

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

No. 56A

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

N° 56A

2nd Session
42nd Parliament

Monday
11 April 2022

2^e session
42^e législature

Lundi
11 avril 2022

Speaker: Honourable Ted Arnott
Clerk: Todd Decker

Président : L'honorable Ted Arnott
Greffier : Todd Decker

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House Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400; fax 416-325-7430
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400; télécopieur, 416-325-7430
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 1180-2987

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

Monday 11 April 2022

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

Lundi 11 avril 2022

The House met at 0900.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Good morning. Let us pray.

Prayers.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GETTING ONTARIO CONNECTED ACT, 2022

LOI DE 2022 POUR UN ONTARIO CONNECTÉ

Miss Surma moved third reading of the following bill:

Bill 93, An Act to amend the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012 / Projet de loi 93, Loi modifiant la Loi de 2021 sur la réalisation accélérée de projets d'Internet à haut débit et la Loi de 2012 sur un système d'information sur les infrastructures souterraines en Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Infrastructure will lead off the debate.

Hon. Kinga Surma: I am pleased to rise for third reading of Bill 93, the Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. I will also be sharing the government's time with my parliamentary assistant, Amarjot Sandhu.

Mr. Speaker, although many of us have begun to return to workplaces, are visiting local businesses and taking part in local activities in our communities, maintaining a strong online economy remains critical for our province's continued economic growth. We still hear from people across the province who struggle daily to take part in our digital world, which is crucial for today's economic success.

Before our government began taking action to fill these service gaps, as many as 700,000 households and businesses across the province didn't have access to fast and reliable Internet services. That's about 1.4 million people being left behind.

Now, more than ever, the people of Ontario who live in the very communities that we represent need reliable high-speed Internet access. It is vital to access health care services, work, learn, start a business, participate in the agricultural sector and connect with our loved ones. That is why our government made a historic investment of nearly \$4 billion to connect every region with access to reliable high-speed Internet by the end of 2025. This is the largest single investment in high-speed Internet in any

province by any government in Canadian history. It is truly outstanding, Mr. Speaker.

Under Premier Ford's leadership, our government has made it a top priority to help expand access to reliable high-speed Internet in unserved and underserved communities across the province. I mean it when I say that our government is taking the necessary steps to help bring access to every individual, every family, business and farm in Ontario. These are the people and communities that need it the most. They simply cannot wait any longer.

Mr. Speaker, these are real people who are impacted every day and frustrated about being left offline for far too long. I would like to take an opportunity to share some of their stories and the barriers they face on a daily basis.

In the Niagara region, a family is currently restricted to using LTE antenna Internet. They have a daughter who will be starting school soon and another child on the way. These parents just want their children to have the same access to learning and resources as everyone else.

A resident in central Ontario has no Internet access at home. When her company pivoted to working remotely, she was forced to rely on the homes of friends and family and public spaces to work. This continues to be an ongoing struggle that is impacting her ability to work.

For a family living in southwestern Ontario, only one person can use the Internet at a time. This makes working and learning at home nearly impossible. They were severely impacted during the pandemic, as their children were not able to participate fully in virtual learning and the parents had to miss many days of work due to Internet limitations.

Another resident in southwestern Ontario was unable to start a business due to poor Internet service in the area. When installing Microsoft Teams on their computer, it took them nine hours.

A mother in northern Ontario had to drive five kilometres to and from her nearest town so her child could participate in online courses for college to get the education that they deserve.

In south central Ontario, a family was forced to have their daughter stay in residence, even though her classes were all online, because of their inadequate Internet at home.

There's also a couple who has been working from home for over two years, with Internet speeds of less than five megabits per second. They are fearful that this lack of reliable high-speed Internet may end up affecting their employment.

Mr. Speaker, these are only some examples from the many letters that hard-working Ontarians take the time to

write to me and my ministry. These experiences are unacceptable, and that is why our government is taking action to ensure no one is left behind.

One of the ways we are ensuring no one is left behind is through our proposed Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. If passed, this bill would help us remove barriers, duplication and delays, and make it easier and faster to build critical broadband projects. This is needed for us to truly accelerate the deployment of high-speed Internet infrastructure to more communities sooner and remove additional obstacles that stand in the way. This important legislation builds on the progress we've already made as part of our plan to connect all Ontarians to high-speed Internet access, no matter where they live.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the many members of the House who support and welcome our government's ongoing efforts to help connect communities faster. There is no question that many of you in this room have heard frustrations from your own constituents about the lack of reliable high-speed Internet services, and I'm sure, like me, you have also experienced frustration yourselves.

I also want to thank all of the interested parties who were consulted during the standing committee and who have shared their feedback. These include groups like Enbridge Gas, Trans-Northern Pipelines, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus, Eastern Ontario Regional Network, Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology, Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus, Ontario One Call, the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, Regional Public Works Commissioners of Ontario, Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association, Ontario Regional Common Ground Alliance, Ontario Road Builders' Association, the National Capital Heavy Construction Association and several other individuals.

It's clear that we all share the same goal: to accelerate the deployment of high-speed Internet to the province's remaining unserved and underserved communities. And we will continue to be transparent and actively engage with our partners, stakeholders and key sectors if the bill is passed, including during the regulation-making process. I am also encouraged that everyone we spoke to in committee was supportive of the overall objectives of the bill.

Mr. Speaker, we understand that building a strong province takes tremendous work, and it is not something our government can do alone. It takes collaboration from across ministries, all levels of government, our partners and our municipalities to deliver critical infrastructure projects, which is why I'm pleased to be working with the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services on this bill. Together, we are helping to get shovels in the ground faster for high-speed Internet infrastructure projects.

0910

We are also working closely with municipalities across the province, who continue to be our number one supporters and advocates for the expansion of high-speed Internet in their communities. In fact, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario recently released its 2022 Provincial Election Strategy: Advancing Ontario's Prosperity. This strategy outlines a strong message on behalf of municipal

governments in Ontario: "Our success is foundational to the success of Ontario." We completely agree with this statement, as we have shown through our municipal partnerships that we're stronger and more resilient when we work together.

AMO's strategy sets out a plan with eight fundamental points that represent their vision for the province's future. Mr. Speaker, I want to bring this to everyone's attention, because number 5 on the list of key priorities highlights the critical importance of access to reliable high-speed Internet: "Invest in broadband and connectivity to expand opportunity, access and economic participation in every part of Ontario." AMO's strategy speaks to all of us in the hopes that we will work towards fulfilling this commitment. They are relying on us to work together.

Mr. Speaker, I want to emphasize that we are all trying to achieve the same goal. Our province's economic future and potential depends on access to reliable high-speed Internet. After all, tomorrow's prosperity begins with shovels in the ground today, which is why the actions we take matter, so I truly hope that Bill 93 will be supported here today.

As I previously mentioned, municipalities have been a vital partner every step of the way to help expand high-speed Internet infrastructure across their communities. Many of these projects are dependent on municipal rights of way to install broadband on municipal land and access to data to ensure these projects are completed in a timely manner. Our legislation would help reduce delays and barriers in these processes, making it easier for projects to be completed faster.

Through this legislation, our government is proposing amendments to the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021. If passed, these amendments would set new service standards for municipalities. These service standards would be 10 business days to respond to right-of-way permits for proponents with projects totalling up to 30 kilometres, and 15 business days to respond to proponents with projects totalling 30 kilometres or more. This would help ensure that municipalities provide timely responses to right-of-way permit applications related to provincially designated broadband projects. The amendments would also require municipalities and other stakeholders to share relevant data when requested by Infrastructure Ontario, on the behalf of the Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, I want to address some concerns that municipalities have expressed with regard to the new service standard being proposed through this legislation. Some municipalities are concerned that they will not be able to meet these new timelines. Our government has been actively communicating with our municipal partners to design programs that will make it easier for municipalities and others in the sector to help build high-speed Internet projects faster. We have also been consulting with stakeholders in preparation for this legislation, and as we draft these amendments.

In November 2021, we released a technical guideline that was heavily informed by key stakeholders. We also issued a statement of intent that demonstrated our intention to strengthen the guideline through additional

legislative, regulatory and non-legislative tools. Through this statement of intent, our government committed to removing further barriers to accelerate high-speed Internet deployment.

Based on the outcomes of our consultations, my ministry, along with Infrastructure Ontario, is creating a technical assistance team that will provide support to municipalities and other stakeholders, when needed. It will help stakeholders interpret aspects of the legislation, including permitting issues and the use of the Broadband One Window. This is an online platform that will help people exchange data and manage right-of-way access applications, creating a more efficient and streamlined process.

The technical assistance team will also help to quickly resolve any potential disputes that may arise between stakeholders. If necessary, they will work together with the Ministry of Infrastructure, Infrastructure Ontario and the impacted stakeholders to help ensure that timelines are consistently met. Through this initiative, we are providing more certainty and confidence for our partners to help us deliver high-speed Internet projects faster. I'm pleased to say that the technical assistance team will be ready this spring. We look forward to continuing to work with municipalities and stakeholders, and I would like to thank them for their ongoing support and dedication.

As you can see, Mr. Speaker, this proposed legislation will help support projects and programs currently under way to bring reliable high-speed Internet access to more communities—and that is not all that we are doing. Our government continues to find new and innovative ways to get Ontarians connected to the fast reliable Internet access they need and deserve. That is why, in 2021, we launched the new competitive process, led by Infrastructure Ontario, to connect more homes and businesses across the province.

I'm proud to say that we were the first jurisdiction in Canada to execute a series of reverse-auction events to help expand access to high-speed Internet across the province. This has been a huge accomplishment already. During this process, we received market participation from Internet service providers of all sizes. Our legislation would provide Internet service providers with the tools and assurances they need to get shovels in the ground as early as this summer, which is only a couple of months away.

Infrastructure Ontario has been working hard to make enormous efforts to achieve positive results. We have provided information about this transparent and competitive process throughout each stage on the Ontario Connects website. I'm confident that this will have a significant impact on bridging the digital divide for more unserved and underserved communities. No one will be left behind, and I'm very excited to update the public on our competitive process in the coming days.

Our government is doing much more to support our plan of 100% access across Ontario. We have made it clear that access to reliable high-speed Internet throughout rural Ontario remains a priority, and our government continues to deliver on that commitment. We are supporting shovel-

ready projects in southwestern, eastern and northern Ontario. Most recently, I joined my colleagues Todd Smith, Minister of Energy, and Dave Piccini, the Minister of the Environment, to announce exciting news for the municipality of Brighton. Working with Hydro One, we will pilot a new way to leverage existing infrastructure and networks to bring faster service quickly and cost-effectively to customers. Through this approach, Hydro One will work with Internet service providers to connect up to 1,450 homes and businesses with access to high-speed Internet. This is great news for the residents of Brighton.

These new connections will help families and farmers to stay in touch and access critical health care services while providing a much-needed boost to the local economy. Recent graduates will no longer have to leave their hometown to move to large urban areas in order to find better job opportunities. Entrepreneurs will be able to start a booming business in rural Ontario by selling their products online to customers worldwide. Grandparents will be able to stay in touch with their grandchildren who have moved off to college or university. This new pilot project is an example of critical infrastructure that will benefit an entire community.

Mr. Speaker, access to high-speed Internet will have a transformative, life-changing effect for families, individuals, businesses and sectors in rural communities. Take agriculture, for example: We know that many family farms are having trouble expanding their business or struggle to conduct regular business operations with ease because of spotty Internet service. Our government understands the importance of the agricultural sector for our province's economic growth, resiliency and prosperity. This is a major economic driver, creating hundreds of thousands of jobs.

According to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, also known as the OFA, the agriculture sector generates over 860,000 jobs for the people of Ontario and contributes more than \$47 billion to Ontario's annual GDP.

0920

For some of us here today, our great-grandparents and grandparents may have grown up working on a family farm, but this sector isn't like it was many years ago, relying predominantly on manual labour. Ontario's agriculture sector has rapidly evolved, with the use of new technologies to help produce food, fibre and fuel more efficiently. Many of these technologies, such as GPS mapping, smart sensors to measure soil conditions and tracking devices for livestock, require access to reliable high-speed Internet.

To be successful, Ontario's farmers must leverage digital technologies to increase economic productivity, explore new markets and remain competitive worldwide. However, a survey conducted by the OFA found that 62% of respondents reported disruptions in their business activities caused by Internet outages, which have directly impacted their profitability. This is not only harmful for their growth potential and the sustainability of farmers and agriculture businesses, but it's also detrimental to the

province's long-term economic growth. That is why we continue to hear from stakeholders who advocate for the expansion of high-speed Internet infrastructure across rural communities.

The OFA believes that high-speed Internet should be deemed an essential service, as it is vital to the continued growth and the development of rural Ontario. In January, at the Rural Ontario Municipal Association conference, the OFA identified the need for broadband infrastructure in rural communities as one of their top priorities. Vice-president Mark Reusser emphasized this importance by saying, "Reliable Internet supports our farmers and rural communities. Without it, rural businesses, residents and schools are at a competitive disadvantage. Our farmers run modern businesses that require innovative technology, high-speed Internet access and reliable cellular coverage."

The lack of reliable high-speed Internet access hurts the productivity of thousands of farmers and their bottom line. It also hurts the livelihoods of their workers, along with the regional economies and communities they feed into. This is exactly why we have been advocating to pass this critical piece of legislation, which is another part our government's comprehensive plan.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to take a moment to address some confusion I have heard about whether our approach will help northern communities. As I have already stressed, we know how important access to reliable high-speed Internet is for Ontarians, especially northern communities. In fact, to improve access to connectivity in the north, we announced an investment of \$10.9 million to bring high-speed Internet access to several towns and First Nation communities across northern Ontario. Additionally, we have invested \$30 million in the rapid fibre project with Matawa First Nations, which will provide access to high-speed Internet services to more than 670 homes.

Our government has also committed \$63 million over five years to the Next Generation Network Program, which to date has supported the launch of 13 projects. This includes projects in Carling township, Iron Bridge, the municipality of Temagami and the city of Kenora, northern lake region.

Mr. Speaker, I want to emphasize that when our government says we are connecting every Ontarian to reliable high-speed Internet access, we mean every Ontarian. The examples I just mentioned clearly demonstrate our government's strong commitment to prioritize high-speed Internet projects in the north. Today, with this proposed legislation, and together with your support, we have the opportunity to ensure that everyone has access to connectivity province-wide. High-speed Internet is a critical part of our province's overall infrastructure, making it key for our long-term economic growth and the future of Ontario.

Our government has a responsibility to act now. We can no longer let access to high-speed Internet be a roadblock for our communities and a barrier to our collective success. If we're going to leverage the potential of our future generations, we need to extend high-speed Internet access into all communities.

High-speed Internet access is as important and necessary as the roads and transportation systems Ontarians use

each and every day. Think of it as our virtual roads and transportation system that connects us to the global economy. Just like people rely on these infrastructure systems to get them to and from their destinations quickly and efficiently, people also rely on high-speed Internet to provide them with access to the digital world. Instead of laying concrete and asphalt, we're here today to help remove the obstacles to install fibre optic cables and lay down underground broadband infrastructure faster.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation is so incredibly important to Ontario's communities for today and for the future. We cannot and will not leave those communities behind. We will continue to advocate on behalf of the people of Ontario and our communities so that everyone can participate in this growing digital economy. I thank all of you for joining us today to help make this a reality.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The minister did state that she would be sharing her time this morning. I turn to her parliamentary assistant.

Mr. Amarjot Sandhu: I'm happy to rise today to speak more on Bill 93, the proposed Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. I'm also honoured for the opportunity to join my colleague, Kinga Surma, the Minister of Infrastructure, to speak about this important proposed legislation.

Mr. Speaker, now more than ever the people of Ontario need access to reliable high-speed Internet, and this cannot be delayed. We have heard countless stories from Ontarians across the province that emphasize how important access to high-speed Internet truly is. From the registered nurse whose Internet service is impacted by poor weather, resulting in the inability to access online resources, to the couple in northern Ontario who work as a teacher and an IT manager but are unable to work from home due to the Internet restrictions in the area, to the physician from central Ontario who works from home with barely adequate Internet speeds, which impacts the ability to make video and phone calls to treat patients, to the small business owner in eastern Ontario who continues to question when they will have the reliable Internet speeds that they need to sell their products online, to the resident in southwestern Ontario that is forced to take calls outside the comfort of their home in order to get a better signal—these are all experiences and barriers that Ontarians face regularly and their lack of reliable high-speed Internet access is detrimental not only for economic reasons but for overall health and well-being. That is why our government is taking action to make sure that no matter where you live, every Ontarian has access to reliable high-speed Internet by the end of 2025.

To deliver on this ambitious commitment, we have a comprehensive and bold plan to bring access to high-speed Internet across the province. As part of this plan, in 2021, our government introduced and passed the Supporting Broadband and Infrastructure Expansion Act, 2021, and the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021, to help speed up construction of broadband infrastructure projects. In addition, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Infrastructure Ontario also released the Building Broadband Faster Act guideline in November 2021. This was created to advance

our work and to bring key sectors to the table to help get broadband projects built faster. We didn't stop there. We're building upon this legislation and guideline with the Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022. Our government is putting people and communities first to ensure that no one is left behind.

I want to take a moment to address questions we have received about why another high-speed Internet legislation is necessary. This new legislation will help strengthen and implement the best practices in the guideline. If passed, it would provide provincial authority to enforce certain timelines and processes, such as requiring municipalities to meet a service standard to consider applications for certain right-of-way permits related to high-speed Internet projects.

Our legislation would help also further reduce barriers, duplications and delays with bringing high-speed Internet access for more unserved and underserved communities across Ontario. It will also make it easier and faster to get shovels in the ground to build critical broadband infrastructure. In addition, if passed, this new legislation would give Internet service providers the tools and assurances they need to start building as early as this summer.

We have also received support on this legislation and our other high-speed Internet initiatives from our stakeholders. I'd like to highlight what we heard from the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario: "We commend the government for tabling this bill, which is an important step toward meaningful improvements to a system that has caused considerable difficulties in the infrastructure and construction industry."

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In addition, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario welcomes the work that is being done, especially with the decision to also create the technical assistance team: "AMO is pleased that the Minister of Infrastructure has committed to strike a dedicated technical assistance team. While the exact functions and services of the team are still being developed, it should help our small, rural and northern members to meet their responsibilities."

We are working together to build a stronger Ontario to ensure that everyone has access to health care services and so they can work, learn, start a business, participate in the agricultural sector and connect with family and friends.

Mr. Speaker, through our high-speed Internet initiatives we have already committed over \$900 million to over 180 high-speed Internet, cellular and satellite projects to date. Some of these initiatives are already starting to connect homes and business as we speak. This includes up to \$16.2 million for 17 projects under our provincial Improving Connectivity for Ontario Program, known as ICON.

ICON supports community-based high-speed Internet projects, and it will expand access to high-speed Internet for over 40 communities across Ontario, from the eastern region of rural Belleville and Rideau Lakes to Moose Cree First Nation in the beautiful north, from Featherstone in southern Ontario to the towns of King and East Gwillimbury in the outskirts of the greater Toronto area and further north in cottage country, such as the Muskoka

Lakes area. These projects bring reliable high-speed Internet to as many as 17,900 homes and businesses across the province.

We're also making a joint investment of over \$1.2 billion in federal-provincial funding for 58 projects under ICON and the federal Universal Broadband Fund program. This investment covers projects across small-town Ontario, rural communities and remote and Indigenous communities, and it will provide high-speed Internet access for up to 280,000 homes and businesses across Ontario.

We're working on initiatives that will help bring reliable high-speed Internet access to every corner of this great province. We know how important access to high-speed Internet is for Ontarians, especially for residents and businesses in northern Ontario. According to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 87.4% of Canadians have access to high-speed Internet. For those living in urban communities, it accounts for 98.6%, but compared to other regions this percentage drops drastically.

Our government is also committed to connecting First Nation communities to health care services, education and access to compete in the global marketplace, and that begins by investing in broadband infrastructure to support the community, residents and businesses. That is why we're rolling out programs and making investments in the north, as Minister Surma clearly outlined already.

In addition to the many programs and investments that Minister Surma has already clearly outlined, we're also investing in projects to connect unserved and underserved areas in the north with access to reliable high-speed Internet through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corp. This includes a \$2.57-million investment to support eight projects with the expansion of high-speed Internet access in multiple communities. An example of these projects includes an investment that will increase access to high-speed Internet for 600 residents in the Mishkeegogamang Ojibway First Nation community. These investments are just a handful of the broadband infrastructure projects our government has supported to ensure our First Nation residents lead safe and healthy lives.

By investing in the north, we're also improving the quality of life for those residents and helping to create the vibrant communities they expect and deserve. Mr. Speaker, for example, through the Next Generation Network Program, a new tower was built in Carling township near Parry Sound to bring high-speed Internet access to the area, through fixed wireless access.

In a video about the Carling township project, one resident mentions that access to high-speed Internet is no longer something that is "nice to have," and instead it is a fundamental driver to prosperity. This resident reflects on how their first Internet connection was made through the telephone line, and he described it as "painfully slow and frustrating." As a photographer, he was unable to upload a single picture without his connection dropping off.

Another resident said that she tears up just thinking about the meaningful impact this will make in their lives. She talks about the powerful impact—the personal, gut-

wrenching impact—that these projects will have on rural and isolated communities by providing access to reliable high-speed Internet, and how she can now better connect with her family without relying on her phone to get the hot spot she needs for Internet. “You have changed our lives for the better,” she says.

Mr. Speaker, we’re also providing northern businesses with a level playing field. We’re helping to drive economic growth by expanding access to education, training and skills development, as well as providing business opportunities to help the region compete in the global economy.

We can already see the benefits that these programs are providing for Ontarians. For example, a local northern business that makes handmade, specialty chocolate was able to get the supports they needed to enhance their online presence, just by having access to reliable high-speed Internet services. This ultimately helped to increase their sales, not just at home but across Canada.

A recent report by the Council of Canadian Academies called *Waiting to Connect* highlights the benefits of high-speed Internet connectivity in rural and remote communities across Canada. The report also addresses the challenges in achieving these benefits as well as the barriers that have limited the rollout of high-speed Internet in these areas. Rural communities without access to reliable high-speed Internet are removed from the economic and cultural benefits enjoyed by urban communities. These are benefits that so many of us here today enjoy and cannot imagine living without.

The report goes on to say, “Rural and remote communities in Canada have identified limited access to fast, reliable Internet as their main barrier to achieving economic growth and have stated that the lack of connectivity restricts their ability to retain youth, attract new talent, develop or expand existing businesses, train workers, and adopt new technologies.”

Mr. Speaker, the lack of reliable high-speed Internet limits our province’s long-term economic growth. We all know that for rural communities to succeed and to be where people want to live, work and raise their children, proper high-speed Internet infrastructure needs to be in place. That is why it is more crucial than ever to remove unnecessary barriers and cumbersome processes that prevent that from happening.

Ontario families, especially in rural areas, cannot wait any longer for better access to high-speed Internet. We know that for those in the service industry, whether it’s a bed and breakfast or a local bakery, the lack of reliable high-speed Internet often means a lack of opportunity. That is why this legislation is so important and our government is providing support for rural Ontario.

We are bringing high-speed Internet access to communities across southwestern Ontario through the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology project, also known as SWIFT. Our efforts to bridge the gaps in high-speed Internet access in southwestern Ontario are part of a combined federal-provincial investment of more than \$191 million to bring fast and reliable Internet.

SWIFT has already awarded 97 contracts, totalling \$268 million in broadband infrastructure investments to

connect more than 63,000 homes and businesses across the region to high-speed Internet services. In fact, there are currently 53 projects under construction. These projects are important for farms and businesses in this region. They will give them the ability to attract new customers, grow their businesses, create new jobs and stay competitive in an increasingly digital marketplace.

