or my counterparts across the province, I'm sure. Constituents love the work that our government is doing to showcase Ontario as not only a premier destination for investment right now but certainly job creation in the future.

I'm wondering if the minister could speak about why these ads noted in the estimates continue to be important for our government.

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

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I would say the ad was successful in terms of the amount of impressions they did receive.

But what I will say is more important to note is the advertising—and I know some other members asked this type of question. We brought more of that advertising in-house, and just by doing these direct media buys, we've been able to have a cost avoidance of about \$3 million. So when we talk about what you were mentioning, value for money—there's certainly a value-for-money proposition there when you can see that we've done \$3 million in cost avoidance by, again, doing a lot of this advertising in-house.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: I have some questions about cabinet accountability. Cabinet Office policies are funded under the Cabinet Office program, which is vote 401.

I was sitting on public accounts when the greenbelt scandal came out. Political staff approved housing construction on the greenbelt to help a handful of landowners and developers with close ties to the Premier make an obscene amount of money, about \$8 billion. As a result of that, the Auditor General issued a report giving some recommendations to cabinet on how their practices could change. The government said that they would implement all of those recommendations and, to the best of my knowledge, I believe that they have done so.

One of the recommendations was focused on cabinet. The Auditor General recommended to cabinet to change Cabinet Office policies so this kind of political interference doesn't happen again—and if it is going to happen, there needs to be a very clear paper trail. Has the government implemented this recommendation? Has the Cabinet Office implemented this recommendation?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, we're here to talk about estimates, but, certainly, as I outlined in my opening remarks, Cabinet Office has all types of roles and recommendations that you are alluding to.

Our government has been on the record, and pretty public about it, saying we welcome the recommendations, we adopted the recommendations—full story.

Ms. Jessica Bell: The government has publicly said that they have implemented this recommendation, and they have communicated with the Auditor General that they have implemented this recommendation. Essentially, what it is is, if political staff interfere with the role of a public servant, there needs to be a clear channel open to cabinet so that concern or those questions or a directive can be communicated directly with cabinet. So my ques-

tion to you, once again: Is Cabinet Office following this recommendation?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I certainly can answer that, but I can also pass it on to the deputy ministers.

As I said, we've been on record; we've adopted the recommendations. We agreed with the recommendations when they came out. We're going in the past here.

Again, we're talking about estimates, but I know Deputy Sutton is here to talk about that as well.

Ms. Shannon Fuller: Shannon Fuller, deputy minister of policy and delivery in Cabinet Office.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm going to get this right at some point.

Ms. Jessica Bell: That's okay. I understand.

Ms. Shannon Fuller: Thank you very much for the question.

Yes, absolutely, there are a variety of different escalation measures that we do have in place and which we have communicated across the Ontario public service, as well as to the Premier's office and ministers' offices, should there be concern around direction coming to officials from a political office.

Ms. Jessica Bell: And just to clarify: If there is concern about political interference, one of those recommendations is that there is a direct channel to Cabinet Office?

Ms. Shannon Fuller: Correct.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Earlier this year, deputy ministers were told through Microsoft Teams to stop processing FOI requests. Because Teams messages are automatically deleted after 30 days, the deputy ministers asked to have that direction in writing, and that request was refused.

Minister, have you looked into this claim? Have you investigated it, and if you have, what have you found?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm here to talk about estimates, not FOI investigations. But I can tell you the updates we have made on the access-to-information processes—as I mentioned earlier, using technologies like SharePoint and Power Apps to make it more transparent, being able to turn around things much quicker. That is actually reflected in your estimates today. Again, we updated legislation. It's not something that's within the estimates, but it's a fact. We had legislation that was outdated for 40 years.

How records are obtained is not changing; 95% of the changes we made are not impacting that. Ontario, frankly, has similar practices to not only the government of Canada, but every province in this country. That hasn't changed.

I'm happy to speak to the investments within estimates of how to improve the FOI process.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm sure you will have another chance to do so.

To be clear, the government said that they had implemented this recommendation to restrict political interference on public servants, and a report came out this year showing that in fact, when it comes to FOI requests, there was political interference and when deputy ministers asked for written clarity on that, it was refused.

The Ontario Information and Privacy Commissioner has said that any political interference in the FOI process is unacceptable. Do you agree with that statement, Minister?

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: We are in estimates. This is the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. We're in estimates, and the purpose of estimates is to go through the spending of different ministries and if we have met what we said that we were going to on the spending aspect of it.