Rural farms need reliable high-speed Internet access to oversee operations, manage finances and respond to international market conditions. Access to high-speed Internet can help farmers predict production inputs, increase yields and access more customers worldwide. These projects will allow communities to attract new development and businesses, strengthen local economics and create more well-paying jobs and opportunities in rural Ontario.

0940

To date, over 12,000 homes and businesses in southwestern Ontario have already received access to high-speed Internet through SWIFT. Beyond high-speed Internet, having unreliable cellular service is an economic, social and community safety issue. Many eastern Ontario residents are often left stuck or stranded without cellular service solely because of where they live, and this is evident from what we hear from Ontarians.

We heard about the young adult from Haliburton–Kawartha Lakes–Brock who does not have good cell service due to the lack of towers. Although there were several cell towers in the distance, none of them were close enough to reach their home.

We have also heard of the many stories of Ontarians driving down stretches of the highway and unable to get a proper cell signal, or they would be in the middle of a call and it would abruptly drop given the lack of cell signal. This is unsafe for motorists if their vehicle breaks down, especially in the middle of the night or in the dead of a cold winter and they’re unable to call for assistance.

Whether it’s a workplace injury or a medical emergency while hiking in the backwoods of your cottage, people need to be able to call for help. That is why we’re investing up to \$71 million for the Eastern Ontario Regional Network Cell Gap Project, which brings the total investment to more than \$300 million with partner funding. Through the great work under way in eastern Ontario, we are bringing near-complete cellular coverage to this region—something our government is proud to support.

Through our commitments to date, we’re bringing faster Internet access to 375,000 homes and businesses across the province and significantly improving cellular connectivity in eastern Ontario. We know that access to high-speed Internet makes a huge difference in the lives of hundreds of families and individuals. It means that people will be able to work remotely. Students will be able to access knowledge at their fingertips. It also means that local businesses will be able to reach new markets with their products, and families will be able to watch grandchildren grow up, even from several provinces away.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to highlight our progress on another initiative that brings high-speed Internet access to communities across the province. Last year, our

government announced more than \$4.8 million through the Connecting Public Libraries Initiative to upgrade high-speed Internet services at approximately 50 public libraries in unserved and underserved communities.

The Ontario Library Service continues to work towards implementing the Connecting Public Libraries Initiative on behalf of the government of Ontario. I'm happy to share that we have recently concluded the successful request-for-proposal process. Through this process they reported that they will be able to update 111 library locations. Mr. Speaker, this more than doubles the original target of 50 public library branches.

Through all the challenges over the past two years our province's public libraries have become even more important to local residents, not only as a place of learning and discovery but as a hub for community building and a place to help residents stay connected with friends and family online, which is especially vital for those who lack reliable Internet access at home. Through the Connecting Public Libraries Initiative, these 111 library locations will have an opportunity to improve their high-speed Internet connectivity.

We're also looking into new and innovative ways to help connect Ontarians. We're working with Telesat, one of the largest and most successful satellite operators in the world. Telesat is a real homegrown success story that is based out of Ottawa. For over half a century, Telesat has been a key player in the development of satellite communications. From the world's first commercial domestic communication satellite in orbit to other breakthrough launches that push the boundaries of satellite technologies, Telesat has a proven track record of innovation and success, so it should come as no surprise that they're not only recognized and respected right here in Ontario but also globally.

Mr. Speaker, just this past summer, we committed more than \$109 million to Telesat's Lightspeed project so that Ontario will have dedicated bandwidth when the company launches its low-Earth-orbit satellite network. This technology drastically reduces a signal's travel time between Earth and satellites, which allows for faster Internet speeds and will help meet the rapid rise in demand for digital connectivity. This is a made-in-Ontario solution for our communities to succeed in today's digital world. It is expected to go into service in 2024. This resource will help ensure that the furthest, most-remote communities are able to be connected. By strengthening our high-speed Internet ecosystem, it will not only help us prepare for the future but also help position a leading-edge Canadian company as a global player in satellite broadband.

Better high-speed Internet access will also help the health care sector as more organizations provide telehealth services. It will help support farms, including precision-agriculture techniques and smart sensors to measure soil conditions and tracking devices for livestock. Better high-speed Internet will help tourism businesses as we build a stronger Ontario. Whether it's accommodations, food and beverage or recreation, businesses will need reliable high-speed Internet access to serve and book their guests and

market themselves. Better high-speed Internet access means smaller businesses can compete with larger e-commerce companies so that made-in-Ontario products can also arrive at your door. It will also help us produce great media content, helping to spread our culture industries far and wide around the globe. Better high-speed Internet access will mean businesses will be able to market their goods and services, from a local microbrewery to a bowling alley, from a new food product to outdoor recreational facilities.

Mr. Speaker, as you can see, we're doing everything that we can to make sure Ontarians are connected to high-speed Internet access by the end of 2025, and the people of Ontario have our commitment that no one will be left behind.

I'm encouraged that there are so many in this room who understand how important high-speed Internet access is to our future. We appreciate the collaborative approach that members in this House are taking on this important issue. I know that we can all agree that we cannot delay any longer on closing the digital divide. We need to ensure that everyone can take part in today's digital economy. We need to be a province that is ready to lead in this increasingly competitive digital world, and that is exactly what we're doing. We're taking the necessary and bold action needed to make this happen.

Let's work together through this legislation to ensure that we create a stronger, more connected Ontario for our families and for future generations to come.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I just wanted to stand up and say this before I get into my question: I found out this morning at 9:05 that Bill 93, Getting Ontario Connected Act, 2022, was being debated this morning. I've stood up here before and said this: I don't think that's a fair way to do these bills. I've been available all weekend. I could have prepared for this. I think it's very, very important. I think everybody knows that.

I believe the speaker, when she first started, talked about Niagara, and we've had some issues in Niagara. We've had issues in Niagara-on-the-Lake and Fort Erie. I would have liked to have talked to the mayor. I would have liked to talk to some of the residents down there so I can have a question that I think is fair and balanced on the bill. And when I find out at 9:05 when I walk in the House, I don't think it's fair to myself, quite frankly; I don't think it's fair to the rest of my colleagues; I don't think it's fair to the Liberals or the independents. I wanted to say that, and I guess I ran out of time. But maybe you could respond to that, please.

Hon. Kinga Surma: I thank the member for the question. This piece of legislation is going through the House just like any other piece of legislation. I was before a standing committee a couple of weeks ago. So there has been time in order to have those discussions with your stakeholders in your community. But it's also not the only avenue in terms of debating in the House. You're more than welcome to catch me and contact me and provide your feedback to me at any point in time.

What I will just say is that this is critical. We just went through a pandemic situation. We still have households that are not yet connected to high-speed Internet. We will have further construction in the fall in terms of building high-speed Internet infrastructure, and it's critical that we move this as quickly as possible. People need access to high-speed Internet to connect with health care professionals, in order to work from home. You heard the very many testimonials, so I ask you to support this bill.

0950

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke has a question.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I want to thank the minister for bringing this legislation forward. She cited all kinds of circumstances where people are suffering because of a lack of access to high-speed Internet. A lot of those could apply to my riding of Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke.

One thing I did hear throughout the pandemic from parents and educators in rural areas like mine, especially when the students were required to work remotely from home, was that they just didn't have that same access. You've talked about how important that is. Could you give a little more detail as to how this is going to change lives for students in areas like mine that don't have access today that, after 2025, will?

Hon. Kinga Surma: Thank you so much to the very hard-working member from eastern Ontario. I think the member was very pleased in terms of the investment that we made as a government, with my predecessor Minister Scott—\$300 million to the Eastern Ontario Regional Network to connect homes in your very community.

But education is key. During the pandemic, the Minister of Education worked so hard to develop online courses for students across the province so that they could be safe and learn from home. It's just important that every single child in Ontario, every single family has that access.

Certainly, none of us want to be in the position that we have been in in the last two or three years—absolutely not. It's important for us to be ready. This is why this legislation is so important: We want to make sure that we accelerate the deployment of building high-speed Internet infrastructure across the province of Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Nickel Belt has a question.

M^{me} France Gélinas: I fully agree that everybody in Ontario, including the people who live in Nickel Belt, need access to the Internet. I cannot tell you how many times I went and saw the minister to say, "Hey, the kids in Foleyet cannot get access to the Internet, yet the school is closed." "The kids in Whitefish have to sit in their car next to the school, because this is only place that has Internet in town"—and it's only minus 40 below. It's just fine to sit in your parent's car in that kind of circumstance.

Let me tell you, Speaker, there are areas in my riding—I talk to every Internet provider that comes to the north, and they say, "It doesn't matter if the government gives us 100% of the cost of the infrastructure. There is no money to be made in Benny, in Bisco, in Westree, in Shining Tree."

Why are you so opposed to having a government-run Internet service for hard-to-reach areas, where the private sector will not go?

Hon. Kinga Surma: Again, I want to thank the Minister of Education, who worked tremendously hard, prior to and during the pandemic, to make sure that there were online courses available for students across the province of Ontario.

Mr. Speaker, we have formed partnerships with the Internet service providers. They are keen to make sure that municipalities, every single household and business, farmers and everyone—absolutely every single premises in the province of Ontario—is connected. We've worked with the federal government. We created application-based programming in the province of Ontario. Now, we are working our way through our reverse auction, which we hope will help us connect the remaining 300,000 households.

I will be updating the public on the outcome of this reverse auction in the next few days.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Your colleague the Attorney General has a question.

Hon. Doug Downey: Mr. Speaker, through you to the Minister of Infrastructure: I am so thrilled. My constituents in Barrie–Springwater–Oro-Medonte need good connectivity, so thank you for driving this forward on our behalf.

It's another part of the failing legacy of the previous Liberal government, which just did not pay attention to the needs of the people of the province of Ontario. I want to thank you for bringing this.

My concern is in terms of the supply chain. I know that you've turned your mind to that. We know that there are construction delays in other areas. Could you please address, for the public, some of the things we're doing to make sure that we're not affected by delays in the supply chain?

Hon. Kinga Surma: Thank you to the very hard-working member. I can assure his constituents that he talks to me about connecting his constituents and his riding very, very frequently. So thank you very much for that.

Listen, we understand that there are, obviously, supply chain challenges across the province of Ontario, as the Minister of Infrastructure myself and Infrastructure Ontario are monitoring this very closely. But the market is very pleased with the investments that we are making in terms of the \$4 billion. We are looking at all options—application-based, reverse auction—and we're also investing in Telesat to make sure that we absolutely pick up the last remaining premises in the toughest geographic areas and most-remote places.

Mr. Speaker, we are looking at all options available to make sure that nobody is left behind and that we can reach our goal of connecting every home by the end of 2025.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Niagara Falls.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Seeing that I didn't get my question out last time, I'll try again.

The broadband budget is interesting, in the last few years. The FAO recently revealed that the Ford government cut the 2022 rural broadband budget by \$207 million, which was more than half. Then they only spent 0.06% of the reduced budget, 1.37% of its \$45.7-million broadband infrastructure budget in 2021, and they spent zero of \$31.8 million for broadband in 2019-20. That's coming from the FAO.

My question is, if high-speed Internet is important—and I believe it is. I think we're ahead of the curve, quite frankly, in Niagara Falls, and if you've been there you probably know that. I was on council, going back 10 or 12 years ago. Why did you not spend all the budget over the course of the last four years? I think that's a fair question.

Hon. Kinga Surma: I responded to this question in the standing committee when your colleagues asked. We enter into transfer-payment agreements and contracts with Internet service providers and various organizations that are helping us make sure we connect to every single home. We do not make payments until we reach certain milestones that are agreed to by both parties.

Our government has the responsibility to make sure that we're accountable, to make sure that every single home is connected. So we will make those payments when that connection is there.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for a very quick question from the member from Perth-Wellington.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: The agricultural industry is very important to our province, and I want to thank the minister for recognizing that. Farmers rely on high-speed Internet to operate their farm technology and maximize their farming techniques.

I wonder, Speaker, if the member can tell me what our government is doing to help farmers, and others across the agricultural sector, access reliable high-speed Internet.

Hon. Kinga Surma: We certainly appreciate the hard-working farmers across the province of Ontario. Their contribution to the gross domestic product in Ontario is tremendous. We want to make sure that they have access to high-speed Internet so that they can use the technologies they need to make sure that our food supply chains are sustainable and resilient, and that we continue to grow in the province of Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Mr. John Vanthof: It's always an honour to stand in the House, and today on third reading of Bill 93, An Act to amend the Building Broadband Faster Act, 2021 and the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012.

M^{me} France Gélinas: It's a long title.

Mr. John Vanthof: It's a long title.

I would like to pick up where the member on the government side was speaking about agriculture and how broadband is so important to agriculture. A lot of people have said it, and it's absolutely true. I'd like to—just for a minute, because it's something I know well—talk about why, or give you an example.

I was a dairy farmer for 35 years. We milked in a parlour. It wasn't a very big one. We milked eight cows at a time, twice a day. It took three hours in the morning, three hours at night. Not too many people in newer facilities have parlours; they have robotic milkers. Now, if you've never seen a robotic milker work and you're thinking it's R2-D2 from Star Wars, going from cow to cow, it doesn't work like that. On a farm like mine, when we milked about 70, you would probably need—one robot does about 60 cows, I believe. But it milks one cow at a time, 24 hours a day. The cows come to the milker, so the farmer is not always there. But that robot has to be monitored all the time. So someone's monitoring that robot, usually the farmer or someone who works for the farmer. Just like we have a smart phone and we get lots of emails, you will have that robot connected to your phone, and that takes a lot of broadband capacity. You can fix some things from your phone, but often that is your link to know when you have to go at 3 o'clock in the morning, if something has gone wrong, or if a cow gets stuck in the robot, or the robot doesn't read correctly. There are all kinds of little things that can go wrong. Many farms have multiple robots and so you need a lot broadband capacity. It needs to be very reliable because you're living depends on it. So when we milked cows, when you are done milking at 7 o'clock at night, you knew that you didn't have to milk again until the next morning at 5 o'clock. But when you have robotic milkers, they milk the cows, but they milk them 24 hours a day by themselves, but they need, like every machine, constant supervision, and that's constantly through Internet.

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We have had complaints from some in the agricultural community in the past that, actually, the lack of broadband is one of the reasons why they couldn't go to the next level of technology. That's a very significant issue because if you don't—and any business is like that and so is agriculture—if you don't go along with the times, one day you wake up and you're too far behind to catch up, so it's extremely important.

I commend everyone who is speaking about agriculture because it's near and dear to my heart but it's very important to us all and very important to our stomachs as well. But farms tend not to be in the most populated areas. Farms depend on land. There are farms in populated areas; obviously, there are lots of farms in the GTHA. But there are also many farms in areas that aren't very highly populated, and those are the areas that tend to have problems getting Internet service.

The way that Internet service was developed in this province—I guess worldwide, but certainly in this province—it's been a for-profit delivery model. I'm not opposed to for-profit; I was in a for-profit business most of my adult life. Dairy farming is a for-profit business. I liked doing it. I liked it. I wish my kids wanted it, we'd still be doing it, but I had to make money doing it. I didn't do it just for fun.

Broadband is the same thing. So private broadband companies tend not to go to places—especially the big

ones—where you have a sparse population. Like the member from Nickel Belt, in her questions, I have those areas too. I have a little town, Gowganda. People are moving to it and wondering why there's no broadband. I can tell you why. Because it doesn't make the company money to provide the service.

M^{me} France Gélinas: But it's a beautiful little town.

Mr. John Vanthof: Gowganda is a fantastic little place—beautiful lake. If you ever go to Gowganda, go to the post office. The post office in Gowganda is right on the lake. When you look across the lake, you look at Maple Mountain. Maple Mountain is one of the highest points of land in Ontario. I'm telling you, Gowganda should be on people's bucket lists—the post office in Gowganda. When people see the house prices in Gowganda they get pretty excited and they move to Gowganda. But it's hard to get Internet in Gowganda. I can't use the person's name, but we had someone move to Gowganda and they were unaware of this. They spent quite a bit of time researching what was the best Internet, telephone and TV package. When they were done researching, they called the company. That didn't work out very well because that company didn't serve—the only company at the time that served Gowganda was Xplornet, a high-altitude Internet provider, but they didn't have any room on the satellite. So at that point there was no service in Gowganda.

We have low Internet satellites now, Starlink. I believe I heard the minister and a couple of other members talking about Telesat. That's also, I believe, a low Internet provider, kind of like Starlink. They can provide it. That would help. I do listen, and I give credit where credit is due.

I don't know what the price is on Telesat, but I know Starlink is not affordable for everybody. Again, I listened to the whole lead on third reading of this bill, and—please correct me if I'm wrong—I didn't hear one person mention affordability.

Where I live right now, I have a small Internet provider. It does a great job. I'll give credit: Paralink, in New Liskeard. They do a great job. I had a big Internet provider, the same one that does Gowganda, and their satellite got fuller and fuller and fuller. At one point, I think I was better off with the original northern Ontario—you know, when you first got computers and you heard that squeaky—I'm not going to try to make the sound, but you know that terrible sound? I'm not going to try.

Paralink does a great job. For my job, I buy—and credit where credit is due, because I have this job, the Ontario government pays for my Internet at home, because I do a lot of work at home. But it is, I believe, 140 bucks a month. As I've said in this House before, I have a child—a daughter; she's not a child anymore—who does computer programming for a living, and she can't do it on my Internet. It's not fast enough. I'm paying \$140—or I would be paying, and I will still be paying, some day. The Conservatives want me out on June 3, and then I'll be paying it myself, if I'm not here past June 3.

But \$140 a month is a lot of money, and I didn't hear anything about how we're going to combat that. I commend the government if they make it. I have my

doubts whether 2025 is attainable. I'm not blaming this necessarily on the government, but in the question from the member from Niagara Falls and the response from the minister, the reason that they haven't invested a vast, vast majority of their budget is because the companies, according to the minister, haven't been able to install the services. And that hasn't been for just six months; I believe that's been happening for three years.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Four.

Mr. John Vanthof: Four years.

The Attorney General brought up the issue about supply chain issues. The supply chain issues are only getting worse now. They're really coming to a head now. So I appreciate the minister's answer on that, but I think the supply chain issues could very well knock that further back than 2025.

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Having said that, it still doesn't answer whether the majority of people or the people who really suffer from the digital divide are going to be able to pay for those services. Right now, as we speak, in my riding, there are people who technically have access but can't afford it. We'll take the obvious example: someone on ODSP who could use the Internet to improve their lot in life. Where are they going to get 140 bucks a month when they're on ODSP? Where? And they're not the only ones. There are a lot of people now who work for minimum wage in my riding who have to take two cars. They both work minimum wage; they both have to drive cars to get to those jobs. There's no public transportation. The cost of food is going up. We know all these things. Where are they going to get 140 bucks a month? It's a legitimate question.

Everyone's going to have it, according to the government, and God bless. Everyone is going to have access by 2025, but will everybody be able to pay for it? I haven't heard anyone on the government side in both leads—I listened to the second reading lead; I brought it up. I listened to the third reading lead; I'm bringing the same issue up. And there are many other issues I bring up, but the affordability one is a huge one, because just the fact that the satellite is there or that the cable is there doesn't mean that they have true access. I think the affordability issue is one that we need to look at, and especially in areas—we'll go to little towns, getting back to the member from Nickel Belt's question, where you know it will never pay a private operator to provide the service. It will never pay.

Low-Earth satellites are great, but at the end of the day, the best Internet is cable. Fibre optic cable to the farm is the best, the most reliable, but if there are only two farms on that road, you know what? That cable's not coming, and that's a problem. It's a very big problem.

So we've identified affordability. We've identified the issue of once the program is over—I think this is the crucial part. Once the program is over and said and done, and the government of the day—whoever—says, "You know, everyone's got service," then what happens when the money's gone and the private sector goes, "Well, we're not going to continue providing service?" I'll give you an

example. This has changed a little bit, but I've brought this up before. Another beautiful town that should be on everybody's list is River Valley, home of the bluegrass festival. It is a beautiful little town. Now, this happened a few years ago in River Valley. I came. They have a school, and a former parish priest—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I apologize to the member from Timiskaming—Cochrane—

Mr. John Vanthof: I was just getting started, Speaker—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): And we look forward to the remainder of your speech, but it is 10:15 and the standing orders compel me to rise and now announce that we will begin members' statements.

Third reading debate deemed adjourned.

WEARING OF SWEATER

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll recognize the member for Scarborough Southwest.

Ms. Doly Begum: I seek unanimous consent to wear a "Love, Scarborough" hoodie today in the chamber.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Scarborough Southwest is seeking unanimous consent to wear a Scarborough T-shirt—

Ms. Doly Begum: Hoodie.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): —hoodie. Agreed? Agreed.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

SCARBOROUGH

Ms. Doly Begum: I'd like to recognize the entire team behind the film Scarborough and congratulate them for their immense success at the Canadian Screen Awards, winning eight awards earlier this weekend, including Best First Feature Film and Best Motion Picture.

Adapted from Catherine Hernandez's novel of the same name, the film is a heartfelt and raw love letter to Scarborough, its resilience and its people. Growing up in Scarborough and seeing my own family navigate similar struggles to those in the movie, when my mother tried to make ends meet while raising my brother and I and while being a caregiver to my father—there was something so personal about watching our community's stories on the big screen.

Shasha Nakhai, Rich Williamson and Catherine Hernandez's amazing artistry made so many in our community with similar stories feel seen in an incredibly powerful way.

The strength of our community—not just in my riding of Scarborough Southwest, but across Scarborough—lies in how we have found support in one another despite decades of being forgotten by our governments and leaders. Because that's what Scarborough is about: You find ways. You find friends, resilience and hope.

This film told stories that are so similar to my own, and I am sure many felt the same way who grew up in Scarborough. So I want to take this moment to thank the entire team behind the film and congratulate them for their immense success. It is a testament to the importance of investing in local creative projects, arts and culture.

PRIORITIES AND PARTNERSHIPS FUND

Mr. Aris Babikian: The priorities and partnerships funding investment, commonly known as PPF, is part of our government's COVID-19 equity supports, which fund various initiatives that help promote a positive and supportive school climate, support healthy relationships and address bullying, cyberbullying and trauma.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Minister of Education for initiating this program and making the health, safety and well-being of the students a priority. Due to his efforts, Parents Engaged in Education, Community Family Services of Ontario, the Chinese cultural association of greater Toronto, Canadian Tamil Academy, Sara Corning Centre and the Zoryan Institute received a \$50,000 grant each. I would like to commend the outstanding work and the essential service the above-mentioned organizations provide to our families and students.

The PPF provides a much-needed culturally responsive mental health and community support to students during and after the pandemic. Supports provided to students may include short-term counselling via an online platform, text or phone; one-on-one personalized lesson plans; and pairing students with professional mentors. Furthermore, students will celebrate and learn about our diverse communities, cultures and traditions, in addition to the ramifications of hate and racism in our society, and try to eradicate them from our daily life.

CRAFT ALCOHOL INDUSTRY

Mr. Wayne Gates: Today, I'd like to discuss an important issue to Niagara and the province: our craft alcohol industry. Many of you know, down in Niagara, we have some of the world's best wineries, craft cideries and breweries. It creates an enormous economic impact for the entire province. The Ontario wine industry alone has a \$4.4-billion economic impact on the province that results in creating 18,000 jobs. In Ontario, there are roughly 104 areas of production for craft cider, with 10 cideries in my riding alone. However, I think we need to do more to ensure this creates an environment in this province where they can grow. We need to come together and look at realistic policy solutions that could have a significant benefit to this growing industry that highlight some of the most beautiful farm products we grow in Niagara and Ontario.

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In terms of our wine industry, we must look at ending the basic tax which foreign wineries do not pay. Think about that: Foreign wineries do not pay. It would have a significant impact on small- and medium-sized wineries producing wine with 100% Ontario grapes.

In the cider industry, I had the privilege of working with members from both the Conservative and Liberal parties to introduce legislation which would bring a more fair and realistic tax structure to craft cider producers in the province.

Even these two small policy changes would have a significant impact on protecting 18,000 jobs in these industries. We grow and produce some of the amazing craft products in Niagara and Ontario. Let's work together and fight for these industries.

POST-STROKE TREATMENT

Mr. Norman Miller: Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare provides top-notch emergency and in-patient care with sites in Huntsville and Bracebridge. Last week, MAHC announced they will also be able to offer endovascular thrombectomy (EVT) screening to patients at both hospital sites.

EVT is groundbreaking stroke treatment. If a patient is within four to 24 hours of stroke system onset, highly specialized teams can use a guidewire to remove the blood clot from the brain. This therapy has impressive outcomes and widens the window for intervention to 24 hours, where previous treatments using clot-busting drugs had to be initiated within just a few hours of the start of symptoms.

Teams at MAHC worked with partners like Central East Stroke Network to launch a new protocol that will offer timely EVT screening at both hospital sites. Eligible patients will be transferred to specialized facilities in the GTA to receive EVT treatment.

Now, when residents and visitors to Parry Sound–Muskoka recognize the signs of a stroke and call 911, they will have access to this newest stroke treatment.

I also want to take a moment to recognize Natalie Bubela, who recently retired as president and CEO of Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare. Natalie managed the hospital for the past 10 years and expanded the services available at both sites. On behalf of the residents of Parry Sound–Muskoka, I want to thank Natalie for all her hard work and wish her well in her retirement.

Finally, I want to welcome incoming president and CEO Cheryl Harrison, who will start next month.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Ms. Marit Stiles: Mr. Speaker, I want to tell you, there are few issues more pressing for the community that I represent than housing and the affordability crisis. Throughout my term as MPP, my team and I have worked to help tenants push back against illegal renovations and sudden above-guideline increases. We hear from young families every day who haven't only seen their dream of owning a home shattered, but they can't even find a place they can afford to rent. As massive new developments go up in their neighbourhoods, they already know that they won't be able to afford a place there.

That's why this government's new housing bill was such a disappointment. It could have been a chance to

correct years of failure on housing, but instead it's one final gift to big developers that will leave ordinary people behind with: nothing to help renters; no rent control; nothing to build the missing middle; nothing to build more affordable homes; nothing to curb speculation.

This government has had four years to protect tenants and build affordable homes that meet the needs of Ontarians, but at every single opportunity they've shown whose side they're really on.

This June, we're going to show them the door, Mr. Speaker. We're going to show them the door and we're going to elect an NDP government that will actually deliver homes that the people of this province and my community can afford.

SERVICES EN FRANÇAIS

M. Stephen Blais: Le 22 mars a marqué la Journée de la solidarité franco-ontarienne. Malheureusement, la francophobie coule toujours dans les veines des gouvernements conservateurs ici en Ontario. Depuis la bataille des épingles à chapeaux, les francophones se battent pour leurs droits car les conservateurs veulent toujours les piétiner. À l'époque, ce sont les gardiennes de Guigues, Béatrice et Diane Desloges, ainsi que des mères de familles francophones, qui ont refusé les ordres de fermeture du gouvernement.

N'oublions pas qu'il y a 25 ans, jour pour jour, notre communauté francophone a fait front et a battu le gouvernement conservateur de l'époque pour sauver l'Hôpital Montfort à Ottawa. Plus de 10 000 francophones et membres de la communauté se sont unis pour s'opposer à la décision irréfléchie du gouvernement. C'est le leadership des membres de la communauté franco-ontarienne qui a permis de sauver l'Hôpital Montfort.

Et nous y voilà encore une fois. Ce gouvernement conservateur actuel a essayé de tuer l'université de langue française, tout en essayant d'accréditer l'université d'un islamophobe. Encore, la communauté a manifesté en solidarité pour défier le gouvernement. Et c'est ce gouvernement actuel qui a éliminé le Commissariat aux services en français, en abdication de ses responsabilités.

Sous la direction de Steven Del Duca et avec le leadership de Lucille Collard et Amanda Simard, notre parti a tenu et continuera de tenir le gouvernement responsable de son traitement déplorable et de son mépris envers la communauté francophone de l'Ontario. Je suis fier d'appuyer un parti qui continue de reconnaître et de célébrer les racines historiques franco-ontariennes de notre province.

SENIORS' SERVICES

Mr. Lorne Coe: Our government is continuing to invest in the health and well-being of local seniors through the seniors active living centres. In this regard, Whitby's seniors active living centres will be receiving \$104,000 from the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility.

The town of Whitby is part of the World Health Organization's Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities and Communities. As an age-friendly community, they are committed to providing supportive physical and social environments for older people. Through their 55-plus recreational spaces, services, programs and resources, local seniors are able to live an active, safe and meaningful life while contributing in all areas of the great community of Whitby.

Speaker, our government remains committed—absolutely committed—to the safety, independence and well-being of Ontario's seniors and continues to support the seniors active living centre programs and services that offer so much to a growing seniors population here in Ontario.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Ms. Catherine Fife: Five years ago, the #MeToo movement spread across the globe. This movement reached our community, helping to strengthen survivors' voices so that they could courageously tell their stories. Local survivors reached out to the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region in record numbers. Their team responded by showing up for survivors in court, in hospital rooms and in police stations, and by holding space in their counselling offices. Their wait-list grew as more survivors reached out.

In response to this cultural shift, the government of the time increased the funding to community-based sexual assault centres across the province. In Waterloo region, these funds would have secured two additional counsellors. But after the last provincial election, these promised funds were clawed back, and since that time, the shadow pandemic—an increase in gender-based violence during COVID-19—has increased the demand even more, resulting in critical underfunding in the sector. The wait-lists continue to grow.

Last week I was in North Bay and I met with the ED of Amelia Rising. They have not seen an increase in operational funding since 1994, and at that time it was only \$20,000. These agencies cannot stretch these dollars any further.

Speaker, we should not have to fundraise in the province of Ontario to keep women and survivors of sexual assault safe. Will this government reverse the clawback to sexual assault centres so that every Ontarian has access to life-changing counselling in the province of Ontario?

GLEN ABBEY GOLF CLUB

Mr. Stephen Crawford: It's an honour to rise in the Legislature today to bring attention to the key to the town of Oakville ceremony that occurred last week for saving the treasured Glen Abbey green space. On Monday, April 4, I had the honour of hosting the Premier of Ontario, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the member from Oakville North–Burlington in my riding, where we attended the key to the town ceremony,

alongside members of the Save Glen Abbey group and residents' associations.

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At this event, Mayor Rob Burton awarded a key to town leaders and volunteers from Save Glen Abbey, residents' associations presidents, the Premier, the minister, the member from Oakville North–Burlington and myself. I want to congratulate the members of Save Glen Abbey. The personal sacrifices they made to save this important green space for our community cannot be understated. Their hard work and organization are admirable, and the outcome is something we can be proud of. Saving this land was a grassroots movement.

I want to thank the mayor and council for collaborating with the province to save this open space. I'd also like to thank my colleagues in government for listening to the residents of Oakville. Glen Abbey is an essential place for both the environment and local history and culture. Saving Glen Abbey is an example of residents, municipal council and the province coming together and delivering results that benefit our local community.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): We have with us in the Speaker's gallery today Ms. Idit Shamir, the consul general of Israel to Toronto and western Canada. She is accompanied by Ms. Shani Azulai, the deputy consul general, and Mr. Jordan Falkenstein. Please join me in welcoming our special guests to the Legislature.

Mr. Faisal Hassan: I would like to welcome members of the York South–Weston youth council who are joining us today. Welcome to Devron Swaby, Jamila Wynter-Scotland, Saherla Osman and Rhythm Rana. Welcome to the Ontario Legislature and thank you for the great work you do in our community of York South–Weston.

Mr. John Fraser: Our page captain is from Ottawa South: Vivian Lozada. She's here this morning. Joining her are her parents, mother, Nancy Macdonald, and father, Dominic Lozada; sister Naveen Lozada; other sister, Vanessa Lozada; Craig Macdonald, her grandfather; Doris Macdonald, her grandmother; and Veronique Lozada, her grandmother. Welcome to Queen's Park.

QUESTION PERIOD

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. John Vanthof: My question is to the Premier. Last week, Dr. Peter Jüni, the science table head, called COVID right now in Ontario a "tidal wave," a wave that's hitting our province hard. Public schools are being closed because there are not enough staff to keep them open. With the science table's best data suggesting we have over 100,000 cases per day right now, that wasn't what the government predicted would happen.

So why did the government remove the mask mandate for schools so early?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To reply on behalf of the government, the Deputy Premier and Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: We have always taken a very cautious approach with COVID when it comes to protecting the health and safety of the people of Ontario. We were one of the last provinces to lift the masking requirements.

I think it needs to be said that Dr. Moore has cautioned Ontarians for quite some time that as we lifted the public health measures, and with the increased transmissibility of the BA.2 strain of COVID, we were going to see the numbers go up.

We are seeing the numbers going up. However, Dr. Moore has also indicated that because we have so many Ontarians who are now fully vaccinated, with the increased use of antivirals such as Paxlovid and the capacity in our hospitals, we are prepared to weather this and to continue. This is something that was entirely predictable from the beginning. We knew this was going to happen, and we're prepared for it.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. John Vanthof: Public Health Ontario released some evidence last week. They state, "With expected increased infections among children associated with increased transmissibility of BA.2, removal of public health measures, and limited vaccine eligibility and two-dose coverage in children less than 12 years, the number of children with severe disease is likely to increase. This may impact pediatric hospital and intensive care unit ... capacity, and also lead to further disruption to in-person learning in Ontario."

Speaker, Public Health Ontario is calling for bringing back the mask mandate in schools, especially as schools are now closing. If the government won't do that, will the Premier and the chief medical officer explain why not?

Hon. Christine Elliott: As I've indicated before, the Chief Medical Officer of Health does not believe that that's necessary. We knew that the numbers were going to go up, but—and I'll quote Dr. Moore—"We have tools that we did not have just two years ago, including highly effective vaccines that have changed the course of the pandemic, high vaccination rates that continue to improve as more and more Ontarians see the value of getting boosted to protect themselves, their families and their communities."

Thankfully, the people of Ontario have responded to the call for higher levels of vaccination. We are seeing higher levels of vaccination in young people as well. So while the numbers are increasing, we know that we have capacity in both our adult hospitals as well as our pediatric hospitals. The numbers have risen slightly as the number of people with COVID increases. However, people are not generally requiring hospitalization or requiring admission to intensive care units.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The final supplementary.

Mr. John Vanthof: Speaking of tools that were supposed to help change the fight against COVID, a new

investigative report by the Star found that the rapid tests this Premier said would be "game-changers" didn't end up helping to protect hot-spot communities. In fact, the Premier sent 175,000 publicly paid for kits to private, for-profit schools. That's more than they sent to paramedics, child care centres, shelters and other front-line services. Small businesses that could have deployed these tests to stay afloat weren't offered what the Premier's friends got.

Why didn't hot-spot communities and front-line staff get these tests? Why weren't they at the front of the line?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Here it is, the NDP, right? During the exact same time frame that the member is talking about, how many times did the NDP talk about rapid tests? Not once—not one time, Mr. Speaker. In fact, this government has sent out 150 million rapid tests to the people of the province of Ontario. Now, all of a sudden, the NDP have come to the party.

Let me tell you, we were sending out those rapid tests to schools. We were sending them out to chambers of commerce. The member for Peterborough ensured that chambers of commerce across the province had access to those tests for our small businesses. We were sending them out to hot spots. In fact, we were handing them out at subways, at shopping malls. We were doing everything that we could to get rapid tests out.

All of the time, we said how important it was. The Ontario science table said that we shouldn't do it, the Chief Medical Officer of Health said that we shouldn't do it, but we knew that we had to get those rapid tests out. Today, over 150 million of those rapid tests are out—more than the rest of the country combined—and we're very proud of that.

COST OF LIVING

Mr. John Vanthof: I seem to have touched a nerve.

To the Premier: The Premier's high-cost and low-wage policies have hurt people looking to keep a roof over their heads. The cost of buying a house in Ontario has doubled since he was elected Premier, and for renters, the average cost is up \$192 a month.

The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corp. says that affordable rent should be no more than 30% of your income. But if you live in Toronto, this year alone, you'd have to work an extra seven and a half hours a month just to stay afloat. In London, it's an extra 15 hours a month, and in Peterborough, it's a stunning 36 hours a month, just to pay the extra rent.

Why has the government done nothing to help Ontarians afford a safe roof over their heads?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Hon. Steve Clark: I might want to ask the honourable member the same question: Why has his party done nothing in the last four years to support all our initiatives that we have accomplished since being here?

We know there is much more work to do collaboratively with our federal colleagues and with municipalities. But I want to remind the honourable member that when it came to the fall economic statement in 2018, when we adhered to our campaign promise to protect existing tenants through rent control, it was his party that said that there wouldn't be any increase in purpose-built rental in the province. What's happened? Three years later, we have now seen record purpose-built rentals being built in the province—13,000 purpose-built rental starts last year, the highest in 30 years.

1040

Speaker, through you to the honourable member: Why did your party keep voting no? Why did they keep not supporting all the initiatives—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. Supplementary?

Mr. John Vanthof: Especially up north, Ontarians have no choice but to pay for the high prices of not just rent but gas. Under this Premier's watch, gas prices are higher than ever. When this Premier was elected, gas in Ontario was \$1.33 a litre, on average. The April average is now \$1.74 a litre and even higher up north. That's 41 cents more a litre. For a person who has no choice but to—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order. Stop the clock. The member will take his seat.

I need to be able to hear the member who is posing the question.

Please restart the clock. Member for Timiskaming—Cochrane.

Mr. John Vanthof: For a person who has no choice but to drive to work, that's an extra \$35 for every tank, just to fill up the F-150.

This Premier promised in 2018 to “have a frank discussion with the oil companies” and said he'd be watching their every move, putting them on notice if they gouged consumers. But instead, he has let them gouge drivers every time they fuel up.

Why has the Premier sat back on his hands while gas prices shot up 41 cents a litre while he has been Premier?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To reply, the government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: The Minister of Finance recently brought a bill into this House that would lower the gas tax for the people of the province of Ontario, for every single person who drives—and not only for the people who drive but everybody who relies on a product that is delivered to a store because of fuel consumption. And how did the NDP vote? They voted against that. They voted against putting more money in the pockets of the people of the province of Ontario, more money in the pockets of small business people. That's how the NDP voted. And we're not even talking about the carbon tax—a carbon tax that they fought for. After we eliminated the carbon tax in the province of Ontario and saw gas prices come down, by one, two, three, four, five cents, they fought to put it back onto the people of the province of Ontario.

And now, recently, we saw—he talks about driving. Well, it was under their watch, with the Liberals, that they got rid of the Ontario Northland, making it even more difficult for people to get around the north. But it was this Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade and this Premier who brought it back.

Under their watch, they closed things down; under our watch, we unleashed the power of the Ontario economy.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): And the final supplementary?

Mr. John Vanthof: Every Ontarian buying food knows the prices are skyrocketing. When the Premier was elected, a Canadian family spent just under \$1,000 a month on food. But these prices are projected to jump by 21% this year, or \$3,000 more a year, for a family of four just to eat the same meals they always have. And it's not all supply chain issues, because one study found that food prices are up because of corporate profits.

Why has this government ignored the high cost of living for Ontarians when it comes to putting food on the table and let companies get away with charging consumers so much?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Finance.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Mr. Speaker, through you to the member opposite, thank you for the question. As the House leader just highlighted, this government has been working to reduce the costs of living for many Ontarians.

Let me just highlight another area where we focused on putting more money back in the pockets of the people of Ontario: In 2012, as I note here, the cost of the licence plate sticker went from \$82 to \$90. In 2013 to 2014, it went up to \$98. Who supported the Liberal government at that time? It was this member's party that supported those increases. And then, in 2014, the Minister of Transportation and the now leader of the Liberal Party increased it again, up to \$108. On September 1, 2016, again, it was up to \$120. That was this party, supported by that party.

We're putting more money in the pockets of the hard-working people of Ontario, and we have a lot more that we are going to do.

COVID-19 TESTING

Ms. Marit Stiles: This question is for the Premier. Well, that was quite a report in the Toronto Star this weekend: A bombshell investigative report confirmed what many of us already knew anecdotally—that the distribution of rapid antigen tests was anything but equitable, especially when it came to Ontario's schools.

In the fall, as cases were rising and schools were closing yet again, parents were forced to crowdsource rapid tests for their local public schools until this government forbid them from doing that, saying they weren't recommended. I stood here in this House on October 5 and I asked the government, “Why are you stopping parents from sourcing those tests?” This government said, “They're not recommended. They're not necessary.”

Speaker, through you to the Premier: If those tests were not recommended, why was the government shovelling nearly 200,000 of them to private schools at the same time?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: You will recall, at the time, Mr. Speaker, the Ontario science table did not recommend the distribution of rapid tests. The Chief Medical Officer of Health did not recommend the distribution of rapid tests, nor did Ontario Public Health. But, you know what, and my colleagues will know this, despite those recommendations, we got over 50 million rapid tests out to education and child care centres—despite those recommendations, because we knew how important it is.

Colleagues, how many times did the Leader of the Opposition get up in her place and ask about rapid tests? Not even one time. Welcome to the importance of rapid tests.

That is why we've got 150 million rapid tests out to the people of the province of Ontario, thanks to the hard work of this Minister of Health, thanks to the hard work of this Premier, and thanks to the hard work of this caucus that worked every single day to ensure that all communities in this province were safe from COVID and that our schools were the safest in Canada.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Well, despite all that, the Star report showed that private schools received more tests than paramedics, than daycares, than shelters and jails combined. Mr. Speaker, this government forced women's shelters to beg for rapid tests. You told public schools, "No, you don't get them yet; it's not necessary." And then, worse still, over the 10 months after these publicly funded rapid tests were made available, only 20% of them went to those COVID hot spots that were designated.

They made schools break down kits of five into two. Meanwhile, in August, St. John's-Kilmarnock School got 14,000 rapid tests. Branksome Hall, where you have to pay \$36,000 a year to get your kid into that school, they got 9,600 tests on August 26. And this government would not put those tests in the hands of our public school students, let alone our shelters, our jails, our paramedics.

Mr. Speaker, knowing this, how can the Premier possibly justify a rapid test rollout that saw the wealthy and the well-connected get first dibs on an essential public health tool?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Of course, Mr. Speaker, when the NDP think that they've got you, they start asking questions about it. One day they want masks; the next day they don't want masks. One day they want closures; the next day they don't want closures. One minute they want more money in your pocket, but in the next minute they're voting to take it out of your pocket.

Where was this member, where was this party and where was the Leader of the Opposition when we were distributing 150 million tests, including over 50 million to our schools and to our child care centres? They were sitting on their hands. They didn't even talk about it. They never even knew about it.

We had them at GO train stations. We sent every student home with a rapid test. What did you do? Nothing.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Davenport, come to order. The member for Hamilton Mountain, come to order. The member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke, come to order.

The next question.

ENERGY POLICIES

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: My question today is about Ontario's electricity supply and it is to the Minister of Energy. The rapid growth of the greenhouse and automotive sectors in southwestern Ontario, under the leadership of Premier Ford, has been nothing short of remarkable. For 15 years, we watched the Liberals and NDP work together to drive good-paying manufacturing jobs out of this province. But under our government, we're bringing forward policies that ensure these jobs are coming back to our province, and we're working to make our energy grid more competitive. However, this record level of growth means that the demand for power is also greater than ever before.

My question to the Minister of Energy is, what is our government doing to ensure southwestern Ontario's economic boom has access to the electricity it needs?

1050

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The parliamentary assistant.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: The member is absolutely correct: After years of seeing jobs and investment flee this province, we knew something needed to change. That's why we've been hard at work restoring Ontario's clean energy advantage and providing the stability that job creators rely on—and we are seeing the results. Just a few weeks ago, our government announced the \$5-billion Stellantis-LGES electric vehicle battery plant, which is the largest automotive investment in the history of this country, creating 2,500 jobs in the region.

But Speaker, these jobs need power, and we need to be ready to support these job creators. That's why last week I announced that our government is taking action to facilitate the timely development of five new transmission lines in southwestern Ontario so that we can power southwestern Ontario's economic boom.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you very much to the minister for that answer. Of course, we know that the nuts and bolts of Ontario's economic engine are energy, and we've had a fantastic track record when it comes to delivering on much-needed reforms in the electricity sector to ensure that we have clean, green energy that's produced for all of the growth that we're seeing across our region.

Since our government first came to office, we've been working every day to make Ontario open for business and open for jobs. I know that Ontarians across Niagara and southwestern Ontario expect their government to understand that economic growth benefits everyone, and that by creating the conditions for new investments in our

province, we are creating opportunities and prosperity for all.

Could the member speak a bit about how these transmission projects will enable even more investment and economic growth in Ontario?

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Thank you again to the member for the question. With new projects often facing lengthy development times, we have taken action by declaring these transmission infrastructure projects as priorities, to ensure we are meeting the needs of south-western Ontario's economic boom. Our government knows that ensuring transmission capacity is built in a timely and efficient manner gives business confidence to expand or invest in operations and create new jobs.

While these measures will create efficiencies, I do want to be clear that they do not remove the obligation of Hydro One to meet the requirements of the Environmental Assessment Act. This will ensure each line is planned responsibly and in consultation with Indigenous and local communities.

By working hand in hand with job creators and communities, under the leadership of Premier Ford, we are enabling economic growth and more jobs for the people of southwestern Ontario.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: My question is to the Premier. Omicron is spreading like wildfire. Two London schools closed last week because they couldn't even cover the absences. Thames Valley District School Board chair Lori-Ann Pizzolato writes that 400 education positions remain unfilled every single day. That's 400 each day—400.

My constituent Mary wrote to the Premier and Minister Elliott:

“What are you doing to address this sixth wave of COVID-19 in Ontario? I don't want to hear about your hospital beds—which ... are very difficult to staff as more and more health care workers also become infected. I want to hear how you are working to keep people out of those hospital beds, especially elders, children too young to be vaccinated, people with disabilities, immunocompromised people, people with cancer or with organ transplants, Indigenous peoples, people from underserved communities who have been hit the hardest.”

Speaker, why did this government accept that children would be left unprotected when they made masks optional and said safety was optional?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: Thank you for the question. We have, at every step along the way, taken every possible step that we could take to make sure that the health and well-being of the people of Ontario is protected. The best way to protect yourself is with a vaccination. We recognize that some can't be vaccinated yet, although there are some very promising developments working their way through the system for approval.

But we recognized that we were going to see an increase in cases. Because we have dropped some of the public health measures, that doesn't mean that people should just ignore all of the other precautions that should be taken. Wearing a mask, of course, is optional now. It's not mandatory. But it's up to every person to assess their own level of risk. So we are recommending, of course, that people continue to wear masks in crowded public spaces like public transit and so on, continuing with the usual measures of mask wearing, frequent hand washing and all the rest. It's not mandatory, but it is something that everybody needs to assess under their own personal circumstances to determine whether a mask continues to be in their best interest.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Respectfully, Speaker, masks are tools—tools this government has left gathering dust on the table. Children need help assessing risk. They need direction from this government. They need leadership.