I have yet to hear anything from the member opposite that actually comes back to the dollar amounts, the money that we have said that we were going to spend and how we spent it. Instead, she has taken this time to come up with a whole bunch of social media clips that are not appropriate. It's not part of what this committee is or what this process is supposed to be. I would request that the member stick to what estimates actually are.

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

I do point out that this is not question period; this is estimates, and every question should relate to the estimates, and the preamble to that question should relate to the question you're going to ask. That means you're going to be talking about the future spending of the government.

I just want to point out to everybody to be cautious to speak to the estimates. It's not question period, where you can wander all over and turn it all into any question you would like. The question is about estimates.

Back to MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Cabinet Office policies are funded under the Cabinet Office program, which is vote 401, as I mentioned. Freedom-of-information requests are certainly part of Cabinet Office's responsibility, and that has been mentioned numerous times.

I'm going to move on.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I'll just point out it's not for the past—it's in the future of spending on the estimates.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm going to move on.

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I want to end with a quote from Patricia Kosseim, the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario: "Taking away Ontarians' access rights—retroactively and into the future—denies them the information they need to understand government decision-making at the highest levels and hold their governments to account.... This should be concerning for all Ontarians, regardless of political affiliation. We urge the government to reconsider its proposal and keep public trust onside."

When we are talking about freedom-of-information processes, I agree with that statement. Transparency is a powerful disinfectant to misdoing and corruption. I believe this government needs to take a bath.

My next questions are focused on the Premier's office's staffing. You've mentioned this a few times. There are a lot of numbers that are going to be mentioned here, so hopefully the MPP's office opposite will maybe stop me less. The minister mentioned a few times the value of leading by example.

The Ontario government has announced a hiring freeze across 143 provincial agencies, boards and commissions starting September 27, 2025. Correct?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: That's correct, as per the news release. I'm happy to elaborate on any of those questions via the President of the Treasury Board. Agencies, as you know, falls under the Treasury Board.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. And then in July 2026, the Premier's office publicly announced that it reduced its staff head count to 10, imposed a hiring freeze, and expected to save \$1.07 million. Is that still correct?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: There are savings due to the hiring freeze and the reduction of 10 staff. That's correct; there are savings.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I am a little bit confused here. I noticed in your opening statements, you said there was a reduction of 10 staff. But then, in the announcement in July 2026, it was announced that the head count was reduced to 10 staff. So is it safe to say it went from 20 to 10?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm referring to estimates. What you're referring to is a news release. I'm referring to estimates. If you'd like to point to the line item that you have a question on, I'm happy to answer.

Ms. Jessica Bell: This is about how much money is being spent by the Premier's office.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Which line item in estimates are you referring to? Which page? I'm happy to answer.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, so help me out here. How many people currently work in the Premier's office?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Which line item are you referring to in estimates?

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm asking you a specific question. You must know. How many people currently work in the Premier's office?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm here to talk about estimates. I want you to refer—point to me. Give me the page number that you would like an answer for.

Ms. Jessica Bell: In your opening statement, you mentioned that the number of staff working at the Premier's office had been reduced by 10.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Correct.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Can you clarify for me how many people are working in the Premier's office?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: And can you clarify for me which line item you're referring to?

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm asking you a very simple question; you mentioned it in your opening statement.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'm confirming what I said in my opening statement.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I think we can go back and forth, but I think this is exactly the point the Chair has been trying to make—if it doesn't refer to the estimates and it cannot be pointed out where in the estimates we are talking about, the question is out of order.

Back to MPP Bell.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Budgeting and staffing salaries are part of estimates.

The Premier's office is spending \$2.154 million on salaries. They have said this publicly. That's correct, yes?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Are you referring to a news release? I'm happy for you to refer to a news release, but we're referring to estimates in the committee today. Would you like to refer to the question you have on estimates, as opposed to news releases the government has issued?

Ms. Jessica Bell: How much money is the Premier's office spending on salaries?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: You will see in vote item 2401, if you look at the Premier's office operations, page 17 of your estimates: salaries and wages, \$2.1 million and change; employee benefits; transportation and communication; services—total operating expenses of \$2.4 million.

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay, \$2.4 million.

Before I came here today, I took a look at the sunshine list. The 2025 sunshine list documents how many people are working in the public sector, and it only looks at people who are earning over \$100,000. The sunshine list—

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order, Chair.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: I believe you already ruled on this when the Liberal member brought up this line of questioning as well, with reference to the sunshine list and the number of employees. You said that it was out of order when the Liberal member brought it up. I therefore would believe that it would be out of order when the NDP member brings it up.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): I believe the question was referring to the estimates, and she will stay with the estimates.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I am staying with the estimates.