Back to the Premier: The science table, SickKids hospital and numerous school boards fought for masks to continue so kids would stay safe in school, but leading experts were undermined by this government, whose reckless, politically motivated decision made masks optional in schools. This government ignored science, ignored their own expert table and threw caution into the wind when they should be protecting children.

My constituent Cathy wrote me a letter urging me to help the government “understand the change about their previous decision regarding masks is all about protecting us and helping us stay healthy.” When will the Premier call the Chief Medical Officer of Health and make him answer the growing number of parents who want their kids to stay safe? Will the Premier and the Chief Medical Officer of Health answer the growing flood of parents and families who are terrified about the dangerous amount of illness in our schools? Yes or no?

Hon. Christine Elliott: Every decision our government has made since the beginning of this pandemic has been based on clinical evidence, based on science, based on recommendations from Dr. Moore, our Chief Medical Officer of Health, and his advisers. This has been the course that we have always taken and the course that we will continue to take.

With respect to the overall view of whether masking should be mandatory or optional at this point, as Dr. Moore has said on a number of occasions, we are at the stage now where we need to learn to live with COVID. We're not going to eliminate it in the next short while.

We will still have cases, but it's important that people continue to be vaccinated. We have increasing numbers of antivirals that are coming into the province—Dr. Moore is going to be speaking about that this afternoon—and we do have capacity in our hospitals. But we know that people are following these measures. We are making these recommendations based on what Dr. Moore and the epidemiologists have told us. We have always done that in the past, and we will continue to do that in the future.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. John Fraser: My question is for the Premier. After being kept under wraps by the Premier for more than a month, Dr. Moore is giving a briefing today, and here's what we have known for a few weeks: We're at 100,000 cases a day, so the sixth wave is a tidal wave; people who need Paxlovid can't get it; and vaccination rates have stalled, which is leaving way too many people unprotected. There is no plan for testing. Local medical officers of health, Public Health Ontario and the science table have called for masking indoors, yet this government is still planning to lift masking mandates in long-term care, hospitals and public transit on April 27.

Will the government do the right thing and not remove masking in LTC homes, hospitals and public transit, and also return today to require masks in essential settings like schools?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Health.

Hon. Christine Elliott: As I just indicated, our government is going to continue to follow the recommendations made by Dr. Moore and his colleagues with respect to masking, with respect to the taking of antivirals. Dr. Moore himself is going to be available for questions and to discuss the increasing use of Paxlovid and other antivirals, both in terms of eligibility and availability, because we are receiving larger quantities now and we know that there are many more people who will want to take these antivirals to avoid having to go into hospital, to avoid having to be in intensive care.

Any questions with respect to those issues can be put to Dr. Moore. He is going to make himself available. We continue to follow his advice and guidance.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary.

Mr. John Fraser: There's a six-year-old at CHEO in Ottawa. He has something called orbital cellulitis, and had some other symptoms. We don't know what it is. That's our grandson, and he's not the only one in the province who is in hospital who is a child, or anyone across the province.

We know that lifting the masking mandates has created greater spread. It's not anecdotal. Public Health Ontario has told us. The science table has told us. Last week, in Ottawa, all the hospitals and all the medical officers of health in the area said we need to return to mask mandates. They've called for a return to mask mandates. So my question is really simple: Will the Chief Medical Officer of Health allow local public health units to issue masking requirements in their own communities? Will he do that? A section 22 isn't good enough. You know the restrictions there are with that. They should be able to order a letter of instruction. It's either that, or Dr. Moore has to do it.

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The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I ask the members to make their comments through the Chair.

Minister of Health to reply.

Hon. Christine Elliott: First, let me say I am very sorry to hear about your grandchild and I hope that he will be well.

Secondly, with respect to the wearing of masks, as Dr. Moore has indicated in the past, we need to learn to live with COVID. That said, it is not compulsory anymore, but every person has to do their own risk assessment. Many people are choosing to continue to wear their masks and they don't feel comfortable not wearing them in crowded public spaces.

With respect to what's going to be happening in hospitals and long-term-care homes and other places where there is higher risk, that is something that we are constantly assessing with Dr. Moore's guidance and the guidance of the other epidemiologists that are advising him. We are awaiting Dr. Moore's recommendations but, as I said before, many people are choosing to continue to wear their masks. That is their own preference.

The local medical officers of health, I know, are conferring on a regular basis with Dr. Moore as well. That is something that we will await their guidance on and if it is a requirement that they recommend that we return to mask wearing, we will. But it will be based on—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you.

The next question.

NORTHERN TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Norman Miller: My question is for the Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. Over the past week there has been some exciting news for northern Ontario. Announcements have been made that would secure the economic future for the north and provide them with the critical infrastructure to remain prosperous for years to come. Can the minister please provide an update to this House on how the government is supporting good jobs in northern Ontario?

Hon. Victor Fedeli: Ten years ago the previous Liberal government, only with a hand from the NDP, gutted northern Ontario by putting Ontario Northland railway up for sale and cancelling the Northlander train service. Well, that's all changed now. For several years our government has been funding the plans for the return of passenger rail, and yesterday Premier Ford and Minister Mulroney announced \$75 million to bring our train back. This funding will replace the tracks and stations that are needed, as well as provide the passenger rail cars.

Ten years ago, the union leaders called it the darkest day at ONTC. Well, the sun is shining today on a bright, new and hope-filled future, thanks to our government returning passenger rail to our north.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you, Minister. It's great to hear that our government is supporting the workers and jobs for people all across the province, including the north. Our government understands the importance of regional economic development and announcements like these show our commitment to local communities in Ontario.

Back to the minister: Can the minister please inform this House how else we are supporting people in the north?

Hon. Victor Fedeli: Ten years ago, when the Liberals announced that they were selling off Ontario Northland, the NDP did not stand up to support the north. They sat on their hands. So the Liberals, with the NDP support, dealt the very first blow to Ontario Northland. They shipped 100 GO train cars to Quebec to be refurbished. They knew there was no way they could shut down Ontario Northland if they were given that valuable contract—the one they'd held for years. To add insult to injury, it cost more taxpayer dollars to ship those rail cars to Quebec to have them done.

That changed on Friday. The province announced a \$109-million contract to refurbish 56 GO Transit rail coaches in North Bay. That's work for 100 women and men in North Bay for three years, and vindication for that hard-working team at Ontario Northland.

LAURENTIAN UNIVERSITY UNIVERSITÉ LAURENTIENNE

Mr. Jamie West: My question is for the Premier. This week is the one-year anniversary of massive cuts to Laurentian University's programs and staff. The parliamentary assistant asked me when I was going to stand up for the north: every single day for the last four years.

It has been one year since hundreds of Sudburians were fired without severance, without notice. It has been one year since its workers had to tell their families this devastating news. It has been one year since the students learned that their programs had been eliminated. Ça fait un an que la ministre des Affaires francophones et la ministre des Collèges et Universités ont négligé leurs obligations en vertu de la Loi sur les services en français. It has been one year since the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act, a process that was never intended for a university, created a black box of secrecy that continues to this day to devastate my community. It has been one year of waiting for hope and being ignored by the parliamentary assistant, waiting to begin to rebuild.

One year ago, the Premier failed to provide the funding needed to avoid the process that led to these devastating cuts at Laurentian University. Will the Premier finally end the chaos of the CCAA process and protect what remains at Laurentian University and provide the funds to help rebuild it?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Colleges and Universities.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member for that question. I had the opportunity to meet with the member as well as the member from Nickel Belt to discuss the situation at Laurentian, which we're obviously—it's a priority for all of us to ensure that there is successful post-secondary education in the north. That's why this government stepped forward on December 16 and took over the DIP loan for the university. That was a \$35-million loan that the university has. We also took additional measures to provide cost-saving measures by providing a \$6-million COVID grant for Laurentian

University and the suspension of recovers and reductions, including those linked to enrolment targets.

My priority as the Minister of Colleges and Universities is to ensure success for the students at Laurentian University, which is why this government stepped forward with financial assistance of up to \$4,000 to students who needed to transfer to publicly assisted post-secondary institutions when their programs were cut in these situations.

We will continue to work with the Laurentian University board and administration to ensure success.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question? The member for Nickel Belt.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Also to the Minister of Colleges and Universities: Laurentian University is a world-class institution in part because it is surrounded by freshwater lakes, conservation lands, cross-country and hiking trails, world-class green spaces. Any Laurentian University student or community member can tell you the added value of the green space to their quality of life and to their education.

Fifteen local organizations, including HSN physicians and all four school boards have written to the minister. As the debtor in possession, the government has the right to Laurentian's property. The government has to agree and can oppose the sale of any of Laurentian University's assets, including its green space.

Can the government reassure my community now by making it clear that they will use their powers as DIP lender to oppose and stop the sale of any green space at Laurentian University?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member for that question. I know Laurentian University is a priority for you in your community, as the government understands as well. Post-secondary education in the north is very important not only to the community, to the local labour needs but also to the local sectors in the north that offer some remarkable programming.

As I said, my priority at this time is to monitor the process with the CCAA that the university is going through right now but to ensure that there's support given for the students and that students are supported during this difficult time. I did have the opportunity to meet with some students and discuss the situation. I know it has been difficult on students as well as the community.

But we'll continue to monitor, to work with the Laurentian University faculty, staff, administration and the board as we work through the CCAA process and the work that this government has done to step in and help move forward.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr. Stephen Blais: Last spring and summer, every health leader, every teachers' union, every school board, every parent was begging the government for a safe back-to-school plan in the fall. When that plan eventually came late in the summer, it was lackluster. There was no rapid testing for anyone in public schools. The rollout for vaccines for teenagers was slow because they didn't use

schools as vaccination centres. There was almost a late rollout for younger aged children, as you know, Mr. Speaker. And as a result, the fall was interrupted with COVID exposures, missed class, both for teachers and for students, and a very disruptive session. As it turns out, there was money available for rapid testing: 175,000 rapid tests to private schools while parents of public school children were forced to buy their own and spend hundreds of dollars or go without.

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Why did this government choose to prioritize kids in public school over the millions of Ontarians that send their kids to public school, Mr. Speaker?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: What can you say about the Liberal Party? They do one thing when the cameras are on and another thing when the cameras are off, right? We've seen this from them before. When the cameras are on, mainly in the Legislature now, they mask up, but when nobody's watching, mainly at a Liberal convention, all crowded around the leader, no masks on. The next day they say we have to wear masks. Then they say we shouldn't wear masks—open, close. They're all over the place, Mr. Speaker—all over the place.

When we were shipping 150 million rapid tests throughout the province of Ontario, what were they doing? Nothing, Mr. Speaker. As a matter of fact, the Liberals' hand-picked candidate, Dr. Nathan Stall—what did he say about rapid tests? He said testing with rapid antigen testing is not recommended. The Liberal medical adviser, the candidate in St. Paul's: It's not recommended. He went even further: "We don't have evidence to support and the risks are ... high." So what is it? Is it the Liberals hand-picked medical officer adviser or is it not, Mr. Speaker? They can't even agree amongst themselves on the appropriate path.

Thankfully, a strong, stable Progressive Conservative majority government is getting Ontario through it better than any other jurisdiction.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question? The member for Ottawa South.

Mr. John Fraser: Well, the Premier called rapid tests game-changing, and he managed to send the game-changers to private schools but not to public schools. But since the member brought up masking, here's the point I was trying to get across.

Interjections.

Mr. John Fraser: It's not funny. It's actually not funny.

In hospitals across Ontario right now, there is a crisis because of absenteeism, and you all know it. We all know it. The hospitals tell us. That's why we should be masking. That's why we should be worried about everyone who's in hospital, that they're able to have the people they need to be there to care for them.

We can joke about all this stuff, we can point fingers and quote things, but at the end of the day, right now, we need to go back to masking: Keep it in LTC, keep it in

hospitals, keep it on public transit and, for God's sakes, do it in schools and places where people have to go. You know why? People are getting sick, people are absent from work and there's going to be a state where people aren't going to get the care they need, and you know it. So please do it. Thank you.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'd ask members to make their comments through the Chair.

Government House leader to reply.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Speaker, if the member had only had the exact same passion under the 15 years that he had the opportunity to govern, then we wouldn't have had the lack of ICU capacity in this province. We wouldn't have had the health and human resource issues we're having in this province. We wouldn't have had old outdated hospitals that need to be rebuilt. Had he only had the passion then, we wouldn't have gone into a warehouse of PPE that was expired. That is the record of the Liberal Party. That is the record that saw us have to endure lockdowns longer than any other jurisdiction because they did not prepare the province of Ontario.

However, Mr. Speaker, because of a strong, stable Progressive Conservative majority, we are making PPE right here in the province of Ontario. We have 90% of our population vaccinated. We have the safest return-to-school program in North America. We are building long-term-care homes. They built 611 beds. There's more than that being built in my own riding, and in his community—30,000, Mr. Speaker. Had they only had passion for anything, we wouldn't have been where we are now. But we're getting through it better than any other jurisdiction because of the hard work—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Stop the clock.

Restart the clock. The next question?

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

Ms. Donna Skelly: My question is for the Minister of Government and Consumer Services. Minister, last week you were joined by the President of the Treasury Board Secretariat to share a message with Ontarians about what our government is doing to ensure that they have the PPE needed to keep them safe.

After two difficult years, Ontarians want reassurance that their government is doing what is necessary to ensure we never let our guard down when it comes to public health. As such, I'd like to ask the minister what measures his ministry and our government are taking to secure the future of Ontario's health and safety.

Hon. Ross Romano: I thank the member for Flamborough-Glanbrook for her question. Last Wednesday, I had the privilege of joining our President of the Treasury Board in visiting a warehouse. It was under the Personal Protective Equipment Supply and Production Act, which is the first piece of legislation of its kind. Through that act, our government is ensuring that we have a very robust and healthy stockpile of PPE and critical supplies that are available at all times, and that we are

always ready to tackle any future emergency that we may face, unlike the previous Liberal government, who left behind a hollowed-out stockpile of our critical emergency supplies. Warehouses like the one that the President of the Treasury Board and I visited last week stood empty and quiet. To this failure, Premier Ford and myself and our entire government have one thing to say, Mr. Speaker, and that is: never again.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Donna Skelly: COVID-19 has taught us many different lessons, including how we can better prepare for any future threats to public health and safety. Even more so, as the government House leader has so passionately argued, we have learned what not to do when it comes to being prepared, thanks to the previous Liberal governments and their NDP allies, who are responsible for the sorry state of our PPE stockpile when the pandemic first struck.

My question, through you, Speaker, is again for the Minister of Government and Consumer Services. Now, more than ever, Ontarians are looking for leadership and confidence in our ability to protect public health for now and in the future. Speaker, through you to the minister: How is our government setting the stage to ensure that Ontarians can continue to feel safe and confident when it comes to our PPE supply and domestic production capability?

Hon. Ross Romano: Thank you again to the member for her question and for her outstanding advocacy for the people of Flamborough–Glanbrook.

Speaker, under Premier Ford's leadership, we have been working relentlessly behind the scenes to boost the supply of our PPE, of our critical supplies exponentially. Under this new piece of legislation, it is a bold step in ensuring a plan to protect Ontarians to ensure that we can stay open and to ensure that continues to be a reality. We are ensuring that we have a robust stockpile by harnessing our domestic production, strengthening our supply chain and our source of critical materials.

In fact, over the next 18 months, over 93%—that's 93%—of all of our procurements of PPE are coming from Ontario- and Canadian-based manufacturers. We're doing this openly, we're doing it transparently, without the veil of secrecy that plagued the former Liberal government. It's going to bring much-needed transparency and trust to Ontarians in their government and let them know that they can rest assured that our stockpile is full and in good condition.

COVID-19 TESTING

Ms. Catherine Fife: My question is to the Premier. Over the weekend, we did learn, through the freedom-of-information report via the Toronto Star, that this provincial government was giving preferential treatment to private schools over public schools when it comes to access to rapid antigen tests. In Waterloo region, for instance, one private school received 14,000 free rapid antigen tests

from the government last fall. That's enough rapid antigen tests to screen their students twice weekly, through to Christmas break.

Now, Christmas break is when the government finally got around to giving four rapid antigen tests per family to families across this province. That was the state of affairs right there. Meanwhile, when I reached out on behalf of countless constituents who were struggling to find these tests before Christmas, the Ministry of Health wrote in a letter to me that there was a "limited supply of tests." That's a direct quote. I'll send it over.

So they had the tests. Mr. Speaker, why didn't the government of Ontario allocate sufficient rapid antigen tests to public schools, to libraries, to daycares, to anyone who needed them so that they could actually screen themselves for COVID and prevent the transmission of COVID?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: What's actually quite shameful, Mr. Speaker, is that the opposition are now suggesting that if you happen to send your kids to a private school, somehow you don't deserve to get the same treatment as the kids in our public schools.

Here, Mr. Speaker, is the difference: Not only did our private schools get it, but so too did 50 million other people in the province of Ontario, in education and child care. In fact, we are the only province that sent home rapid tests with kids over the holidays—the only province to do that. On every single occasion, they either said nothing or did nothing to assist, Mr. Speaker; 150 million rapid tests went out across the province.

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Do you know who else got rapid tests, Mr. Speaker? Our small businesses in her own community got rapid tests. That's who got rapid tests. Education, health care, essential industries: over 150 million tests, more than any other province—in fact, more than all of the other provinces combined. It is a great record and we should be proud of that. I know we are on this side of the House.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I would just say that facts matter in this regard. On this side of the House, we were asking day in and day out why ECEs did not have access to tests; why public schools did not have access to tests; why, when people had to line up at the LCBO, they were gone in 20 minutes. But certain people had easy access. We're asking for equal access, and that answer that the minister just gave is completely insufficient.

We do know that rapid antigen tests would have helped curb the amount of absenteeism we are currently seeing in Waterloo region's public schools and schools across the province, because of a surge in sickness due to COVID-19. This past week, for instance, was the worst week for Waterloo Region District School Board in terms of fail-to-fills, with 99 fail-to-fills across 16 secondary schools.

This impacts learning. You should care about that. COVID spread in the schools impacts the overall community. People should not have to scramble to find staff to

staff our schools. Why did this government fail to ensure that public schools would have had sufficient access to rapid antigen tests, and equal access? That's what we want to know.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Education.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Mr. Speaker, it is under our Premier's leadership that we are sending seven million rapid tests to publicly funded schools every single month, 40,000 additional HEPA units to our publicly funded schools and 9,000 additional HEPA units to our child care centres.

We continue to provide free PPE. We're the only jurisdiction in this federation to send N95s to child care and education staff, well before the members opposite raised this issue. We have over 200 school-based vaccination clinics in the province of Ontario. We were the only province, as the House leader rightfully said, to send millions of rapid tests home over Christmas, the only province to have the foresight to do so ahead of Omicron hitting our shores, and the only jurisdiction in Canada to send families home with take-home PCR tests.

This was a proactive plan designed to reduce risk and keep kids learning in schools, which this government, our Progressive Conservative government, understands is so consequential to the mental health of children. We're going to continue to invest, with \$300 million for more staff, more PPE and more rapid tests to keep our kids safe.

HEALTH CARE FUNDING

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: My question is to the Premier. Last week, the Financial Accountability Office of Ontario released its report comparing Ontario's fiscal results with the other provinces after the first year of the pandemic. Despite Ontario's tax revenue being 13.7% of GDP, which was higher than the average of other provinces, Ontarians are not seeing that translate into its programs and services.

In fact, the FAO reports that when it comes to health spending, Ontario is last. In fact, they found that the health spending is 10% below the average of other provinces. It is alarming that government has consistently underspent when it comes to health care, starting with cutting \$284 million in planned cuts to public health pre-pandemic.

Speaker, why does this Premier feel that Ontarians should be paying their taxes but not getting the same results in health spending?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Minister of Finance.

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: Thank you to the member opposite for that question. You know, Mr. Speaker, I sit here and listen to the member opposite talk about investments in health care when the previous governments, supported by the NDP from 2011 to 2014, clearly, clearly did not make the investments in our infrastructure for health care, for long-term care, for housing, for high-speed Internet, for highways and for public transit.

Mr. Speaker, let me tell you what this government is doing. During the pandemic, \$51 billion in supports were made available to fight COVID-19 and to support and

promote the economic recovery. In fact, since the financial economic update that I tabled here on November 4, we've put an addition \$2.3 billion to support our health care system.

That side of the House didn't invest in infrastructure and health care. This side of the House is.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question.

Ms. Mitzie Hunter: I have a lot to say. Back to the Premier: When it comes to taking a deep dive into the FAO's numbers and comparing where Ontario ranks in per capita spending in 2020 with other provinces based on their program spending, we are not number one in any category in Canada. In fact, when it comes to general public service, we are last. When it comes to health care, we are last. When it comes to housing and community services, we are last. When it comes to recreation and culture, we are last. When it comes to the environmental protections that we need for the future of this province, we are ninth out of 10, but we are nowhere leading the pack.

My question: It is clear that this government does not want to invest in Ontario's future. Will the Premier continue on his program of a lack of investment, or will he invest in the future of this province?

Hon. Peter Bethlenfalvy: It's interesting that the member opposite talks about being last. I will let others draw their own conclusions from the few members over there.

Mr. Speaker, let's look at some of the facts. Which side of the House didn't go out in front of the public every 90 days to tell the people of Ontario how they spent their money? That side of the House. Which side of the House came out 16 quarters in a row over the last four years to tell the people of Ontario how they were spending their money? This side of the House.

Which side of the House did not get a clean opinion from the Auditor General for the public accounts? That side of the House. Which side of the House for four straight years has gotten a clean public opinion from the Auditor General? This side of the House.

Which side of the House put tolls on the 412 and the 418, making it more expensive for the people of Durham region, where I represent? That side of the House. Which side of the House is providing support for the families of not just Durham but all around Ontario, so the cost of living continues to be supported? This government.

This is the government that says yes. This is the government that's getting it done.

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Mr. Faisal Hassan: My question is to the Premier. Youth unemployment numbers across the province, and in particular in my riding of York South-Weston, are troublesome. While we are still feeling the economic effects of the pandemic, a clear strategy and youth employment initiative needs to be in place.

I recently had the pleasure of having some meetings with First Work: Ontario's Youth Employment Network.

The First Work program is a vital service in providing a range of employment services.

This government changed the delivery model from children, community and social services to the Ministry of Labour in 2019. We are seeing the effects of that change. With scarce public dollars, I'm concerned about the use of for-profit service providers and with the cutting of the programs that really help those most at risk and vulnerable young people.

What is this government doing to ensure an employment model remains well-funded and a strategic youth employment plan is in place?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Government House leader?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think the member knows full well that when we came to office in 2018, many of the programs that support people who were looking for work just weren't working for the very same people who were seeking to access that work. That is why we modified the system entirely: to make it more of a results-based system. We looked at those best providers. We supported them so that people in the community could have access to jobs.

The good news is this: Not only are we looking for people who are in the workplace today—that's why 550,000 people, I believe, have the dignity of a job that didn't when we took office in 2018—but for those young people, the people on his youth council, they have to look forward to a system of education that is better. There are more schools that are open. We have a better curriculum because of this Minister of Education. Our colleges and universities are firing on all cylinders, preparing people for the jobs of tomorrow.

The Minister of Labour has ensured that skills training and the trades are back in the province of Ontario. Before, you could not get a skilled trade in this province; now you can. The Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade has delivered the jobs of tomorrow. That is what the youth of this province have to look forward to under a stable, strong, Conservative majority government.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary?

Mr. Faisal Hassan: Back to the Premier: I'm honoured to have guests in the public gallery this morning from our York South–Weston youth council. They know first-hand the struggles young people face and know that a very important service was lost in the government's changes of delivery, and that's through the Youth Job Connection program. This program assisted those young workers who really needed the most assistance and helped push them into the hard-to-navigate and intimidating adult system. This policy shift and overhaul of social services is being piloted in three test regions.