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: I am questioning the legitimacy of the estimates.

The sunshine list shows that 50 people work in the Premier's office, yet publicly the government is saying, through press releases, that 10 people are working for the Premier's office. Which is it? Is it 10 people or is it 50 people working for the Premier's office? It's a very simple question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: The news release you are referring to should have said "a reduction of 10." The salary and number of employees you are referring to is from public sector salary disclosure—two items that aren't in estimates. But if you look at the public sector salary disclosure, you'll see there are 50 employees. We're not hiding anything. This is literally information you can find on the public website, which you yourself have quoted.

The premise of you saying there is something to hide is totally incorrect, because the number of employees is available online; salary, available online.

The news release we sent should have said "a reduction of 10 employees."

Ms. Jessica Bell: Okay. How many people are working in the Premier's office? If you're so focused on being transparent, just tell us how many, because there's a big difference between what the sunshine list is saying and what the Ontario government is releasing in its news releases. How many people?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Again, you know the number because you can look it up on the public salary disclosure website. It's public information. You referred to the sunshine list.

It's something that you too at home can look up—every Ontarian can look it up using their laptop, on the World Wide Web.

I'm here to talk about estimates. I'm happy to answer on estimates.

What you're referring to is already publicly disclosed information, and alluding to this government—it's publicly available. There's nothing to hide.

I'm happy to move on to the next question.

Ms. Jessica Bell: I'm hearing a whole lot of different information here, but what I gather—

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

Ms. Jessica Bell: —from this conversation is that the Conservative government wants staffing freezes and budget cuts for everyone else except themselves. And the numbers don't add up. There is this illusion that they want to crack down on spending. But the truth is, when it comes to your own staff, you're opening up the spending floodgates. Going by—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I wouldn't characterize it that way.

Ms. Jessica Bell: How would you characterize it?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I wouldn't characterize it that way. You clearly have a lot of hesitation and concern over the Premier's hiring freeze. Perhaps you want us to hire more, judging from your questions.

We're in an economic trade war. We're leading by example by doing more with less every day. We have a very dedicated team who works day and night to bring investments to the province, and their key performance indicators and the amount of investment they have brought is paying dividends. We talked about how since 2018 this is a government that has brought \$235 billion in investment to this province. Every time the Premier leaves—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): That concludes the time.

We'll now go to MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I want to just pick up on the minister's comment about doing more with less. You're certainly doing more on the number of ministers that this government has—37 ministers, including the Premier, which is larger than the federal cabinet by 11. That doesn't even include all of the multiple PAs that many ministers have.

The cabinet has actually doubled since you first took office. How do you align that with the concept of doing more with less?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Can you refer me to the line in estimates that you're referring to?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Sure. It's "Cabinet Office," "Salaries and wages."

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Great. If you look at the Cabinet Office program and you look at salaries and wages, yes, there's a number there of \$43 million and change. Then we have employee benefits; transportation and communication; services; supplies and equipment.

I mentioned to you in my opening remarks that there have been a lot of efficiencies made. We actually have an individual here who I would call up because he's doing some really great work on lean excellence, and that actually helps us, again, save a lot of—because the premise of your question is, how are we doing value for money? How are we saving dollars? Certainly, you can see that in real time through the Premier's leadership on the lean excellence team and how not only have we been able to save money internally, but also secure investments by the very work the Premier's office does through supporting Cabinet Office as well—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you.

Chair, I'd like to just reclaim my time.

Yes, doing more is certainly clear; the cabinet has doubled. You've appointed a significant number of more cabinet ministers. That is all costing taxpayers money, and I think that's—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: So which one of the cabinet minister priorities would you cut? Are wildfires not important?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Sorry, I'm here to ask the questions today, Minister.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: But are you alluding to a cut you would make? Is long-term care not a priority—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you. I'm here to ask the questions.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —well, actually, it wasn't according to Liberals. I remember that.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Order. Order. I'd like to remind all the honourable members that they should speak through the Chair, not to each other. We'll get along a whole lot better, and we'll get a lot more done.

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Now we'll go back to MPP Bowman.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Let's move on to interprovincial trade. The minister mentioned that. It's something that certainly is of great interest, as you've talked about, in the trade war that we are in. It's interesting that back in 2019, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney pushed the idea. And then nothing happened for seven years, until 2026, when this government tabled a bill. Unfortunately, the progress has been slow.

The CFIB notes that there's a large gap between announcements and operational realities on mutual recognition agreements for labour mobility and barrier-free trade in goods and services. According to the CFIB, "Persistent interprovincial barriers include tax complexity, licensing and regulatory differences, and transportation and logistics challenges." Some 67% of Ontario small businesses report no significant change in ease of doing business across provincial borders. I'm wondering if you could comment on that.

Mr. Dave Smith: Point of order.

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

Mr. Dave Smith: Again, I have to interject. Interprovincial trade is the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. If the

member would like to talk about the estimates for any of the three offices that are here—quite happy to deal with that. But she’s talking about things for MEDJCAT and finance.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): It may be, but they fit in with the presentation that was made from the Premier’s office.

Carry on.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I imagine you’re referring to intergovernmental affairs.

There have been 60 Premier-led missions to not only improve our trade, diversifying our markets, but also internally. You’ll see, through the estimates, whether it was the First Ministers’ meetings that have happened, one of them—and many years of them—being chaired by the Premier. That is something that the Premier has led to break down interprovincial trade barriers. But some of that work in Ontario had started well before then. I will pass it over to Deputy Sutton—because that does fall under intergovernmental affairs—to talk about the amount of work that has actually been done to break down trade barriers through those missions.

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: Thank you, Minister.

Yes, the work on interprovincial trade has been a priority at the Premiers’ table and is something that Premiers have been seized with, in terms of breaking down those barriers. Ontario has led a leading position on that through work that was done through our colleagues at the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade on mutual recognition, and in addition to the Ministry of Finance.

You will have seen, just around the summertime, the announcement on direct consumer alcohol sales, with now the ability for producers to sell directly to consumers. That was something that hampered the system for a very long time. So there’s a lot of really positive progress happening on that front, and Premier Ford—

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

I will just point out that Ontario is lagging other provinces when it comes to implementing the final rules. According to the CFIB, the Ontario government has indicated that only Nova Scotia, Manitoba and the federal government will immediately qualify for mutual recognition. I would certainly like to see the government of Ontario take a lead on that, but we’ll have to wait for that.

I want to come back to the advertisements that the minister talked about. The Auditor General said that Ontario spent a record \$112 million on taxpayer-funded advertising last year, and that 38% of the campaigns were meant to leave people with a “positive impression” of Premier Doug Ford’s government and came ahead of the snap election. She went on to say, “When I look at value for money for those ads, we look at, is this telling me anything I didn’t know as a person in Ontario?”

“Some of the ads are quite promotional for the governing party. They aren’t really providing really good, solid information to the citizens of Ontario.”

I want to know if you would care to respond specifically to the Auditor General’s comments on value for money from those ads.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: What you will see with all the ads—ultimately, they’re approved by the Auditor General. All rules were followed, and all ads were approved by the Auditor General.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: The Auditor General has also said the rules should change. I know this government says, “Don’t break the rules if you don’t like them; change them.” So maybe we can get those ad rules changed.

I would also like to come back to travel under the Premier’s office; we’ve got an estimate here for \$73,100. I’m wondering if you could tell us how much of that travel is done by at least private jets?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: So you’re referring to the Premier going and securing investments to bring back to Ontario—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: No, I’m talking about—sorry, Chair. Just to clarify my question—maybe the minister didn’t hear me—I’m asking about how much of the \$73,100 in the Premier’s office budget for travel is done on private jets.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: It’s a good question, because she will recall, when Dalton McGuinty was Premier, he took 426 flights, 194 of them empty.

However, when this Premier flies, his flights aren’t empty; they’re actually filled with security staff, because the reality when you’re Premier of this province is that you can’t just always fly without security. The general needs to bring all of his soldiers when it comes to this economic trade war. So when he goes south of the border and he makes those trips—let’s remind you. In the span of 24 hours, this Premier went to Texas, the second-largest economy in the United States—went to Dallas, Houston and Austin, was able to be nimble and brought back \$294 million of investment.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I don’t have an answer yet as to how much of that spending in the estimates here is on private jets.

The Premier said that it was not the right time for the government to buy a private jet, and so he reversed that decision. He certainly, at that time, thought it was the right thing to do. I’m curious to hear if he will lease that jet back to conduct his private travel this year.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: You’re referring to the Ontario-made used aircraft, which was sold. Again, it has nothing to do with these estimates.