Young people have already been hit by the pandemic economic damage, and young people facing many barriers are now being neglected by this government. Will this government look to youth employment services that raise up all young people, reject for-profit models and devote their energy to helping those most vulnerable youth?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, what the Minister of Labour has been focusing on right from the beginning is

ensuring that the youth, the people who will fill the jobs of tomorrow, have access to programs that—wait for it—actually work, because the system that we inherited from the Liberals was not working for the very same young people who are in the gallery today who are looking for jobs. It was not working. Our education system had let them down. Our colleges and universities had let them down. A system of training had let them down. Apprenticeship was almost closed in the province of Ontario because of the policies of the Liberals, supported by the NDP.

Now, we reignited the Ontario economy right from day one, building for the jobs of tomorrow. The jobs of tomorrow—that is what we have been doing since day one so that the members of your youth council, those who are sitting in the gallery, have access to the highest-paying jobs that we can offer. That is why when we deliver \$5 billion for new technologies in the province of Ontario, Mr. Speaker, and the thousand of jobs that come with it, it is not for us. It is for tomorrow that we do it. I hope the member will support us on that journey.

COVID-19 IMMUNIZATION

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Speaker, through you to the Minister of Health: The creation of a vaccine usually requires 10 to 15 years of research before the vaccine is made available to the general public, which includes several years of identifying an antigen that can prevent a disease. Many Ontarians chose not to get vaccinated because of a lack of reliable clinical data related to adverse side effects. Extensive trials are conducted on human volunteers to test vaccine efficacy, to determine appropriate dosage and to monitor adverse side effects.

Dr. Moore has stated we have to learn to live with COVID, and I agree, just like we have to learn to live with the cold or flu virus. It's been proven that with every shot, one's immune system is further depleted, leaving people with greater susceptibility to other illnesses. Now new science data has come forward. Pfizer was court-ordered, Speaker, to reveal what they knew all along: thousands of adverse effects.

Minister, you and the science table were misled. What do you say now that new data has come forward?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To respond on behalf of the government, the government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, the question speaks for itself, doesn't it? We could re-evaluate in 15, 20, 30 years, and the member opposite still would not believe in the efficacy of the vaccine. We could let it go for 100 years; he would still be getting up in his place and saying, and people like him saying, that vaccines do not work. They do. That is why billions upon billions of people worldwide have gotten the vaccine. That is why, in Ontario, the 90% of Ontarians who have gotten access to a vaccine—we have seen the results. Our economy is coming back. We are on fire yet again because of the work of our health care professionals, because of vaccines.

Look, I completely disagree with the member opposite. He has the right to get in his place and ask these questions.

But I completely disagree with him, Mr. Speaker, and so do the 90% of the people of the province of Ontario who rolled up their sleeves and got vaccinated.

CORRECTION OF RECORD

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Orléans has a point of order he wishes to raise.

Mr. Stephen Blais: On a point of order, I'd like to correct my record. During my question, I said that the government prioritized public schools, when of course they prioritized private schools over public schools.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): It is a valid point of order to rise and correct your own record.

DEFERRED VOTES

ENDING AUTOMOBILE INSURANCE DISCRIMINATION IN THE GREATER TORONTO AREA ACT, 2022

LOI DE 2022

METTANT FIN À LA DISCRIMINATION EN MATIÈRE D'ASSURANCE-AUTOMOBILE DANS LE GRAND TORONTO

Deferred vote on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 103, An Act to amend the Insurance Act to prevent discrimination with respect to automobile insurance rates in the Greater Toronto Area / Projet de loi 103, Loi modifiant la Loi sur les assurances pour empêcher la discrimination en ce qui concerne les taux d'assurance-automobile dans le Grand Toronto.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Call in the members. This is a five-minute bell.

The division bells rang from 1135 to 1140.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): On April 7, 2022, Mr. Yarde moved second reading of Bill 103, An Act to amend the Insurance Act to prevent discrimination with respect to automobile insurance rates in the Greater Toronto Area.

All those in favour of the motion will please rise and remain standing until recognized by the Clerk.

Ayes

Andrew, Jill	Gélinas, France	Rakocevic, Tom
Babikian, Aris	Ghamari, Goldie	Rasheed, Kaleed
Bailey, Robert	Hassan, Faisal	Romano, Ross
Begum, Doly	Hunter, Mitzie	Sabawy, Sheref
Bethlenfalvy, Peter	Jones, Sylvia	Sattler, Peggy
Blais, Stephen	Kanapathi, Logan	Singh, Gurratan
Bouma, Will	Karpoche, Bhutla	Singh, Sara
Calandra, Paul	Kernaghan, Terence	Skelly, Donna
Cho, Raymond Sung Joon	Kusendova, Natalia	Smith, Dave
Cho, Stan	Lecce, Stephen	Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie)
Clark, Steve	MacLeod, Lisa	Stiles, Marit
Coe, Lorne	Mamakwa, Sol	Taylor, Monique
Crawford, Stephen	McKenna, Jane	Tibollo, Michael A.
Cuzzetto, Rudy	McNaughton, Monte	Triantafilopoulos, Effie J.

Downey, Doug	Miller, Norman	Wai, Daisy
Dunlop, Jill	Morrison, Suze	Walker, Bill
Fedeli, Victor	Oosterhoff, Sam	West, Jamie
Fife, Catherine	Pang, Billy	Yakabuski, John
Fraser, John	Parsa, Michael	Yarde, Kevin
Fullerton, Merrilee	Pettapiece, Randy	
Gates, Wayne	Piccini, David	

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): All those opposed to the motion will please rise and remain standing until recognized by the Clerk.

Nays

Karahalios, Belinda C.	Nicholls, Rick	Park, Lindsey
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The Clerk of the Assembly (Mr. Todd Decker): The ayes are 61; the nays are 3.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I declare the motion carried.

Second reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 101(h), the bill is referred to the Committee of the Whole House—I recognize the member from Brampton North.

Mr. Kevin Yarde: Regulations and private bills, please.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Is the majority in favour of the bill being referred to the Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills? Agreed? Agreed.

The bill is referred to the Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills.

Seeing no further business at this time, this House stands in recess until 1 p.m.

The House recessed from 1144 to 1300.

REPORTS BY COMMITTEES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Mr. Will Bouma: I beg leave to present a report from the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs and move its adoption.

The Clerk-at-the-Table (Mr. Christopher Tyrell): Your committee begs to report the following bill without amendment:

Bill 111, An Act to amend the Fuel Tax Act and the Gasoline Tax Act with respect to a temporary reduction to the tax payable on certain clear fuel and on gasoline / Projet de loi 111, Loi modifiant la Loi de la taxe sur les carburants et la Loi de la taxe sur l'essence en ce qui concerne la réduction temporaire de la taxe à payer sur certains types de carburant incolore et sur l'essence.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Shall the report be received and adopted? Agreed? Agreed.

Report adopted.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The bill is therefore ordered for third reading.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

CENTERING YOUTH IN PANDEMIC RECOVERY ACT, 2022 LOI DE 2022 POUR METTRE LES JEUNES AU CENTRE DE LA RELANCE APRÈS LA PANDÉMIE

Ms. Stiles moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 113, An Act respecting children, youth and young adults and the COVID-19 pandemic recovery / Projet de loi 113, Loi concernant les enfants, les jeunes et les jeunes adultes, et la relance après la pandémie de COVID-19.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll invite the member for Davenport to briefly explain her bill.

Ms. Marit Stiles: The Centering Youth in Pandemic Recovery Act was first tabled in this place nearly a year ago, and regrettably the need to address the disproportionate impact this pandemic has had on children is even greater today. Experts in child development, mental health and education are all telling us that we must do much more to mitigate those impacts or we risk lasting harm to a whole generation of Ontarians.

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke will come to order.

Ms. Marit Stiles: Mr. Speaker, can I start again? Is that possible?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Please conclude your explanation.

Ms. Marit Stiles: The bill seeks to establish a child and youth action plan in collaboration with youth to address the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. It would also create a COVID-19 recovery youth secretariat to ensure that government bills are looked at through the lens of their impact on children and youth. A new standing committee will ensure accountability and transparency so that these issues are not just paid lip service but are measured and acted upon.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I'll remind members on both sides of the House—because it happened on both sides of the House—that occasionally the explanation of the bills goes a little longer than 10 to 15 seconds.

Introduction of bills.

PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS ACT, 2022

LOI DE 2022 SUR LA PRÉPARATION AUX PANDÉMIES

Ms. Karpoche moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 114, An Act to amend the Health Protection and Promotion Act with respect to pandemic preparedness / Projet de loi 114, Loi modifiant la Loi sur la protection et la promotion de la santé en ce qui concerne la préparation aux pandémies.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I invite the member to briefly explain her bill.

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: The Pandemic Preparedness Act amends the Health Protection and Promotion Act to protect the funding formula for cost-share programs and services between the province and local public health units.

The bill also requires the Minister of Health to establish a pandemic preparedness review committee composed of public health and pandemic preparedness experts, as well as community leaders from equity-seeking groups to ensure our response is equitable. The committee will review the province's pandemic response plan every five years, and the Minister of Health would be required to present the plan to the Legislature.

TEACH THE REACH ACT, 2022

LOI DE 2022 SUR L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE LA MÉTHODE D'OUVERTURE PIVOT

Ms. Stiles moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 115, An Act to amend the Highway Traffic Act to ensure the Dutch reach method is included in driver education programs / Projet de loi 115, Loi modifiant le Code de la route pour assurer l'intégration de la méthode d'ouverture pivot dans les programmes de conduite automobile.

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

First reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Would the member for Davenport care to briefly explain her bill?

Ms. Marit Stiles: The Teach the Reach Act would require the Ministry of Transportation to ensure that the Dutch reach method is included in driver education handbooks and is taught in driver education courses.

There are hundreds of road accidents involving cyclists every year. Many of them are dooring incidents, but we can improve that road safety using the Dutch reach method, a simple method of opening a vehicle door where the person opens the door using the hand farthest from the door. This forces people to shift their upper body in a way that they can see if a cyclist is approaching.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe this small change of behaviour can significantly reduce the risks of injury and death and improve road safety for all.

PETITIONS

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ms. Bhutla Karpoche: This petition is entitled "Raise Social Assistance Rates." It reads:

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Ontario’s social assistance rates are well below Canada’s official Market Basket Measure poverty line and woefully inadequate to cover the basic costs of food and rent;

“Whereas individuals on the Ontario Works program receive just \$733 per month and individuals on the Ontario Disability Support Program receive just \$1,169 per month, only 41% and 65% of the poverty line;

“Whereas the Ontario government has not increased social assistance rates since 2018, and Canada’s inflation rate in January 2022 was 5.1%, the highest rate in 30 years;
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“Whereas the government of Canada recognized through the CERB program that a ‘basic income’ of \$2,000 per month was the standard support required by individuals who lost their employment during the pandemic;

“We, the undersigned citizens of Ontario, petition the Legislative Assembly to increase social assistance rates to a base of \$2,000 per month for those on Ontario Works and to increase other programs accordingly.”

I support this petition and will affix my signature to it.

SEXUAL ASSAULT

M^{me} Lucille Collard: “To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas 39% of Ontario hospitals and health centres reached by She Matters throughout the course of the sexual assault kit accessibility study stated they did not have sexual assault kits available to survivors;

“Whereas many hospitals do not have nurses or physicians trained in conducting a” sexual assault evidence kit “examination and specialized training is required to gather evidence without further re-traumatizing the survivor;

“Whereas it is not mandatory in nursing and medical schools to learn sexual assault evidence collection and many colleges charge a fee beyond traditional tuition for nursing students who want to take a SANE course on weekends;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“To adopt Bill 108, Access to Sexual Assault Evidence Kits and Provision of Sexual Assault Education Act, 2022, which would amend the Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000, to require persons who grant degrees in nursing under that act to provide Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner training, free of charge, to nursing students and amend the Public Hospitals Act to require hospitals to have at least 10 sexual assault evidence kits available for patients at all times and to provide them to patients who are in need of them, free of charge.”

I agree with this petition. I will affix my signature and give it to page Vivian.

PROTECTION OF PRIVACY

Mr. Rick Nicholls: “Whereas Ontario is planning to introduce a comprehensive digital ID program that will

centralize every citizen’s personal, financial, business, medical and social information and assign them an identification under this system;

“Whereas central banks in Canada and around the world are already developing digital currencies to replace paper and coin money, and these digital currencies will be integrated into any digital ID program;

“Whereas the danger this new program poses to upholding civil liberty and privacy rights and the clear opportunities for abuse of governmental authority present in terms of surveillance and compelled behaviour, using access to basic resources as a tool of coercion is ominous. They point to a progression to a dystopian Communist Chinese-style social credit system;

“Whereas some Canadian citizens have already experienced such coercion through seized properties and frozen bank accounts in retaliation for having supported the freedom convoy protest, those acts having been justified by provincial and federal governments under the imposition of the Emergencies Act and a declared state of emergency in Ontario;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“(1) Insist that principles of data minimization, decentralization, consent and limited access must be upheld in Ontario, even as our world becomes increasingly digitalized; and

“(2) Demand that there be zero tolerance for the implementation of any digital ID program in Ontario and that any government endeavour seeking to establish a system akin to the social credit system of Communist China be condemned, halted and banned.”

I approve of this petition. I will sign it and give it to page Pallas. Thank you very much.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Mr. Jamie West: This petition is entitled “To Raise Social Assistance Rates.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Ontario’s social assistance rates are well below Canada’s official Market Basket Measure poverty line and woefully inadequate to cover the basic costs of food and rent;

“Whereas individuals on the Ontario Works program receive just \$733 per month”—that’s shameful—“and individuals on the Ontario Disability Support Program receive just \$1,169 per month, only 41% and 65% of the poverty line;

“Whereas the Ontario government has not increased social assistance rates since 2018, and Canada’s inflation rate in December 2021 was 4.9%, the highest rate in 30 years;

“Whereas the government of Canada recognized through the CERB program that a ‘basic income’ of \$2,000 per month was the standard support required by individuals who lost their employment during the pandemic;

“We, the undersigned citizens of Ontario, petition the Legislative Assembly to increase social assistance rates to a base of \$2,000 per month for those on Ontario Works and to increase other programs accordingly.”

I wholeheartedly support this petition, Speaker. I'll affix my signature and provide it to page Mila.

OPTOMETRY SERVICES

Ms. Marit Stiles: I'm very pleased to present this petition on behalf of Laura Cave. It reads as follows:

“Petition to Save Eye Care in Ontario.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas the Ontario government has underfunded optometric eye care for 30 years; and

“Whereas the government only pays on average \$44.65 for an OHIP-insured visit—the lowest rate in Canada; and

“Whereas optometrists are being forced to pay substantially out of their own pocket to provide over four million services each year to Ontarians under OHIP; and

“Whereas optometrists have never been given a formal negotiation process with the government; and

“Whereas the government's continued neglect resulted in 96% of Ontario optometrists voting to withdraw OHIP services beginning September 1, 2021;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“To instruct the Ontario government to immediately commit to legally binding, formal negotiations to ensure any future OHIP-insured optometry services are, at a minimum, funded at the cost of delivery.”

I support this petition, will be affixing my signature and handing it to page Brianna to table with the Clerks.

OPTOMETRY SERVICES

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It gives me great pleasure to present the following petition on behalf of Mary-Louise Hitchon from Wharncliffe Optometry, though it's astonishing that, after nine months of calling for fairness, we're still presenting these petitions.

“Petition to Save Eye Care in Ontario.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas the Ontario government has underfunded optometric eye care for 30 years; and

“Whereas the government only pays on average \$44.65 for an OHIP-insured visit—the lowest rate in Canada; and

“Whereas optometrists are being forced to pay substantially out of their own pocket to provide over four million services each year to Ontarians under OHIP; and

“Whereas optometrists have never been given a formal negotiation process with the government; and

“Whereas the government's continued neglect resulted in 96% of Ontario optometrists voting to withdraw OHIP services beginning September 1, 2021;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“To instruct the Ontario government to immediately commit to legally binding, formal negotiations to ensure

any future OHIP-insured optometry services are, at a minimum, funded at the cost of delivery.”

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

OPTOMETRY SERVICES

Mr. Rick Nicholls: “To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas the Ontario government has underfunded optometric eye care for 30 years; and

“Whereas the government only pays on average \$44.65 for an OHIP-insured visit—the lowest rate in Canada; and

“Whereas optometrists are being forced to pay substantially out of their own pocket to provide over four million services each year to Ontarians under OHIP; and

“Whereas optometrists have never been given a formal negotiation process with the government; and

“Whereas the government's continued neglect resulted in 96% of Ontario optometrists voting to withdraw OHIP services beginning September 1, 2021;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“To instruct the Ontario government to immediately commit to legally binding, formal negotiations to ensure any future OHIP-insured optometry services are, at a minimum, funded at the cost of delivery.”

I wholeheartedly support this petition, will sign it and give it to page Vivian.

OPTOMETRY SERVICES

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Again, I have the honour of presenting the following petition on behalf of Dr. Gregory Millar in my riding.

“Petition to Save Eye Care in Ontario.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas the Ontario government has underfunded optometric eye care for 30 years; and

“Whereas the government only pays on average \$44.65 for an OHIP-insured visit—the lowest rate in Canada; and

“Whereas optometrists are being forced to pay substantially out of their own pocket to provide over four million services each year to Ontarians under OHIP; and

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“Whereas optometrists have never been given a formal negotiation process with the government; and

“Whereas the government's continued neglect resulted in 96% of Ontario optometrists voting to withdraw OHIP services beginning September 1, 2021;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as follows:

“To instruct the Ontario government to immediately commit to legally binding, formal negotiations to ensure any future OHIP-insured optometry services are, at a minimum, funded at the cost of delivery.”

Let's get this done. I fully support this petition and will affix my signature.

ANIMAL PROTECTION

Ms. Bhutila Karpoche: This petition is entitled “Protect Migratory Birds.” It reads:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas an estimated 25 million birds in Canada die each year due to collisions with windows on buildings, including many migratory and bird species at risk;

“Whereas materials to prevent the collision of birds into windows can proactively be incorporated into the designs of new buildings;

“Whereas the Canadian Standards Association has established a national standard for bird-friendly building design which has been adopted by some municipalities...;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to incorporate the CSA 2019 bird-friendly building design standard into the Ontario building code, requiring bird-friendly materials to be used in new residential and commercial building windows.”

I support this petition and will affix my signature to it.

OPPOSITION DAY

NORTHERN ONTARIO

Mr. John Vanthof: I move opposition day number 4:

Whereas the lack of public transit alternatives across the north requires northern Ontario drivers to depend on personal vehicles to get to work, school and other essential activities, and the cancellation of mass transit options such as the Northlander and inter-city bus service exacerbates this challenge; and

Whereas gas prices are often most expensive in northern communities, with prices exceeding \$2 per litre in some regions; and

Whereas Bill 111 has no requirement for gas companies and other retailers to lower prices after the gas tax is reduced, and the government’s own calculations show that the average driver will save as little as \$45 over six months, an average of \$7.50 per month; and

Whereas the Ford government has failed to deliver on commitments to lower hydro and gas costs, and failed to reinstate the Northlander, and northerners disproportionately affected by these failures cannot afford more broken promises; and

Whereas northerners need help now and cannot wait three months for relief;

Therefore, the Legislative Assembly calls on the Ford government to deliver real relief for northerners by immediately issuing a one-time rebate of \$200 per household to offset the rising cost of living in northern Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Mr. Vanthof has moved opposition day number 4. I’ll recognize the member for Timiskaming–Cochrane to lead off the debate.

Mr. John Vanthof: It’s always an honour to stand in the House. I would like to start on Thursday. Last Thursday, we passed Green Shirt Day. We passed that unanimously and it was to honour the Humboldt bus

tragedy and to promote organ donation. I commend the member for bringing it forward.

I didn’t add to that debate because I just had been given some news that I didn’t want to talk about during the debate, but it adds to this discussion. It’s about life in northern Ontario, and we have brought this forward many times in this House.

Drivers with motor vehicles registered in the Cochrane region are twice as likely to be killed in a highway accident as those whose vehicles are registered in the Halton region. When it comes to motor vehicles registered in the Timiskaming region, the chances of a fatal collision are almost four times higher than the Toronto region. And if we compare the regions of Timiskaming, Cochrane and Kenora to those of Durham, Halton and Toronto, drivers are three times more likely to engage in a fatal accident in the north.

This is a place of words, but words matter. We disagree on many things, but I think we agree on that. This summer, the OPP reported that fatal transport truck crashes were up 40%, as many drivers ignore risks—40%. If you will recall, there was a W5 report that centred on the Humboldt truck crash—bus crash, but a truck was involved. It talked about if our system had actually improved. One of the things that came out was that Ontario has 400 driving schools and eight inspectors for those—and not just for those driving schools, for all college courses.

Why am I saying this and why am I starting this debate like this? Some of you have maybe been there: The Trans-Canada Highway goes through New Liskeard, and there are two sets of stoplights on the Trans-Canada Highway. There was an accident last Thursday. The quote I’m going to read you speaks for itself:

“Something needs to be done. They need stricter standards to get a commercial licence. It’s a damn shame when you just pick up a crib and just as you’re getting set up to start assembling it, the police show up at your front door and tell you that your eight-month pregnant fiancée and unborn son were just killed in a car accident because some transport blew a red light. Also the fact that her friend she was with is in a medically induced coma and lost her child. This should never have happened.”

Those are the words of Alexander Niemi that he sent me last Friday. They were just waiting at a stoplight at Highway 11, which is also our main street, and through no fault of their own, none at all, two unborn babies and one lady died, and one lady is in a medically induced coma. This is an example of what’s still wrong on Highway 11. Driver error? Inattention? Bad road design? Should there be a stoplight at the bottom of a hill on the Trans-Canada Highway? People are asking me, “John, how often do we have to raise this?” And I’m asking the House, how often do we have to raise this? I’m not accusing anyone of not caring, because I don’t believe that’s the case. I have very good relations with almost all of you—maybe all. But we know there are issues. To us, this is our Humboldt.

I know if this were question period—“We have the safest roads in North America.” Well, you know what? Highway 11 in northern Ontario isn’t the safest road in

North America, and neither is Highway 17, and I just want to put that on the record. We need to make sure that people who are licensed to drive in Ontario know how to drive. I have spoken to the Minister of Transportation about this issue and she mentioned, “Yes, I know there are problems with automatic transmissions.” Yes, there are people who can drive a truck with an automatic transmission and don’t know how to drive a standard. Well, then perhaps they shouldn’t be licensed to drive in Ontario. It’s the job of the government to make sure that everyone is licensed. It’s the job of the government to make sure the roads are as safe as possible, to redesign roads to make sure they’re safe. It’s all our jobs. I know we can’t fix it in one day, but we need to make concrete steps so Alex’s fiancée and baby and her friend’s baby didn’t die in vain. I needed to get that on the record, Speaker, and I thank the House for their attention.

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There are quite few things in that motion, and I’m going to start with—we mentioned the Northlander a few times in that. There was an announcement on Sunday. The Premier came to Timmins, with a few of the ministers, and announced that the Northlander is coming back. Well, that was basically the same announcement as four years ago. They had announced it was going to come back in the first term. It didn’t. Okay. We made the same promise.

I would like to also put on the record that we have full faith in the ONTC that they have the capacity, the will, the technological skill to bring it back. Northerners want it back, and they need it back. Full faith in the ONTC, but if you will recall, this wasn’t the first time that the government announced that the Northlander was coming back. It was announced a few months previously and caused quite a furor in northern Ontario because it was announced that it was going to go to Timmins. Previously, it had gone to Cochrane. Perhaps the government was expecting a hue and cry from us, but actually, the member from Timmins has been advocating to get the train back into Timmins for years.

Timmins is the biggest city in our part of the north. It should have train service. We agreed with that, but we did make a caveat, along with many other northerners, that it should be connected to the train in Cochrane, because there is a train in Cochrane that goes to the coast. It goes to Moosonee. It serves the First Nations and others along the coast. It didn’t make sense to us not to have those two trains connected. The people of the north united, as we always do, and they made it very clear to the government that those trains should be connected.

There is a mention of it in the press release. But when you look at the press release, the press release is a bit different than the statements of what the government is saying. The press release talks about an “updated initial business case.” Well, an updated initial business case isn’t a design plan for the new train system. No. Again, we have no doubts that ONTC can do this. And they will do this. If either one of us get elected, they will do this. But it was also mentioned, where Cochrane was mentioned, that there would be “future feasibility work on a ... new rail

connection to Cochrane. “Future feasibility work” tells me, northerners, that our job here isn’t done, because “updated initial business case” is a bit fuzzy, but “future feasibility work on ... a new rail connection to Cochrane”? That’s certainly not cast in stone.

Again, northerners need to work together to make sure that those rail lines are connected so that the system, regardless of who brings the system back, is a fully integrated working system that as many northerners as possible can use. That’s why Timmins is important, because you can go farther than Timmins. It has to be an integrated plan. But I encourage northerners that this is not the time to say, “Oh, we have won. Ford is going to come through on this.” This is pretty fuzzy, and if you want to be really critical, we’re at the exact same point as we were this time four years ago. Promise a new train, but you don’t really see the train a-comin’.

And again, ONTC has done a lot of work on this. We are not criticizing ONTC.

Now, I have other members who want to speak. There’s one other issue that I want to talk about, specifically to this motion. It is the heart of it. It is kind of the heart of the motion—if I can find my headline here.

Interjection.

Mr. John Vanthof: Pardon? Yes, I’m almost done.

So the government is saying, “We’re going to rebate some gas tax”—guess what? After the election, come July 1 to December. Well, do you know what? In northern Ontario, we often question whether those gas taxes get transferred down, because our gas is often 20, 30—and I drive it every week, and I don’t even go to the Far North; my member here can tell you about the Far North. The prices don’t seem to make sense for southern Ontario.

I have someone who also questions that, or used to question it, and it’s actually the Premier. On June 19, 2018, he stated that he was going to watch the gas companies’ every move. He didn’t even trust the gas companies then; why should we? Because it hasn’t worked out that well in the past.

Now, I have other members who want to speak. I hope we have a right of reply at the end. I’m going to once again thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to state my views.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I appreciate the opportunity to rise and to express my sympathies with the member opposite and the individual from his community. I can only imagine how difficult that is, and I certainly won’t comment on any of that; I think the member’s words spoke for themselves.

Let me just begin by saying this, Mr. Speaker: I think that to understand where we’re at right now in the province of Ontario and what the future holds for the province of Ontario, it bears some import for us to look back at where we were, so that we can get to this motion today and where we’re going.

I think it was very clear that in 2018, this party was elected on what was really a promise to reignite the Ontario economy. What do I mean by “reignite the Ontario

economy”? We had seen a very troubling pattern in the province of Ontario in the years that led up to 2018. We saw investment begin to dry up in the province of Ontario. We saw industries that had been so important to the province of Ontario openly question whether Ontario was the right jurisdiction in which to continue to do business. We saw hydro prices, electricity prices skyrocketing. We saw communities beginning to fight amongst themselves and with the government, often being forced into projects and programs, often for energy, that they did not want or that the province could not afford, which caused our prices to escalate.

As the member talked about, we had seen services to northern communities greatly reduced and the Ontario Northlander eliminated. We saw a Far North Act imposed on the people of northern Ontario.

So we knew that in 2018, if we were going to reignite the Ontario economy, a lot had to be done, and we started from day one. We started from day one. We brought the House back very shortly after the election, and we started by looking at the capital city of the province of Ontario, Canada’s most important financial centre. What did we do? We reduced the amount of seats in the council. Why did we do that, Speaker? Because we knew that we had to make decision-making in the city of Toronto better. We knew that it had to be faster, we knew that it had to be more accountable and we did that.

The Premier sent the Minister of Economic Development out to speak to businesses, to understand what it was that was holding them back from investing in the province of Ontario. He wanted to hear from them, and we heard from them constantly and consistently that out-of-control hydro prices and the lack of stability within the system were causing them to question their ability to invest in the province of Ontario. We heard about red tape and regulation that had become so cumbersome, so burdensome that it made it difficult for them to invest.

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We heard from a number of industries that our education system was failing our students, that we weren’t graduating students who could compete for the jobs of tomorrow, that our trades had come to a virtual standstill in the province of Ontario. Our mining sector had come to a standstill.

We knew that we had to do something differently. We knew that we had to make change, and we did that. We worked on our capital city. We said, “What do we have to do to get the financial centre of the province and the country moving?” We did that. We worked on hydro and electricity prices. And what did we do? We cancelled the 19% increase in hydro rates that was proposed by the previous Liberal government. We cancelled that.

More work obviously had to be done. We were starting to hear from our small, medium and large job creators that WSIB premiums were getting out of control. They asked, given all of the challenges that they were facing in creating jobs and bringing investment to the province of Ontario, that we pause a minimum wage hike until we could get the situation in the province of Ontario under control, and we

did that. We knew it would be a challenge. We knew it would be difficult, but we also knew that if those jobs continued to leave the province of Ontario, a small pause in the minimum wage increase would pale in comparison to the disaster that would befall communities across this province.

And then, of course, the pandemic hit. Speaker, you will recall that when the pandemic hit, the parties opposite were suggesting that the government of Ontario basically do nothing but focus on the pandemic, and we said no. We said we could focus on the pandemic, but we could also continue on our job of unleashing the Ontario economy, and that is what we did. We had started eliminating red tape, because that’s what they told us they had to have—if we were to bring jobs and investment back to the province of Ontario, we had to look at red tape and regulation, and we have done that. Every single time a session has happened in this Legislature, we have brought a red tape reduction bill forward—every single time—and we started to see jobs come back to the province of Ontario because of that.

But we also knew that the jobs of tomorrow depended on a better education system, so we made changes to our education system, so that our students could graduate not only with the tools that they needed to succeed in the jobs of tomorrow, but so they could fill the jobs of tomorrow. We started to see, again, jobs starting to come back when we changed the apprenticeship program in this province—a province that was built on the backs of immigrants, for the most part.

When my parents came to this country, when my dad came to this country, he started to work right away. It has often been joked that the first generations of Italians built this city; the second generation owns the city of Toronto. But they were able to do that because they could get to work right away in the trades. That stopped. We changed it, and there’s hope and opportunity coming back to the province of Ontario because of the decisions that we had made.

And because of those decisions, we knew that we could do even more. We knew that the jobs of tomorrow and the economy of tomorrow, the manufacturing of the future, could not happen in the province of Ontario if it wasn’t for the economic heft and might of the people of northern Ontario, which included the people of northern Ontario and which included First Nations partners in northern Ontario. We heard for years and years and years how important the Ring of Fire would be, but nobody did anything about it. The Premier then tasked the Minister of Northern Development to sit down with First Nations partners and find a way that we could open up the north, and we have done that by inviting First Nations, our partners, to be a part of the economic revival of northern Ontario.

We continue to ensure that remote communities in northern Ontario could be connected to the electricity grid. How can you possibly invite people to participate in economic revival if they weren’t connected to the electricity grid? How could we ask them to be a part of that? One of

the first meetings I had as the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Energy at the time was with the mayor of Hornepayne. I remember the mayor of Hornepayne telling me that because of the hydroelectricity prices, her community was being devastated. They were closing down the only facilities that the people of Hornepayne could rely upon to give them any enjoyment or pleasure. We knew that we couldn't do that. How could you involve northern Ontario if you couldn't ensure that they could bring in jobs and economic activity?

We saw during the pandemic—but even before the pandemic—how important Internet access was and how we could work with our partners, and we did. We worked with our federal partners for many years. But we knew that the job was not going to get done fast enough if we sat around and waited for our federal partners, who, admittedly, have an entire country to worry about, not just the province of Ontario.

We could do one of two things. We could do what previous governments asked us to do—slowly wait for our partners to help us out—or we could do it ourselves. And we are doing it: close to \$5 billion of investments so that we could make sure that every community in the province of Ontario has access to high-speed Internet. Why are we doing that? Because, again, you can't ask communities in different parts of the province to participate in the economic revival if they don't have access to the latest technology, something as simple as Internet. We said that there's no community—rural, urban, north, south, east or west—that won't be connected to the Internet. We're getting the job done.

But we also know that the important thing about communities is this: When we talk to people who want to invest in the province of Ontario they say to us, "You're making all of the right decisions to bring jobs and investments back, but communities are more than just jobs and investment. It's about health care. It's about long-term care. It's about facilities, culture, entertainment. That's what builds strong communities."

We said that we had to do that, so we made investments in hospitals and long-term care. And not just in the big cities of the province of Ontario; we brought long-term care to small communities across this province, where announcing 14 beds for a long-term-care facility in northern Ontario has a huge impact on a community. It means jobs and opportunity for that community. When rebuilding hospitals that are 50 or 60 years old in smaller communities around the province, not only does it mean jobs and opportunity; it means that people who want to make investments in some of our rural and remote communities can have the confidence that if they make those investments they will have all of the tools they need to succeed and that the families they employ will need to succeed.

They'll have access to high-speed Internet for their businesses and for their kids who need to have the latest technology for school. Their community hospitals will have the latest technologies. They'll have modern facilities. And as their population gets older they will have somewhere where they can settle in a community that they helped build.

We knew that we had to do more. The minister of culture, tourism and recreation looked in different communities across this province and said, "We have to make investments in big cities like Ottawa. We have to make investments in cities like Toronto, obviously, where the arts and culture are responsible for billions of dollars of economic activity, probably the second-most jobs of any sector. We made those investments. We took those investments out of—not only just leaving them in Toronto but out of—and spread them out across, whether it was a tourism operator in a small village in parts of northern Ontario—we heard the member, Mr. Mantha—I can't remember his riding—talk about how important Internet access was for businesses and fishing lodges in his community, where three or four people working makes a huge difference. We did that.

We looked at the pandemic and said, "What do we have to do to ensure that Ontario is never left behind again?" We said that we will never be put in the position that the Liberals put us in, where we had to go begging and pleading for personal protective equipment. We will do that right here in the province of Ontario.

We've put all of the tools that were necessary to get our province back on track, to reignite economic opportunity and prosperity.

We looked back at the city of Toronto and said, "What is holding back Ontario? What is holding back our capital city?" and we saw that transit and transportation were a big impediment to growth in our capital. That is why we were able to make investments in the largest transit infrastructure in Canadian history.

We've talked about subways in Toronto for decades, but because of the changes that we were able to make to the city of Toronto, the changes that we were able to make in red tape and regulation by empowering northern communities to participate in that growth by bringing trains and allowing them to build those trains in northern communities, we were able to start right now. Not tomorrow, not next month, not next year but right now there are machines under the ground, building subways on the Ontario Line, building subways in Scarborough, where for decades they had waited. We're getting it done.

1350

But it's not just about that. A lot of the cities that feed into our capital needed GO train expansion and opportunity, and they got it—two-way, all-day GO train service, because we knew how important it was. Whether you lived in Burlington, Oakville or Markham, people had to get to the places they work and they had to have different ways of doing it, Speaker. If you want an economy to grow, that was the way to do it.

Again, we looked at northern Ontario. Now, I can't explain why, when the NDP held the balance of power in 2011, they allowed the Ontario Northland to be closed down and sold off in 2012. They could have stood in their places and said no. They could have brought down the government. They could have protected the north, but they didn't. That is something that they will account for. We looked at the jobs of Ontario and said, "Look, we've

reignited the Ontario economy and now it is time to unleash the Ontario economy.” That is what we are doing, Speaker.

We looked to sectors like the nuclear industry, which was so important to building a strong, fierce Ontario, a strong, fierce manufacturing sector that was responsible for billions and billions of dollars in economic activity, not only in Toronto but across the country. We said, “How do we do that?” How can a province that was as small as Ontario build something like the Candu reactor which served us for many years, and how can we use that to unleash tomorrow? And we said we can.

We invested in SMR, small modular reactors, which will lead us, for generations to come, into cheap, clean, reliable power. That has led to investments we have not ever witnessed in this province, the investments that the Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade brought with respect to our automotive sector. We knew that old-school manufacturing had had its day. It had been so important in the province of Ontario, so important to so many communities, to so many families, to so many people. It gave us the province that we had. But if we were to protect and save that, Mr. Speaker, we knew we had to transition, and we are transitioning to the jobs of tomorrow. We can only do it with our friends and partners in northern Ontario. That’s why we have the Critical Minerals Strategy. That’s why we are building hospitals. That’s why we are building long-term care. That’s why we are improving roads and highways in that area, because we know how important that is.

Now, Mr. Speaker, when you talk about affordability, we understand how important it is. That is why we are reducing the gas tax for the people of the province of Ontario. We are putting it in legislation, so that every single time you fill up, you will save money. It’s not just about the people going and filling up their gas tanks, right? This is what the NDP fail to recognize. They fail to recognize that for every transport truck that goes and puts in gas and delivers its product to a store that somebody in the north buys, it costs more because of the extra taxes that they support. Now they voted against those reductions in taxes. They voted in favour of a carbon tax, which costs everybody more. Again, they will account for that, Speaker.

But, Speaker, I say, very sincerely, the opposition have an opportunity now to vote in favour of putting more money back into the pockets of the people of Ontario. They have an opportunity later today to reverse the decision that they made just last week, on Thursday, to take money out of the pockets of the people of the province of Ontario, to help people in northern Ontario, to help businesses in northern Ontario, to ensure that people can live sustainable lives in northern Ontario, that they can be part of the economic success that is Ontario.

I hope that, later on today, they will work with us and will help pass those reductions in taxes for all Ontarians, not just northern Ontarians but for all Ontarians, Speaker. And given that we have a bill on the table today in order to do that for the people of the province of Ontario, Mr.

Speaker, I think it is vitally important that we focus our energies on that, and that is why I move adjournment of this debate.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Mr. Calandra has moved the adjournment of the debate. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion say “aye.”

All those opposed to the motion say “nay.”

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

Call in the members. This is a 30-minute bell.

The division bells rang from 1355 to 1425.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): All those in favour of the motion, please stand and remain standing until counted by the Clerk.

All those opposed to the motion, please stand and remain standing until counted by the Clerks.

The Clerk of the Assembly (Mr. Todd Decker): The ayes are 36; the nays are 16.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I declare the motion carried.

Debate adjourned.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

TAX RELIEF AT THE PUMPS ACT, 2022

LOI DE 2022 SUR L'ALLÈGEMENT DE LA TAXE À LA POMPE

Mr. Parsa, on behalf of Mr. Bethlenfalvy, moved third reading of the following bill:

Bill 111, An Act to amend the Fuel Tax Act and the Gasoline Tax Act with respect to a temporary reduction to the tax payable on certain clear fuel and on gasoline /
Projet de loi 111, Loi modifiant la Loi de la taxe sur les carburants et la Loi de la taxe sur l'essence en ce qui concerne la réduction temporaire de la taxe à payer sur certains types de carburant incolore et sur l'essence.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Mr. Michael Parsa: Good afternoon. It’s always a privilege to stand in this House. Before I go any further, I would like to inform the House that I’ll be sharing my time with the incredible member from Brantford–Brant, who is also the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Finance, and of course, the parliamentary assistant to energy, the MPP for Oakville, as well.

Speaker, I rise today for third reading of the Tax Relief at the Pumps Act, 2022. I’ll be sharing, again, as I said, my time with the members from Brantford–Brant and Oakville to discuss this bill. As members have already heard, the Tax Relief at the Pumps Act, 2022, would, if passed, temporarily cut the gas tax by 5.7 cents per litre and the fuel tax by 5.3 cents per litre for six months, starting July 1, 2022. The savings people and businesses would gain as a result of this legislation would give them the freedom to use their hard-earned money as they

choose, because people and businesses know how to use their money better than anyone else, and that includes government. And when people and businesses have more money to spend, this stimulates economic recovery and growth, benefiting the entire province.

We've discussed time and time again about inflation and the consequences of the ongoing price hikes in all sectors, not just at the pumps but across the board. The bill we are discussing would bring much-needed relief to families and businesses in the face of rising costs.

Mr. Speaker, I went to a grocery store last week just to buy a bag of shredded cheese, a bag that used to cost me \$5.99 when I used to go in before. Now, that same bag retails for \$8.99. According to the Canada food price report for 2022 that's released by Dalhousie University and the University of Guelph, a family of four will pay almost \$15,000 in 2022 for food alone. That's an increase of \$966 from the total annual cost in 2021. Can the average family manage an increase of close to \$1,000 for food alone in one single year?

1430

On February 22, the first day back in the Legislature, the member from Scarborough Southwest said, "With the skyrocketing price of basic necessities like rent, groceries and electricity, we are looking at an affordability crisis." Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely correct. It's true. The prices and costs for the most basic essentials of life are now at an all-time high.

We've heard over and over again in this chamber how families are having to choose between feeding their children and filling up their cars, and this is right here in Ontario. This is the best place to live and work, and the best place to raise a family and feel connected to a community. Among the other steps we've taken, Mr. Speaker, and the other initiatives we're implementing, this bill will serve to help the hard-working people of Ontario by reducing one of their basic expenses.

Mr. Speaker, she continued to say, "They failed to prioritize issues of affordability, fair wages, concerns of tenants and small landlords, families looking to buy their first homes in our province, or even a young person simply trying to get started." Well, let's just unpack that a little. The member said that we failed to prioritize issues of affordability. Speaker, how can we be failing to prioritize affordability when we're making changes in all areas of life to improve the challenges of high costs?

Bill 111 fulfills the promise Premier Ford made to Ontarians, the promise to reduce the cost of gas by 10 cents per litre. We reduced gas prices by 4.3 cents in 2018 when we eliminated the cap-and-trade system and, as of July 1, we will have removed the remaining 5.7 cents. With the recent increase in carbon tax by the federal government, this legislation, Mr. Speaker, could not have come at a better time.

If we look at families and the cost of child care, the Minister of Education just recently secured the \$10-a-day child care deal that this government had been working for months to achieve, and I want to thank and congratulate the minister for that. After fighting relentlessly for Ontarians with the federal government, Minister Lecce secured

a deal even better than we could have thought. The \$13.2-billion deal includes \$10-a-day child care, which includes parents' rebates. It includes 86,000 new, high-quality child care spaces, more early childhood educators and more licensed child care centres, and maintains the care tax credit. Speaker, this agreement means that fees for families will be reduced by 50%, which translates, colleagues, to \$1.1 billion in savings for moms and dads all across the province. This is only two areas we delivered on to reduce financial pressures for the people of this province.

The member said that we failed to prioritize fair wages. But how is that possible if we've raised the minimum wage across the board for all workers to \$15 an hour? We've already informed the public that the minimum wage will be raised again in October to \$15.50, putting more money in people's pockets, and more Ontarians taking home more. Speaker, we can't raise the minimum wage all at one time to \$17, \$18, \$21 or whatever rate that the NDP feels is adequate at the moment. The reason we can't do it is because employers need time to adjust to the increase.

Speaker, the member mentioned concerns of tenants and small landlords. On October 19, the member for St. Catharines said that "we need action" to combat the housing crisis, "taxing speculators more." On March 30, we increased the NRST tax to 20% from 15%, and expanded it beyond the greater Golden Horseshoe to the entire province.

She said we need rent control. We froze rent increases at 2020 levels for 2021 and we've limited rent increases for 2022 at 1.2%. If this government has addressed every issue brought forward by members of the opposition, then how is it possible that we have failed the people or that we have broken promises? We are bringing forward this legislation to make a real difference in the lives of Ontarians, to bring real relief to Ontario families and Ontario businesses.

In 2012, the cost to renew a licence plate sticker was \$82. In 2013, that cost rose to \$90. In 2014, the fee was \$98. The cost to renew licence plate stickers rose every single year under the previous Liberal government. Now, we can't forget who supported them every step of the way: of course, none other than my colleagues sitting in the opposition, the NDP. This government is eliminating the fee altogether, saving Ontarians hundreds of dollars every year. Vehicle owners in Ontario would see significant direct savings from the proposed gas tax cut, coupled with the recently announced elimination of licence plate renewal fees.

It's worth noting that in 2018, this government passed legislation to eliminate the previous government's cap-and-trade carbon tax to reduce gas prices by 4.3 cents per litre. When combined with the savings from the government's proposed legislation, the reduction in provincial taxes and charges on gas would total 10 cents per litre for six months. With this proposed legislation, our government is doing its part to support workers and families all across the province.

Mr. Speaker, now is the time for the federal government to join us in providing relief for hard-working Canadians by cutting the carbon tax. Some critics may wonder why we are proposing relief at the pumps, rather than other environmental protection measures. Our government recognizes the importance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and of doing our part to protect our environment for future generations. With 94% emissions-free generation in 2020, Ontario is home to one of the cleanest electricity grids in the world.

The people of this province are proud of their efforts in the global fight against climate change. Our government's environmental plan is helping to protect our land, our air and our water while lowering greenhouse gas emissions and helping communities protect themselves from climate change, because we believe it's possible to have both a healthy economy and a healthy environment.

In addition to the measures we're taking to protect Ontario's environment, we know we must act to bring relief to families and businesses from the cost-of-living increases they are experiencing right now. As soon as this bill was introduced, we began working to prepare the industry to deliver this proposed relief for people and businesses. The industry includes gas and fuel tax collectors, registered importers, wholesalers and retailers. Pending passage of the bill that we're discussing today, these businesses would require some time to adjust their systems and business processes, so that the relief could be in place for July 1.

In terms of the way gas and fuel taxes are paid to the province, they are pre-collected. Through this system, gasoline and fuel taxes are imposed directly on consumers. How this works in practice is that gasoline and fuel taxes are pre-collected by designated collectors and importers at the wholesale level and are included on the invoice to the retailer. The retailer, in turn, recovers the tax amount when this sale is made to the consumer. Therefore, the industry needs some time to prepare for these changes, in terms of supply chain implications, so that the relief at the pumps can in fact be delivered.

1440

If this legislation is passed and the rate decreases on July 1, 2022, importers, wholesalers and retailers that hold tax-paid inventory at the time of the rate cuts would be required to take inventory and then a credit in the amount of the difference would be provided. This tax adjustment for registered collectors and importers would reimburse them for the—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I'm sorry to interrupt.

Please stop the clock.

ROYAL ASSENT
SANCTION ROYALE

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I beg to inform the House that in the name of Her Majesty the Queen, Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor has been pleased to assent to certain bills in her office.

The Clerk-at-the-Table (Mr. Christopher Tyrell):

The following are the titles of the bills to which Her Honour did assent:

An Act to proclaim Ontario Cadets Week / Loi proclamant la Semaine des cadets de l'Ontario.

An Act to proclaim Hungarian Heritage Month / Loi proclamant le Mois du patrimoine hongrois.

An Act to enact the Digital Platform Workers' Rights Act, 2022 and to amend various Acts / Loi édictant la Loi de 2022 sur les droits des travailleurs de plateformes numériques et modifiant diverses lois.

An Act to proclaim Green Shirt Day / Loi proclamant la Journée du chandail vert.