What I will have to say about the estimates is, the travel the Premier has done—we’re in an economic trade war. You cannot sign these types of agreements sitting behind a desk. We have a Premier; he is our general. He’s going out there and signing not only agreements and memos of understanding with other states, but in real time, helping to secure Ontario jobs.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. I would just like to reclaim my time.

Again, I’m just trying to understand how much of the Premier’s travel in the estimates will be done in private jets.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: We’re talking about estimates. I’m happy to refer to any of the trips that have occurred that have brought back investments. We talk about—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Were those done on private jets?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —the Council of the Federation meetings.

Do you understand the size of Ontario? We've got two different time zones. We're twice the size of Texas. The Premier—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I was born and raised here in Ontario. I certainly understand the size—

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —needs to be able, at a moment's notice, to go anywhere where there are going to be investments made.

Just yesterday, he was talking about the energy corridor out in Alberta—

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

I think it's clear that the Premier—through the minister here—doesn't want to talk about his travel because he knows that the private jet was the wrong decision to make in an affordability crisis. That's why he reversed the decision and sold the jet back, at a cost to taxpayers of about \$190,000.

Certainly, it would be interesting to hear what the current view is on leasing private jets. Again, I think if the Premier thinks it's the right thing to do, he should be—through you, Minister—quite willing to say that and tell us how much he's going to spend on those jets this year.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: The Premier has been clear. He has a \$220-billion plan to strengthen our resiliency, boost our competitive economy. You don't do that behind a desk; you go out there and make sure you do everything you can to protect Ontario jobs.

I know when you held the balance of power, we had 300,000 manufacturing jobs that left this province. We had nurses who were leaving this province.

Instead, we're bringing back much of those investments—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I'll reclaim my time.

The government has apparently created about 800 manufacturing jobs in the eight years it was here, so it's not a stellar record.

Let's just come back to the private jet. Private jets can only land on about 10% of runways in this province, so I'm not sure that the minister or the Premier understand the lay of the land in the province.

Again, I just want to get to the answer around how much of the estimates that are laid before us here today will be spent on private jets.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: The Premier has been clear: He will do whatever it takes in order to protect Ontario jobs.

Hilton Foods invested \$109 million in our economy—150 jobs. AstraZeneca invested \$820 million—700 jobs were created. You do not have these types of deals by sitting behind a desk; you get out there.

When you're in an economic trade war, I would hope our Premier has the best interests—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: —of this province in mind.

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I would just like to conclude that we still don't know today how much taxpayer money

will be spent on the leasing or the renting of private jets for the Premier from these estimates. That's disappointing, especially since this Premier acknowledged that buying a jet was the wrong thing to do during an affordability crisis. We have a minister here before us today who will not talk about whether or not the Premier is going to use that jet. We understand that jet was sold to a company he already leases planes from. Again, I think it's only fair that the government be willing to talk about what the Premier's plans are to use that jet. If we don't hear it today, it's okay; we'll continue to ask when we finally get back to the Legislature after—how many months away? Four or five months away.

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Chair, let me go back to the advertising. We know that we're not seeing the results here in terms of jobs. We've got one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. Of all the large provinces in the country, we've got the highest unemployment.

I wonder if the minister would care to comment on whether or not the ads in the fall contributed to the ceasing of the trade talks that were well under way at that time.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I alluded to it in one of my answers, but look at the Invest Ontario ad that we ran internationally—264 million impressions. It resulted in a 600% increase in requests or conversations with Invest Ontario, year over year. That is people who are calling Invest Ontario because they want to invest in Ontario supply chains and they want to create jobs here in Ontario.

The Ronald Reagan campaign, 14 billion impressions—

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

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

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: It certainly impressed the President, because he cancelled the trade talks, following that ad. So, certainly, it has made an impression.

Let me just go back to the conversation about advertising, around what could be being done.

The Tourism Industry Association of Ontario has requested \$15 million to boost the profile of our beautiful province and make sure that we are bringing tourists here from the US, from other provinces. This government has not approved that request but is, again, spending millions of dollars, according to the Auditor General, on self-promoting ads. How do you reconcile those two things?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Maybe the Liberal Party thinks affordability is self-promoting, but we care about Ontarians' livelihoods, and we have done ads on affordability to allow Ontarians—what services are available to them. It created 175 million impressions.

Maybe you don't think the measles vaccine is important—

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Thank you, Chair. Can I reclaim my time?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: We've also done advertising on the measles vaccine.

Maybe you don't think health care screening for breast cancer is important.