TAX RELIEF AT THE PUMPS ACT, 2022

LOI DE 2022 SUR L'ALLÈGEMENT
DE LA TAXE À LA POMPE

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I return to the member from Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill, the author of Green Shirt Day.

Mr. Michael Parsa: Yes, I did, and I'm very, very pleased that it got royal assent, among other great bills, Mr. Speaker.

I was just saying that this tax adjustment for registered collectors and importers would reimburse them for the adjustment they will provide then to their retailers. The Ministry of Finance is actively working with the industry to ensure that there is an implementation plan available that is efficient for the industry and effective in delivering the proposed tax cuts so that this proposed tax relief would be in place, as I said, July 1.

Speaker, the past two years have seen people and businesses step up to do their part to follow public health guidelines and keep people safe, to find new ways of living and working, and to demonstrate true tenacity and perseverance in the face of a global pandemic. Now is not the time to hit the people and businesses with extra costs. No; instead, our government is taking action to keep costs down for people and businesses in Ontario, to address the inflationary pressures, which are not really unique to Ontario, because we know that the best place for taxpayer dollars is in the pockets of taxpayers so that they can invest in themselves, invest in their communities, their families and their futures. That's why we have brought forward the Tax Relief at the Pumps Act, 2022.

That is also why our government has a plan to keep costs down for people and businesses. An important part of this plan, this tax relief for people and businesses, is why we are debating this bill today. Part of this plan includes relief this tax season. We're working to keep costs low for families through Ontario tax credits and benefits. Our Ontario Child Care Tax Credit allows families to claim up to 75% of their eligible child care expenses, including care provided in child care centres, homes and camps. When people file their 2021 tax return this year, they can benefit from our 20% top-up this tax season.

Here's an example of how this tax credit can help. Jim and Kerry are a couple with a two-year-old child. They have annual earnings of \$45,000 and \$50,000 respectively, and they have eligible child care expenses of \$8,000 in 2021. Jim and Kerry would get \$1,705 in total federal and provincial income tax relief from the child care expenses deduction, \$2,480 from the Ontario CARE tax credit, and an additional \$495 from the temporary CARE tax credit top-up. Speaker, this would bring the total of support to 59% of eligible expenses. As you can see, this is real relief to help this couple with their child care expenses.

We're working to keep costs low for low-income workers. Our Low-income Workers Tax Credit is also helping keep taxes low for working people by providing up to \$850 each year in Ontario personal income tax relief to lower-income workers. Individuals can use this support to reduce or eliminate their Ontario personal income tax, excluding the Ontario Health Premium.

Here's an example of how this tax credit can help. Amelie is a single worker who works eight hours a day at minimum wage throughout 2022, earning about \$30,400 a year. For 2022, she can get \$830 in tax relief from the LIFT credit, putting dollars back into her pocket so she can use it as she sees fit.

Speaker, we are working to keep costs down for workers. Our Jobs Training Tax Credit is helping workers get training that they need for a career shift, retraining or to sharpen their skills. It provides up to \$2,000 in relief for 50% of a person's eligible expenses. Our government extended this temporary tax credit to the 2022 tax year to help more workers continue to upgrade their skills and transition back to the labour force.

To exemplify how this tax credit can help, I will use the example of Elliott. Elliott is a 28-year-old who lost his job due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Elliott has \$4,050 in eligible expenses in 2022 to develop skills for a new career. He will get back \$750 through the Canada Training Credit, which is the maximum amount available for 2022, and he will get \$2,000 from the Ontario Jobs Training Tax Credit, which is the maximum amount available for 2022. In total, Elliott will get \$2,750 in support from the two training credits, or 68% of his eligible expenses. That's more money to help Elliott get back on his feet and prepare for a new career.

Speaker, we're working to keep costs low for seniors. Our Seniors' Home Safety Tax Credit is helping seniors make their homes safer and more accessible, so they can stay in their homes longer. The credit is worth 25% of up to \$10,000 in eligible expenses for a senior's principal residence in Ontario, to a maximum credit of \$2,500. Our government has extended this temporary tax credit to the 2022 tax year to help seniors who may not have had a chance to use it in 2021.

I will share an example of Karl and Peter to help exemplify the relief from this tax credit. Karl and Peter are a senior couple. In 2022, they complete and pay jointly for a \$10,000 renovation to make the ground floor of their home safer. To divide the benefit between them, Peter claimed \$7,500 and will receive a Seniors' Home Safety Tax Credit of \$1,875. Karl claimed the remaining \$2,500

of the renovation costs and will receive a credit of \$625. These are dollars that can help Karl and Peter stay in their home that they love longer.

Speaker, we're working to keep costs low for individuals and families, and as I said, our Ontario Staycation Tax Credit is helping families who want to discover our beautiful province this year while helping the tourism and hospitality sector recover from the financial impacts of COVID-19 and the pandemic that it brought us. Through this tax credit, Ontario residents can claim 20% of their eligible 2022 accommodation expenses. For example, for a stay at a hotel, a cottage or a campground, they could claim 20% of their expenses in the 2022 accommodation. They can also make this claim when they file their personal income tax and benefit return in 2022. People can claim eligible expenses of up to \$1,000 as an individual, or \$2,000 if they have a spouse, a common-law partner or eligible children, to get back up to \$200 as an individual or \$400 as a family.

1450

I will use the example of Mohammad to further explain. Mr. Speaker, Mohammad books an eligible hotel room for one night in 2022 for \$250. He also has \$250 in non-eligible tourist-related expenses, including a dinner out and a ticket to perhaps a show. As a result, Mohammad would receive \$50, or 20% of his eligible accommodation expenses, through the temporary staycation tax credit. Again, that's money to both help Mohammad enjoy a vacation in Ontario and help the province's vibrant tourist sector recover from the pandemic.

As you can see, the bill we are discussing today is one piece of our broader plan. In addition to bringing forward the Tax Relief at the Pumps Act, 2022, our government has also a long-term vision. We know that automotive supply chains must evolve in order to the build cars of the future. Our province is poised to become the North American leader in electric and hybrid vehicle manufacturing. We will do this by combining our strength in the auto and the tech sectors with our wealth of critical minerals, which are essential to manufacture electric vehicle batteries, and by harnessing the strength of our province's clean tech sectors, the largest in Canada.

We recently announced two game-changing investments in Ontario's auto industry: The first, a major investment by Honda Canada to upgrade and retool its plant in Alliston, ensuring the production of its next-generation vehicle models; the second, that Ontario has secured the largest auto investment in the province's history as part of a joint venture between Ontario, the federal and municipal governments, LG Energy Solution and, of course, automaker Stellantis to build the province's first large-scale electric vehicle battery manufacturing plant in Windsor, which I'm sure you know too well, Mr. Speaker. These historic investments put our province on a path to becoming one of the most vertically integrated automotive jurisdictions in the emerging North American electric vehicle market.

On April 4, Premier Ford was in Oshawa to announce that Ontario had secured another milestone auto investment. The Ontario government is supporting a more than

\$2-billion investment by General Motors Canada with up to \$259 million in grant support to transform the company's Oshawa and CAMI manufacturing plant, as well as improvements across all of GM's manufacturing and research and development facilities in the province. These investments will pave the way for General Motors' first electric vehicle production line in Ontario, in Ingersoll, and the continuation of vehicle production in Oshawa while ensuring the vehicles of the future are built in Ontario and sold all over North America. As you can see, Speaker, we have a plan to provide urgent and much-needed relief at the pumps today while building a bright and exciting future for the auto sector and the industry of tomorrow.

It's not just business who would benefit from this proposed cut. The transportation industry, which moves people and goods as part of a critical supply chain network, or other businesses that use gas and diesel as part of their operations, would benefit from this relief as well.

The bill we are discussing today builds on the significant action our government has taken to lower costs for employers so that they can create more opportunities for their businesses, their workers and their communities.

Again, for example, we've lowered costs for employers by supporting a reduction in Workplace Safety and Insurance Board premiums.

We've allowed businesses to accelerate write-offs of capital investments for tax purposes, an incentive that is encouraging businesses to invest in our province and create jobs for the people of Ontario.

We cut the small business corporate income tax rate to 3.2 cents from 3.5 cents starting January 1, 2020, fulfilling a commitment by our government to cut the rate by 8.7%. This measure was estimated to provide more than 275,000 businesses with up to \$1,500 in annual tax savings. This tax relief is helping to create a more competitive environment for small businesses.

We've also reduced property taxes by lowering the high Business Education Tax rate for job creators. This has created more than \$450 million in annual savings for more than 200,000 business properties, or approximately 95% of all business properties in the province of Ontario.

Our government also ended a tax on jobs for an additional 30,000 employers by increasing the Employer Health Tax exemption from \$490,000 to \$1 million starting in 2020. With this additional relief, about 90% of employers now pay no Employer Health Tax and eligible private sector employers now save up a total of \$19,500 annually in their Employer Health Tax.

Keeping costs low for businesses and cutting red tape means that they have more dollars and time to hire workers, retain their current staff, invest in their operations and support the communities in which they operate. We know that businesses know better than governments how to invest these dollars, and that's why we brought this bill forward, and that's why we have a broader plan to keep costs down.

Speaker, as you can see, the Tax Relief at the Pumps Act, 2022, is one part of the government's plan to provide

tax relief for people and businesses. By temporarily cutting the gas tax by 5.7 cents per litre and by temporarily cutting the fuel tax by 5.3 cents per litre for six months, beginning July 1, 2022, this bill will provide relief at the pumps, putting money back into the pockets of people and businesses so that they can invest their hard-earned dollars in a way that makes sense for them.

For vehicle owners, this means significant direct savings, while households that do not own vehicles would benefit from the gas tax cut in the price paid for things like taxis, food delivery and consumer products. This builds on our relief for drivers, a package of savings that includes cutting costs for millions of Ontario vehicle owners by refunding licence plate sticker renewal fees for individually owned vehicles paid since March 2020, and eliminating licence plate renewal fees and plate stickers on a go-forward basis to save vehicle owners \$120 a year in southern Ontario and \$60 a year in northern Ontario for passenger and light commercial vehicles.

Our relief for drivers also includes permanently removing tolls on Highways 412 and 418 to bring fairness and relief to the Durham region.

Another important consideration in this proposed relief at the pumps is Ontario's gas tax program. Ontario's gas tax program supports public transit in municipalities across Ontario by providing two cents per litre of provincial tax to improve and expand transit. In light of this bill, municipalities may be wondering what this means for the gas tax program and the support it provides for local transit. I'm pleased to report that the Ontario government will ensure that this funding would not be impacted by these proposed cuts.

Speaker, I urge all members to vote yes to providing tax relief for the people and businesses of this province, yes to temporarily cutting the gas tax by 5.7 cents per litre for six months, yes to temporarily cutting the fuel tax by 5.3 cents per litre for six months, yes to providing relief at the pumps and, again, yes to putting more money back into the pockets of Ontarians and Ontario business.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The parliamentary assistant did say at the beginning of his presentation that he would be sharing his time with two other parliamentary assistants, the member from Brantford-Brant and the member from Oakville. At this stage, we turn to the parliamentary assistant from Brantford-Brant.

Mr. Will Bouma: It's my sincere pleasure and honour to rise again and once more share details of our government's proposed legislation on the gas and fuel tax.

As many of you may recall, I shared some context regarding this legislation, entitled Tax Relief at the Pumps Act, 2022, last week, during second reading. I am pleased to share similar details and information with you here today.

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Speaker, it is abundantly clear to this government that families, couples and people from every corner of this great province are looking to cut back on their household expenses. There is no question about it: People are feeling pressured by today's price tags.

Businesses are also not immune, as they are also seeking ways to turn a profit without passing their increased costs on to their customers in this time of increased inflation. It is clear that everyone's pocketbook is feeling the pressure right now. And while we all know the causes of this pressure did not begin and end in Ontario, it is our government's firm belief that all levels of government have a responsibility to step up to the plate and support people and businesses who are feeling and facing the pressures of rising costs, which is exactly why we have introduced proposed legislation on the gas and fuel tax.

This is not the only measure our government has introduced. I will also share additional related progress our government has made on key files that all feed into one central objective: bringing costs down for the people of Ontario.

Let me begin by providing some information about the gas and fuel tax legislation itself. If passed, this piece of legislation would provide tax relief at the pumps and put money directly back into people's pockets. The Tax Relief at the Pumps Act, 2022, would, if passed, temporarily cut the gas tax by 5.7 cents per litre and the fuel tax by 5.3 cents per litre. These changes, if passed, would begin on July 1, 2022. I will speak more about the effective date in a moment.

This proposed legislation would provide cost-of-living relief, impacting drivers and directly impacting the heavy duty transportation industry. We know that our supply chains simply cannot wait a minute longer for a more moderate price of diesel fuel.

But it is important to note that this targeted tax relief would have broader impacts on our economy than on just drivers, because this government knows that for many people in Ontario, not driving is simply not an option.

We also know that it is in fact this population of people who are being directly impacted by things far beyond their control: spiking oil prices, the federal carbon tax and geopolitical turmoil. I will have more to say on the carbon tax a bit later. For now, though, I will say this: Coupled with the recently announced elimination of licence plate renewal fees and refunds for fees paid since March 2020, households in Ontario can expect to start benefiting from savings right away.

The gas tax rate, if this legislation is passed, will be cut from 14.7 cents per litre to nine cents per litre, representing a cut of 5.7 cents per litre. The fuel tax rate, which applies to diesel, would be reduced from 14.3 cents per litre to nine cents per litre, representing a cut of 5.3 cents per litre.

Speaker, the need to move about our great and beautiful province is not something that is unique to drivers. That is why we have taken bold action to invest in transit and priority transit projects in municipalities across this province.

I also want to share that because Ontario's gas tax program supports public transit in municipalities across Ontario, our government will ensure this funding would not be impacted by these proposed cuts. Our government recognizes investments to transit systems across the

province will also ensure people who do not or cannot drive can keep moving.

I also want to be clear about the effective date of this proposed legislation. This proposed tax cut would be effective on July 1, 2022, as I mentioned earlier. If passed, this change would be in effect until December 31, 2022.

Why then, do you ask? Well, Speaker, I can say that the reason for this is in fact sensible and practical. The member from Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill has already mentioned some of those reasons. Our government simply wants to provide industry the required time to adjust their systems and business processes. This is a smart approach to ensuring everyone is on the same page, and it will ensure families, couples and friends can pile into cars bound for sunny summer destinations to celebrate the birth of our great nation with a bit more ease and a lot less anxiety about costly gas prices.

More broadly speaking, I am also here today to speak to Ontario's plan to help bring relief to families across this province. Our government's proposed Tax Relief at the Pumps Act, 2022, is just one piece of a larger package aimed at keeping costs down for the people of Ontario.

There are other examples of efforts that have already been announced and are already under way across Ontario that I am pleased to share with you here today. To start, I will note and remind everyone that our government has eliminated the road tolls that were in place on Highway 412 and Highway 418 to help provide relief to the commuters in Durham region. This restored fairness to the Durham region while addressing local congestion.

Highways 412 and 418 were the only tolled north-south highways in Ontario. Removing tolls as of April 5, 2022, provides more travel options for local residents, relieves gridlock on local roads across Durham region and helps improve economic competitiveness for local business.

We also delivered relief to all drivers in the province, making life more affordable and convenient for nearly eight million vehicle owners by eliminating licence plate renewal fees and the requirement to have a licence plate sticker on passenger vehicles, light-duty trucks, motorcycles and mopeds, effective March 13, 2022. The government introduced red tape legislation that would enable the province to refund eligible individual owners of vehicles for any licence plate renewal fees paid since March 2020. Thousands of refund cheques started to arrive in mailboxes at the end of March. Eliminating renewal fees will save vehicle owners \$120 a year in southern Ontario and \$60 a year in northern Ontario for passenger and light commercial vehicles.

Our government is also making steady progress on the auto insurance file. I am pleased to share with you here today that the government of Ontario is continuing to create long-term, meaningful change in the automobile insurance sector that puts drivers first by making automobile insurance more affordable and accessible.

Here is a brief journey into our government's work on that file. In April 2019, the government released Putting Drivers First, a blueprint for Ontario's auto insurance system. In the blueprint, the government is committed to

lowering costs and fighting fraud in the auto insurance system, including modernizing rules on unfair or deceptive acts or practices, pronounced UDAP. With the implementation of the Financial Services Regulatory Authority of Ontario's new UDAP rule, effective as of April 1, the government is enabling insurers to put more money back into the pockets of Ontario consumers by permanently enabling rebating and incentives subject to consumer protective processes.

In the blueprint, the government also committed to fixing Ontario's broken automobile insurance system and making automobile insurance more affordable for Ontario's 10 million drivers. And, as indicated in the 2020 budget, the next phase of the blueprint focuses on increasing choice for consumers by enabling insurers to offer more coverage options, including optional not-at-fault property damage coverage, for example, for drivers who may determine that insuring their older vehicle costs more than what the vehicle is worth.

Our work on helping to drive down costs and make life more affordable for the people of this province did not stop with auto insurance reform. I would be remiss if I did not also briefly address some of the recent reforms our government has introduced related to housing.

It unfortunately goes without saying that housing prices in Ontario and, in fact, globally have skyrocketed. They have almost tripled in the last 10 years, specifically here in Ontario, far outpacing people's incomes. We know this because of the many headlines that have dominated the news cycle and anecdotes shared with us by constituents across the province. Home ownership remains a dream, and that is it, for many first-time homebuyers looking to secure and purchase their very first property. Rental units are costly in rural communities, small towns and urban centres. In short and in sum, the system in Ontario is not working as it should, which is why our government has stepped up to offer support.

Our government has increased the non-resident speculation tax to 20% and expanded the tax to apply province-wide, effective March 30, 2022, as part of our commitment to tackle Ontario's housing crisis. We are prioritizing Ontario families and homebuyers.

Increasing the tax rate to 20% from 15% and expanding the tax to apply beyond the greater Golden Horseshoe region will strengthen efforts to deter non-resident investors from speculating on Ontario's housing market. This measure will also help make home ownership more attainable to Ontario residents.

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Ontario will also consult on potential measures to address concerns related to Ontario residents and land speculation. For example, the province will explore ways to discourage construction slowdowns that may be artificially driving up prices of new homes for Ontario families through land speculation.

Our government is hard at work and we will continue to fight for the people of Ontario. We are also providing tax relief for workers, families and seniors through the Low-income Workers Tax Credit, the seniors' home tax

credit, the Ontario Jobs Training Tax Credit and the Ontario child tax credit, and we recently reached an agreement with the federal government for \$13.2 billion of funding for a Canada-wide early learning and child care system.

Speaker, I can go on—I have plenty more here—but I see that I'm running short and I'd like to leave some time for the member from Oakville. Before I wrap up, Speaker, I want to say one last thing. Building Ontario cannot be done by burdening those who are most impacted by global swings in oil prices and geopolitical crises. Ontario is taking action now to protect our gains and ensure that tomorrow is even better than today.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We turn to the parliamentary assistant from Oakville to continue.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: It's an honour to be able to speak in the Legislature this afternoon and follow my two esteemed colleagues here today to talk about this bill specifically related to tax relief at the pumps. I know this bill will benefit everyone in my community of Oakville and indeed throughout the province of Ontario.

Speaker, we are living through an affordability crisis right now. I think we can all agree on that. Ontarians are paying more for less. Inflation is at a 30-year high and it keeps climbing month over month. Anyone can take a trip to the local grocery store and see the increasing cost of goods. Ontarians need greater relief to offset the financial impacts caused by inflation.

This bill is about affordability and making our province more affordable for everyone. Importantly, it adds to measures that we have already implemented. Our government has been finding ways to keep money in the pockets of Ontarians, who have worked hard to earn their paycheque. Keeping money in the pockets of taxpayers has guided many of the decisions of our government. Taxpayers know their personal situation better than we do here in government. They know where their money is best spent, whether it's on necessary goods or on themselves. Enabling taxpayers to spend money into the economy drives economic growth. Notably, spending into the economy creates opportunities and jobs, which we have witnessed increasing here in Ontario since our government took office.

Speaker, over the past six months, we heard the news that gas prices are going up and up and up. At one point, the price at the pump was nearing \$2 a litre in Oakville. Paying this price only harms individuals, businesses and families. Everyday activities like driving kids to hockey practice or music lessons are getting more expensive. Picking up the necessities like groceries is also becoming more expensive. My office hears directly from constituents who are worried about gas prices. They're concerned about their financial security and the ability to afford goods when gas prices keep climbing.

We know that Ontarians are getting pinched at the pump. We have already provided relief. One of our first actions as a government was to cancel the cap-and-trade system, cutting government charges on gasoline by 4.3 cents a litre. But, Speaker, more needs to be done and

that's why we have proposed this legislation. The federal government is causing the prices at the pump to rise, with no end in sight. Since 2019, the carbon tax has been adding more to the cost of driving. Right now, the federal government has increased the price of gas by over 11 cents per litre and over 13 cents per litre on diesel, effective April 1, 2022.

We recognize the challenges and difficulties that are present in this situation. Businesses and individuals are negatively being impacted. This legislation would, if passed, provide temporary cuts to the gas tax by 5.7 cents per litre and to the fuel tax by 5.3 per litre for six months beginning July 1, 2022. In other words, the gas tax rate would be cut from 14.7 cents to nine cents per litre, and the fuel tax rate would be reduced from 14.3 cents to nine cents per litre. Looking specifically at the gas tax, paired with the previous reduction, drivers will be saving 10 cents a litre on gas. The legislation will provide immediate savings for drivers. However, everyone will benefit. People who do not own a car will save on taxis, food delivery and consumer products.

Although the vast majority of cars on the road use gasoline, our government is accelerating the transition to electric vehicles, and we recently announced our hydrogen strategy. The demand for electric vehicles is increasing, and we are accelerating the production of made-in-Ontario—and I want to emphasize “made-in-Ontario”—electric vehicles. As of February 28, 2022, there are over 75,000 electric vehicles registered in the province.

Exciting EV production announcements have been made over the past several years. In total, \$4 billion has been invested by companies for their Ontario assembly plants. Our government has supported these companies to attract their investments and create jobs in the process. For example, in Oakville, our government provided Ford Motor Company with \$295 million to help retool the assembly complex to build electric vehicles. The funding secured 3,000 direct and countless indirect jobs. General Motors announced it would invest \$1 billion in its plant in Ingersoll, and Toyota announced a \$1.4-billion upgrade to their Cambridge and Woodstock facilities. These are just a select few of the investments made by businesses. Our record is keeping jobs and investments here.

Recently, the largest auto investment in Ontario's history was announced: A \$5 billion facility is being built in Windsor to produce electric vehicle batteries, creating thousands of new jobs. It will also integrate the domestic supply chain.

Further, driving an electric vehicle is made easier, because our government is providing \$91 million to help make electric vehicle chargers more accessible to the public throughout the province. Installation of charging stations is occurring at highway rest stops, carpool parking lots, Ontario provincial parks and community hubs like hockey arenas and municipal facilities. Electric vehicle sales have tripled in Ontario since we took office. Providing all Ontarians with convenient, public access to fast, reliable charging will help us move forward with our goal of making made-in-Ontario electric vehicles the top choice for drivers.

Cars and commercial vehicles are not the only vehicles going electric. Our government has been investing in electric buses for local public transit systems. In Oakville, the government provided \$22.1 million for transit projects, including the purchase of 57 zero-emission buses.

Reducing the gas tax is not the only measure helping commuters. To save drivers money, licence plate stickers and toll highways have been removed. Unlike the Liberals, who imposed tolls on Highways 412 and 418, we removed these tolls. We listened to the residents, the businesses in Durham region. Further, we removed stickers that provide immediate savings of \$120 a year for every car. Taking the stickers and the reduced gasoline prices together, Ontario households will save a total of \$465 on average for 2022. The \$465 savings represents the total amount of savings to households divided by the total number of households in Ontario, whether they own a vehicle or not.