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: Which one of those—

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

We now will go to MPP Brady.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: The minister was just speaking of investments and jobs. And we know Cabinet Office is asking taxpayers to approve \$77.2 million this year. I understand that the mandate is also to provide strategic advice to the Premier and cabinet, coordinate across government agencies and support the delivery of government priorities.

I'm sure my colleague across the table from Hamilton will be interested in this line of questioning as well. Yesterday, Ontario's largest steelmaker announced it is idling operations in Hamilton and potentially affecting up to 500 workers. I'm shocked that nobody has actually talked about this yet today.

Last year, in response to a question that I asked in the House, the Premier was extremely critical of Cleveland-Cliffs' CEO and questioned whether the company was committed to Canadian steel.

We've heard several times this afternoon that the Premier is a leader across the border.

So I'm asking the minister if you can tell this committee what portion of the resources in these estimates will be dedicated to the government's strategic response to this situation and to protecting Ontario's steel industry.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I've been to Hamilton. I have two colleagues here actually from that area.

My heart goes out to everyone who is affected by this. It's not an easy time, but that's why you have a Premier who goes out. When we first heard the announcement of what was happening to the steel sector, he stood shoulder to shoulder with those workers at Dofasco. MPP Ciriello was there, ensuring that they have a sense of certainty. He said it on record—he will do whatever it takes to protect them. In part, that is also why we have a \$30-billion relief fund, the Ontario Together Trade Fund, to help.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: So do we have an idea how much of that \$30 billion will assist in getting things back on track with our steel industry?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: We're talking about estimates here today.

What I'd say is, even today, you saw the qualifications to access those funds have been extended, so it really depends on those companies—when they apply for that relief. I can't speak to that number before you because it's a hypothetical of when they apply to get the relief.

I will say that we're ramping up services like the—and my colleagues know about the POWER centre in Hamilton, where we recently funded 50% of—helping workers connect to the local jobs at the training centre there as well. We're doing things twofold. We're investing in the training, things like the POWER centre, like my colleagues in Hamilton know, but we're also ensuring that we have a tariff fund that is there for those companies and workers who need it most.

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: It's 16,000 direct jobs, 53,000 indirect jobs. We don't have a dollar figure on what we're actually going to commit to help solve this.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: If you look at the Premier's comments, he has said he'll do whatever it takes—if it's things like my job at the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction, whether it's my colleagues at intergovernmental affairs, whether it's the Premier making sure we have assurances to the steel factor. This is why we have the \$30-billion trade relief fund. This is why we put investments into things like skills training. Again, it's a little bit outside of the estimates today, but I know it has been top of news and it's something that the Premier and our government doesn't take lightly. That's why he has been laser-focused on helping Ontario steel producers, when it comes to the reliance on US steel.

I will say that this is another reason why we put in buy-Ontario policies. The buy-Ontario policies—

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I'll move on. But maybe the Premier could begin actually apologizing to the CEO of Cleveland-Cliffs for his remarks last year.

You mentioned red tape reduction and that you were increasing the red tape reduction budget to \$12.7 million in the coming year—an increase of approximately \$1.3 million. Can you tell this committee what measurable reduction in regulatory burden that additional \$1.3 million is expected to produce for small businesses, farmers, and our municipalities?

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

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: It's a great question.

Just to go back to your other question for a moment, we have also told the federal government to join us on our made-in-Ontario policy, to make more things with Ontario steel, like pipelines and infrastructure—

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: There's a new question on the table, Chair. I asked a new question.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: On the question you asked me for red tape reduction: An example of that is on the agriculture front, the amount of time we've saved on licensing—

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Brady, did you ask the question?

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: Yes. She pivoted.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Oh, okay.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I just wanted to make sure we get a full answer on the previous one too.

On red tape reduction: There are things like licensing fees we streamline. The \$1.3 million is what you're asking about? Part of that is the vehicle dealership licensing fee. It has saved \$51 million for individuals, through those upgrades and transactions.

If you look at One Fare, that's also part of saving—

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

We will now go to MPP Lahey.

MPP Susan Lahey: MPP Susan Lahey, the newly elected MPP for York-Simcoe. I'm deeply honoured to be here today representing all of the residents of York-Simcoe.

I want to thank the minister for being here to answer questions on estimates. So I'm going to redirect the questions towards estimates.

What the estimates show me is financially responsible spending to make sure that our government can continue

to deliver the services that matter most to the people of not only my riding of York–Simcoe, but across our entire province.

Can the minister please explain how government spending is protecting core public services while maintaining a responsible fiscal plan?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Within what you see with the estimates, in terms of what we're doing to make sure that we are communicating what Fortress Am-Can is designed to do—I know that our folks within intergovernmental affairs have been laser-focused on promoting Fortress Am-Can. I'm going to point to Deputy Sutton here, because I know there has been a lot of time and resources spent in terms of communicating that particular plan and the results we have seen by taking that plan not only south of the border, internationally, but also communicating amongst other Premiers of this province on the Fortress Am-Can strategy that we put in place, with the leadership of the Premier.

MPP Susan Lahey: Yes, there has been lots of emphasis in terms of Fortress North America and the work that has gone into that in order to present to our partners in the US a possible path forward, in terms of working closely aligned together. It is something that we can continue to benefit from, in terms of energy and in terms of ongoing trade. That has been a key pillar of the plan, in terms of highlighting the benefits that both economies have seen, working together, including that of Mexico, as we head towards the CUSMA renewal.

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I would like to discuss advertising again; the estimates show that the importance of government spending is to ensure people know about the products and services available to them in every corner of our great province. What's also important is making sure there is accountability with these advertising campaigns, to ensure strong value for taxpayers.

What accountability measures apply to government advertising and public communications?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: All ad communications are run through the Auditor General's office. There are strict guidelines through Cabinet Office that are abided by when it comes to any of those campaigns. And as a result of updating practices, we've also seen savings in terms of when it comes to said campaigns.

An example of a Protect Ontario campaign that the government has run is the Ring of Fire—there were 536 million impressions on that particular campaign. Your riding is just next door to mine. Oftentimes, when you talk to Ontarians about the Ring of Fire, the first thing they say is, "Oh, is it actually happening?" There's a belief there that it's something that governments talk about but never get off the ground. But this government has made huge inroads, talking to all types of communities, to get the project off the ground, and that will help communities from yours to mine, because of the supply chains. It's no different from the investments in the ads done on nuclear energy.

Nuclear energy—the impressions on that were 414 impressions. That shows that, when it comes to advertising

about nuclear, it's not just about, again, showing that we have energy security, but it's also doubling down on the fact that—when you're in Barrie and you listen to that ad, you're part of that story. If you work at Brotech in Barrie, you're actually making the precision components to support the nuclear refurbishment. When you see that ad, it's a proud moment. You're working on something that's creating and building a nation. We need to do more of that.

We need to give Ontarians hope, but also strengthen our nation. The supply chains we're strengthening through Buy Ontario—that makes everyone proud that they're part of this effort to fight Donald Trump's tariffs, and they're part of this kind of wartime effort, if you will, to really rally around one another and support our local economy. So these ads—that's just what they do.

Look at Foodland. People talk about food security. We did ads on Foodland. I know you have a lot of carrot growers and vegetable growers in your riding. Imagine the pride that you get seeing that ad, knowing that you're part of that supply chain and the government is backing you up and saying, "This is great. Look at our local produce that we're growing through Foodland Ontario and the work that they do."

The overall economic strategy this government has—not only are we talking about urban centres, but we have a rural economic development strategy, and we're really talking about that, when it comes to government communication. That is at a time when folks need certainty. We're providing a lot more certainty through government messaging, and advertising is a way to get the message across.

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

Mr. Jeff Beattie: Thank you, Chair, and through you: Thank you, Minister, for the opportunity to be here today.

First, I wanted to acknowledge that the news in Hamilton was disappointing. I know that our government will use every tool at its disposal to support the community, including ramping up services, as was mentioned at the POWER centre, and putting Ontario steel first, through our buy-Ontario policies. So thank you for that.

As you know, the riding that I represent is very heavily reliant on trade, as are many of our ridings throughout the province. We have a number of employers within Hamilton East–Stoney Creek and throughout Hamilton that are involved in a variety of advanced manufacturing, automotive parts and other steel processing industries.

Coming back to the estimates, though: The estimates show that our government is moving forward with a focused and, I would say, responsible approach to strengthen the economy, particularly in these extremely uncertain times, while supporting the priorities that matter most to Ontarians.

You alluded a little bit at a high level, earlier in your comments, about the role of the Premier's office in terms of trying to advance our government's Protect Ontario plan. I'm wondering if you could dig a little deeper into the important role that the Premier's office plays.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you for that question.

I would say, when it comes to the Fortress Am-Can approach, which is, again, designed by the Premier's office,

through the help of intergovernmental affairs, Cabinet Office and the Premier's leadership—it's really twofold. It's doubling down on our advocacy to our friends and neighbours south of the border, in the United States. I talked about the MOU signed in Maryland, but that's not the only one. We look at the Premier's work done in Boston, Massachusetts, when he was there attending the eastern Canadian Premiers' and northeastern US Governors' meeting, and again reinforcing our strengths—going to Quebec as well, when it comes to meeting with all the different Premiers and what we can do to strengthen our interprovincial supply chains. And just yesterday, you saw some of that work, again, coming out of the Premier's office and that plan with the Premier of Alberta, when it comes to energy security and helping our counterparts here in Ontario, in Sarnia—being able to secure that corridor and energy security, and telling the folks in Sarnia they will have future jobs and prosperity in that region, because this government now has the foresight to have these types of conversations early, to secure that corridor. And I wouldn't take that lightly; it's very significant.

That's no different from—you talked about Hamilton, but just also the other investments and communication this government is doing when it comes to retooling and reskilling individuals, and talking about the investments in trade and our post-secondary sector as well. But that can't all happen without continuing to go out there, do the negotiations and bring those investments back home, so that we can grow our GDP and create more Ontario jobs.

I talked about Northern Transformer in my area, but there are other investments that have been made that I haven't been able to touch upon.

Sandvik is a global, high-tech engineering group, and they provide equipment, tools, digital solutions for manufacturing, mining and industries—a lot of industrial industries here. They are investing \$85 million, and that will be about 60 new jobs, but that will support that whole ecosystem. If you're in the industrial trades, if you're in manufacturing, that will help.

We talk about energy security and what the Premier is talking about in Sarnia. If we can use Ontario steel to make those things, then that, again, will affect that entire supply chain and help.

The Premier has a \$220-billion plan to get us through this, to take us from reliance to resilience. Again, he's not doing this by sitting behind a desk; he's getting out there. He's building relationships. He's securing deals. And we've seen him being able to bring approximately \$60 billion from just going to Texas—to \$235 billion being delivered to this province since this Premier formed government in 2018.

Mr. Jeff Beattie: Both in this role and in my previous role, I had a great opportunity to speak with business owners, employees, managers throughout Hamilton, and one thing that continually comes up is the need to streamline processes, tighten timelines and reduce red tape.

Coming back to your estimates for your ministry—and I believe that they show that changes made within the

ministry have made improvements—I'm wondering if you could continue to elaborate on these changes and the measurable progress that our government has made in reducing red tape, and the effect that it would have on the economic output.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Some of the investment you'll see through red tape reduction is investment in the REGi tool, which, I was telling you, will be able to—again, the return on investment on that is great, because it's able to scrub through Ontario statutes and find efficiencies and redundancies, helping a lot of Ontarians. If we're saving time and money—time is something we can't buy for Ontarians, but if we can change how they interact with government and save them that time, I think that would go a long way. This is a tool that we're using across the enterprise. Right now, it's being used to complement the One Project, One Process, to be able to go through and see what regulations are complex or can be eliminated, and again, it complements the work of policy analysts.

Overall, the work that red tape reduction does is about how we can be better and smarter for businesses. We get ideas from all walks of life in terms of how to reduce costs. I think a great transactional example is—this was a government one. We first came in in 2018; you had ServiceOntario offices where people were lining up, queue after queue, not being able to do transactions online. Just by putting transactions online, we saved a lot of taxpayer dollars and time—that is money they're not spending to have to gas up their car to get to the ServiceOntario station, and that's an hour off work.

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

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: They can actually have a lunch or have a meeting, as opposed to having to get in line to renew their health card or driver's licence. It's being practical and meeting people where they're at.

Mr. Jeff Beattie: I'm sure that that and other measures that this government is putting forward will continue to make our economy competitive in the face of what we're facing out there in the world.

Thank you so much for your time, Minister.

The Chair (Hon. Ernie Hardeman): Twenty seconds.

This concludes the time for the committee's consideration of the 2026-27 estimates of Cabinet Office and the Office of the Premier. Standing order 69 requires the Chair to put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are the members ready to vote?

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

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

Shall the 2026-27 estimates of Cabinet Office carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2026-27 estimates of the Cabinet Office to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the 2026-27 estimates of the Office of the Premier carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2026-27 estimates of the Office of the Premier to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

We have concluded the consideration of the estimates

of the Office of the Premier and Cabinet Office.

I'd like to thank Minister Khanjin for being here and ably representing the Premier's office, and everyone here today for their participation.

There being no further business, this committee now stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1503.

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