While we are saving drivers money, our government is promoting public transit as well, by reducing the costs for riders. Specifically, the fare for local transit in the GTA has been removed when connecting to GO Transit services. This will save residents in Oakville \$4.80 a week, or almost \$250 a year. In addition, Presto discounts for youth and post-secondary students have been reduced to nearly 40% of the adult fare. Promoting public transit is great for commuters and the environment, and commuters are seeing significant savings.

Speaker, I want to mention that the province has been supporting the operations of local public transit systems. The gas tax program provides an opportunity to enhance local transit. It can be used to extend service hours, buy transit vehicles, add routes and improve accessibility or upgrade infrastructure. Since 2018, Oakville has received over \$11 million in gas tax funding. Moreover, nearly \$8 million was provided to help Oakville Transit deal with COVID-19. This funding is essential to keep public transit running and encourage ridership.

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Speaker, our government knows and believes in creating savings for Ontarians. Since the start of our mandate, the members on this side of the House started tackling the skyrocketing cost of living left by the previous Liberal government. The Liberals had no problem driving up costs on just about everything. We have offered direct savings to taxpayers, and many of these savings are permanent.

For instance, we can talk about child care. Under the previous Liberal government, families across the province and in my community of Oakville were forced to pay the highest child care costs in Canada. In fact, child care costs increased by 400% under the Liberal administration. This harms women, children and families.

Before our government took office in June 2018, the Toronto Star reported that about 776,000 young children in Canada—44%—are living in child care deserts or in communities where licensed care is scarce. This was unacceptable and unfair to working parents. Our government has turned this around and we've provided relief to families. We introduced the Ontario Child Care Tax Credit

that is saving parents up to \$1,500 per year. The tax credit allows families to claim up to 75% back on eligible child care expenses.

Furthermore, under our leadership, the \$10-per-day child care agreement has been signed. Our government worked to secure not the quickest deal, but the best deal for the people of Ontario. The Liberals would have signed the first deal presented. Again, this would not have been the best deal and would have left billions on the table and a lot of unknowns in terms of the perpetuity of these investments

Parents in this province deserve to have their interests looked after, and we delivered on that. We negotiated hard for \$3 billion more than originally presented. In addition, we secured an additional year in the extension of the program into for-profit child care spaces. Specifically, we received \$13.2 billion in funding for a Canada-wide early learning and child care system. This provides Ontario families with children five years old and younger in participating licensed child care centres with up to 25% in savings, to a minimum of \$12 a day, retroactive to April 1, 2022. There will be more decreases in child care fees over the next several months, and this agreement will deliver an average of \$10 for eligible children by September 2025.

Speaker, this deal provides so much for families, expands the potential labour force and helps families save money that can now be used in any way they want. We are turning child care around in this province. We have built 15,000 new spaces to give parents more choice and flexibility. In Oakville alone, over \$121 million has been provided to create and expand schools and child care spaces.

Furthermore, we cannot forget about the hydro problems of the previous government. Speaker, I mentioned auto manufacturers and the creation of jobs with the EV investments. The confidence of these companies to invest billions of dollars in our province was a result of the business environment that was established by our government. Under the Liberals, this was certainly not the case. Some 300,000 manufacturing jobs left the province. Auto manufacturers were leaving for the United States and Mexico. Under Liberal leadership, hydro skyrocketed 70%, and Ontario had the highest hydro rates in the country. The price of hydro rose at four times the rate of inflation from 2008 to 2015. Ontarians remember these headlines of families choosing either to pay for their hydro or for food to eat. Increases in the cost of living and doing business is the Liberal record.

This legislation is another way we are creating the best jurisdiction, not only in Canada but, indeed, the world, to live, work and raise a family. It helps both individuals and businesses. But it is not the only affordability measure.

Speaking about business, lowering the gas tax keeps money in the hands of businesses, which will allow them to explore new ways to grow, which in turn will lead to economic growth. We have introduced broader measures to help Ontario businesses. We have created a more affordable business environment by cutting the small business tax rate to 3.2%, reducing electricity rates for

industrial and commercial businesses through the comprehensive electricity plan that provides full savings of between 15% and 17%, slashing \$400 million in red tape and allowing businesses to accelerate write-offs with capital investments for tax purposes.

In total, through our measures, businesses are saving \$7 billion annually. As a result, Ontario is witnessing incredible job growth. Employment in Ontario increased by 35,000 in March, bringing the total number of new jobs created since we took office in 2018 to over 500,000.

Businesses are not the only ones impacted. We've been there for workers. We've raised the minimum wage and created the Low-income Workers Tax Credit, which provides up to \$850 each year in Ontario personal tax relief for low-income workers. We are permanently raising the personal support worker wage, and we've introduced the Ontario Jobs Training Tax Credit, which helps Ontarians get training when they need it. Making Ontario more affordable for both individuals and businesses has a positive effect throughout the province.

Speaker, this bill is all about affordability. I did want to mention a few of the other initiatives and programs of this government that fit into the theme of saving Ontarians money. These are programs and credits for seniors.

The Seniors' Home Safety Tax Credit is a temporary refundable personal income tax credit that can help make your home safer, more accessible and help people stay in their homes longer. On these home renovations, the credit is worth 25% of up to \$10,000 in eligible expenses per year for a senior's principal residence in Ontario. Seniors are able to get back up to \$2,500 on eligible upgrades and features. Additionally, we have created the Ontario Seniors Dental Care Program, which provides free routine dental care for low-income seniors in the province.

Our government has also made travel less expensive. We've rolled out the staycation tax credit. Ontario residents can claim 20% of their eligible 2022 accommodation expenses here in the province of Ontario. Ontarians can claim eligible expenses up to \$1,000 as an individual or \$2,000 if you have a spouse, common-law partner or eligible children, to get back up to \$200 per individual or \$400 per family. The credit will provide an estimated \$270 million in support to about 1.85 million Ontarians. Additionally, we are encouraging residents to explore our beautiful provincial parks by lowering the price of popular seasonal day-use vehicle permits by up to 30%. Ontario is a vast province that has unlimited opportunity, and I encourage everyone to experience something this summer and use the staycation tax credit.

Students are also benefiting from the package of affordability measures. Tuition for university and college students was reduced by 10% and the tuition freeze was extended by one year, for a total of three years. We cannot forget the free menstrual products to school boards. Providing these products keeps girls involved in sports and extracurricular activities.

These are real savings. Hundreds of dollars are provided back on purchases.

Speaker, I'm proud of the many initiatives introduced by this government to save Ontarians money, and I'm

proud to be able to stand in favour of this legislation. Passing this legislation would be the first direct cut to the gas tax in over 30 years. Obviously, with the way prices are today, there is no better time to introduce this cut than right now, when prices are high and inflation is high. People need money in their pockets. We do not know the personal situation of every person. To some, that sticker refund could benefit a family and allow them to put more food on the table. To others, it may be to buy new kids' sports equipment. Whatever they may choose to spend that money on, it's money directly back into the people and the businesses of the people of Ontario, and I'm proud to support this bill.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Point of order.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Point of order, the government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Pursuant to standing order 9(f), I wish to inform the House that tomorrow's morning meeting is cancelled.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you.

For the past hour, we've heard from three of the government's parliamentary assistants on this bill. It is now time for questions and responses.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to thank the members for their presentation. My question today will be to my friend from Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill. In his presentation, he spoke quite a bit about affordability and rental increases. We know that nothing hits closer to home than the cost of housing. However, this government scrapped rent control on new buildings built after 2018, pretending that this would somehow create affordable housing. The evidence is in. We know that that is not the case.

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One Richmond Row residents in my riding are seeing increases of 7% to 10% in rent that is already high. Will this government step up, put rent control back in place on new builds and stand up for people who have had their pockets emptied by that reckless and poor decision?

Mr. Michael Parsa: I thank my honourable colleague for the question. He's right: I did spend a lot of time talking about affordability and making sure that Ontarians across the province are finding life more affordable. I'm glad that my colleague mentioned that. Part of that includes making sure that areas that have a high impact on Ontarians, like at the pumps, Mr. Speaker—Ontarians are receiving the relief.

When it comes to housing—again, Mr. Speaker, we've said it—there's not a bigger champion than the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, who has stood up for Ontarians when it comes to protecting them. And also, creating an environment—again, because of the failure of the previous government, we are putting in place so that there's more housing, all kinds of housing in place, and also protecting existing tenants all across the province.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke has a question.

Mr. John Yakubski: I want to thank the member from Aurora–Oak Ridges–Richmond Hill for his presentation today. When we were elected, we were elected on a platform of making life more affordable for the people of Ontario. I know that you've talked about a number of those things today, including the pertinent issue, which is, of course, the reduction of the provincial taxes on gas. But could you put a little more details, sir, on the number of actual initiatives that we are bringing forward to ensure that life is more affordable for the people of Ontario? Because under the previous government, it had simply gone the other direction. Every time you turned around, life had become less affordable.

We're making it more affordable. Could you give us some of the details, please?

Mr. Michael Parsa: I thank my honourable colleague for the great question. He is absolutely right: Life was unaffordable. The only thing is, to my honourable colleague, unfortunately, I only have a minute to answer, so I can't list all the great initiatives that we've been able to put in place to be able to turn things around after the failure of the previous government. But he's absolutely right: Life was unaffordable. We all know that. We've all talked about it here, Mr. Speaker, which is why Ontarians chose a government that will turn things around for them. And part of that is to create good-paying jobs.

The Premier said from the beginning that we're not going to give up on the jobs that the previous government gave up on. They just threw up their hands and said, "We can no longer compete." That's not good enough for us. It's not good enough for the people of Ontario. We want those jobs; we want those good-paying jobs to come back to this province. We'll fight every single day to make sure that they return.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question?

Mr. Gurratan Singh: This is why people are losing faith in this Conservative government. You introduce a bill on car insurance, then you do nothing with it and you let it die. You see an NDP bill around auto insurance and you say some pretty words to support it, but you refuse to actually lower rates.

My question is very clear: Will you, once and for all, actually stand up to your buddies in the insurance industry and instead fight for Ontario drivers, reduce rates and show that reduction now? Not four years from now, not a year from now—right now, will you commit to lowering car insurance rates?

Mr. Will Bouma: I am so glad that question came up in the House today because I found it so striking that in these attempts by the opposition private members' bills on the auto insurance industry, they fail to hit the basics. All they're doing is spreading the high cost of insurance around to people around the rest of the province who are driving well and paying less insurance right now. They're doing nothing to actually hit those things, and that's exactly where we're taking action.

(1) The minister just sent a letter to FSRA dictating to them that they have a good look at the 55 territories, which

haven't changed in decades, and make sure that there's fairness in those; (2) we're actually making optionality possible in the auto insurance industry; and (3) we're helping lower insurance costs so that people don't have to pay for insurance they don't have to have—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member has 10 seconds.

Mr. Will Bouma: All I can say is, I wish the NDP would support us on some of these great actions to lower costs in auto insurance.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Flip a coin—the member from Perth–Wellington has a question.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Last night when I came to Toronto, I came through Orangeville and around through Caledon and down that way. It's kind of a nice drive, instead of getting on the 401. But anyway, the gas prices started off in my town in Listowel at \$1.67, and in Caledon it was \$1.60, and they got less as I went and got closer to Toronto, which I found quite surprising.

Ms. Catherine Fife: You should do something about that.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Pardon?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Maybe you should do something about that.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Anyway, so I filled up in the town of Caledon last night and it was kind of a nice—well, I mean it was expensive, but it was kind of nice to see that.

But the NDP is proposing, in their Bill 91, that the government should step in and interfere with gas prices. I wonder whichever member is going to ask this. I wonder if the member can tell us why this is a wrong approach to cutting costs at the gas pump.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: Thank you to the member for the question. You do raise a very good point because there actually have been other provinces in Canada that have so-called “regulated” the price. I mean, they can't really regulate it, because we all know we live in a world where supply and demand are paramount. There are geopolitical events that obviously affect the price. But having said that, there are a few provinces that have regulated it, and what every single study that's looked at this particular situation has found is—guess what? They actually pay more money in those provinces, for example, in Atlantic Canada and NDP-run British Columbia, where taxes are the highest. So regulating the price of gasoline would not be in the best interests of consumers of this province or anywhere, for that matter.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Miss Monique Taylor: I definitely have been listening to the members opposite on their third reading of Bill 111, but I've raised some interesting—not so interesting. I've raise a concern during second reading of Bill 111, as Minister Clark, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, had made an announcement on January 21, 2022, to top up municipalities for their loss during COVID on the gas tax portion because the municipalities get 2% of the gas tax directed to them to pay for transit. That announcement came on January 2021, and then again, just

the other day, on April 4, the minister made the same announcement for the same \$120.4 million.

Can they assure the municipalities that they're getting both of these tax refunds and that they're not actually going to lose by the government removing this portion of their gas tax?

Mr. Will Bouma: I appreciate the question, Speaker, and I think the member answered her own question: that by decreasing the tax by 5.7 cents and by 5.3 cents, we are not at all touching the two cents per litre that goes to municipalities for their transit.

In fact, we recognize that there are many Ontarians who don't drive, can't drive, and that they still need those transit systems, which is why our government has made unprecedented investments into transit systems across the entire province of Ontario. So we are keeping those people who use transit safe, and we are providing real relief to Ontarians who need to drive to get to work, to go on vacation.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The Attorney General has time for a quick question.

Hon. Doug Downey: We did the first tax cut on gas as soon as we got elected, and now we've done the second and we're locking this in. This isn't something, I understand, that's going to take effect if we get elected; this is happening unless they get elected and undo it. They have to physically undo it. So, Mr. Speaker, I just wonder how secure we are that we completed our promise to Ontarians that we made last election.

Mr. Will Bouma: Well, we have and we need a strong, stable Conservative government in the province of Ontario to make sure that we can see true affordability relief for every single person in the province of Ontario. Thanks for the great question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Before we continue debate, I understand—no, you've changed your mind?

Interjection.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The minister has made your point of order that you had given indication that you were going to make. Okay.

We're going back to continue debate. The member from Waterloo.

1540

Ms. Catherine Fife: I wasn't expecting to debate for a whole hour today on Bill 111, but I'm always happy and always privileged to actually bring the voices of the people of Waterloo to this place and to raise genuine concerns from the people that we serve.

I just want to start by saying, though, that last Thursday I was watching the speeches that departing MPPs were giving in this place. I found it very emotional, actually, to listen to some of the stories of what brought people into politics, how politics impacted them, and what they're going on to in the future. There was one moment when the former Premier reminded folks of when, I believe, the member from York Centre had yelled out to her and said, “Why are you still here?” I think that it was a really powerful moment around the discourse in this place and

around the need to actually maintain a level of respect and decorum as legislators. So I just wanted to mention that your speech, of course, was very good, Speaker, as was the member from Windsor–Tecumseh's.

All that said, I do want to just take a step back here and remind folks why Bill 111 is actually right before us on the floor of the House. We were, of course, debating a very serious affordability issue in the north. Our caucus and our member from Timiskaming–Cochrane had brought forward a very well-crafted opposition day motion that reflected what he and our other northern members have been hearing about affordability in Ontario, and it was actually a direct response to the inadequate state of affairs with Bill 111. It addressed public transit alternatives across the north, which required northern Ontario drivers to depend on personal vehicles to get to work and other essential activities, and the cancellation of mass transit options such as the Northlander, an inter-city bus service, which exacerbates this challenge around moving around the north of Ontario. It went on to say that Bill 111 has no requirement for gas companies and other retailers to lower prices after the gas tax is reduced, which is a very key part and a key weakness in Bill 111. The government's own calculations show that the average driver will save as little as \$45 over six months, an average of \$7.50 per month.

The motion itself basically said that no one in Ontario can wait for leadership on addressing these high costs, but northerners face unique challenges which require regional approaches, which is why we brought forward this opposition day motion to the floor of the Legislature. That debate was unceremoniously closed. I think that folks in North Bay, Timmins, Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury and the far, far north will be very upset that the Legislature decided not to actually have this conversation. I mean, it's worth a conversation, at the very least. That's the bare minimum that you can do for our northern communities.

Some folks know this, but I've been counting down a long time until the election. The timing of Bill 111—as I said last week, when I spoke to it the first time for second reading—is very interesting, given the fact that there are 23 days until the writ is dropped if the schedule stays as it's planned. There are 52 days until election day, and there are 19 days until the second time the budget is legally due, and that will come very quickly.

Now, of course, Mr. Speaker, there's lots of contemplation around the budget, and budgets matter. Budgets are moral documents; they tell the story of our priorities, of where the government is going to be investing in people or not investing in people. If the government does what we suspect, they'll drop the budget on April 28 and then we will not come back to this House. I feel like the Conservative Party of Ontario is going to do exactly what the Liberals did in 2014. They're going to drop a budget that's like a dream budget, with no due diligence, no oversight, and no checks and balances, so really it can say whatever it wants. I do recall how upset my former PC colleagues, when you were on this side of the House, were about that, because basically, it was a work of fiction and it became a platform document.

This whole “when is the budget going to be dropped in the province of Ontario?” was of course never meant to happen, because there was a transparency and accountability guarantee: The former finance minister and the Premier of this province promised this would never happen. They promised you would not play these games with the budget, because budgets matter.

But that said, if you do, in fact, drop that budget on the 28th, then the election will start in 19 days. That's why this opposition day motion that was connected to Bill 111 was so important, because, of course, the long-awaited promise to maybe bring back the Northlander was made, I believe, on Friday.

It was Friday, right?

Mr. John Vanthof: Sunday.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Sunday, just yesterday. Yes, so you're really cutting it close with these promises. It was really interesting for me to watch this because when I was in North Bay last week—because I do think it's important for legislators to get out of this place and check out other communities to see what the lived experiences of the people that we serve are—the Northlander came up a good deal of times when I was in North Bay. I know the members from Timiskaming–Cochrane—that northeastern connection—and Timmins are people who have consistently been raising the issue of the importance of connectivity between southern Ontario and northern Ontario. We know this. It's 2022. This is not new news.

But it was discouraging. I just want to put this on the record: When the Premier rolled into Timmins he basically said, and this is a direct quote from him, “I don't even know who the member for Timmins is.” This is what the Premier said. Okay. The member from Timmins has been here for 23 years. He has been a very vocal member for affordability and for the environment; he's a former miner, he has raised the importance of infrastructure and, as we heard from our colleague from Timiskaming–Cochrane earlier today, of the importance of well-planned transportation and having qualified drivers operating on our roads. These are common themes that the member from Timmins has made. But what does the Premier do? He shows up in MPP Bisson's riding and says, “I don't even know who this person is.”

This is really the lowest kind of politics that we're at right now. I want to say that I would never do that to any of my colleagues. I know who sits in what ridings. We've always said that when you have those announcements and you don't invite us, it's not just us that you're being disrespectful to, you're actually being disrespectful to the people that we serve. When the Premier actually said that, I was wondering: Is this just ignorance, is it incompetence or is this a new level of disrespect for fellow legislators who will likely be here for a long time?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I hesitate to interrupt, but I will, and say that we have to be mindful of our language. I believe you just used some unparliamentary language. I would ask you to withdraw and then to continue.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay, withdraw. But that level of disrespect that the Premier of the province displayed in the

riding of Timmins is not the kind of bar that we should be trying to achieve, I would say.

I also want to say that when the Premier came in here—I think it was just in the fall—and said, “Waterloo, I’m coming for you. I saw the numbers; you and Taras are gone,” I also don’t think that that raises the bar for discourse in this place. It certainly doesn’t help the culture for legislators to make informed decisions and to craft legislation that actually will help the people we serve. I want to put that on the record.

The parliamentary assistant talked about the affordability piece, which we on this side of the House find a little ironic, given the fact that one of the first things that this government did was cut the minimum wage. You’ll remember: That first tumultuous year was quite something. We actually started one evening session at midnight.

1550

This pertains to the affordability piece. What happened is that we brought forward a proposal around the minimum wage, because when we assessed and when independent companies and agencies looked at the impact of freezing and rolling back the minimum wage, ultimately, that cost individual Ontarians, the front-line workers in the province of Ontario, between \$6,000 and \$7,000. People were working full-time, they were trying to make ends meet, they were trying to be part of the economy, but what did you do? You actually—and I know this government talks a lot about pockets. I’ve never heard pockets or alcohol talked about so much in this Legislature. It does seem like the government is really trying to rebrand very late in the day—as I mentioned, 23 days until the election.

We’ve had an opportunity to review the impact of that policy decision. We had heard from delegations around the impact of minimum wage, which ironically—Bill 111: no delegations, no clause-by-clause. It was just introduced recently. This is a common theme of this government. But if you don’t follow due process, if you don’t seek counsel, if you don’t reach out to the people who we’re serving and say, “How will this bill actually affect you?” then you have a flawed bill, which Bill 111 is.

Just to go back to the affordability piece, what we had seen when you made the reduction in minimum wage and froze it for three and a half years—if you were a full-time worker in the province of Ontario, you lost between \$6,000 and \$7,000. What does Bill 111 propose? Seven dollars and 50 cents a month in savings, maybe, potentially, if it happens, if, after the election—you’ve set this timing for even after the election, ignoring the fact that so many people in this province are struggling day to day.

You lost between \$6,000 and \$7,000 for minimum wage workers. For part-time workers, that was between \$2,000 and \$3,000. Actually, this may even have a greater impact, because work is so precarious that people are stringing together jobs. So you literally went into the pockets of Ontarians and you removed that money. That’s what happened when you reduced the minimum wage and froze it for three and a half years.

We feel strongly on this side around the minimum wage. We’ve done a lot of work on this front, a lot of

reaching out to businesses and consulting with them, listening to them. They have asked that you take the politics out of the minimum wage and that you give us some predictability. Just don’t change it overnight—which, ironically, you did.

But on this piece, it is so important to be really aware of the impact that policy decisions have on the people who we serve. Recently, David Card, who is a Canadian, received the Nobel Prize for economics for debunking the myth that a higher living wage compromises the economy. In fact, David Card, Joshua Angrist and Guido Imbens received this award for real-world research dating back from the 1990s. So this is not just a little pilot project; this is 30 years of research, 30 years of evidence that should inform public policy. They demonstrated empirically that the idea touted by conservative economists—and we heard some of this language when you did freeze the minimum wage—that a higher minimum wage means fewer jobs is not based in fact.

They went on to say, as did the general secretary, Sharan Burrow, “These Nobel Prize winners have demolished the unproven, yet influential, theory that ensuring that workers have a decent minimum wage somehow means job losses”—not true. She went on to say, “Those who have peddled that mythical theory for decades, and the governments and institutions that have imposed the same theory, without proper evidence or against evidence to the contrary, are responsible for millions upon millions of people living in poverty.”

There is really a contradictory message here coming from the government. Now, with 23 days before the election is called, you are suddenly concerned with affordability when, for three and a half years, you knowingly, intentionally were in the pockets of people who are really the drivers of our economy. Those are the minimum wage service industry. Look how dependent we were on them during this pandemic. They still went to work. They could not isolate in place.

This research goes on to say, “This prize is a serious indictment of many economists in that it has taken some thirty years for the facts to be given prominence over a damaging and groundless idea. At a time when the world needs evidence-based and scientific research to tackle a global pandemic, economics too needs to be based on factual analysis rather than ill-informed and ideological speculation dressed up as legitimate policy advice.”

It begs the question, though, with regard to Bill 111, where this is a temporary gimmick to perhaps make it sound like relief will actually be happening at the pumps, where is the policy piece? Where is the research? Where’s the evidence that proves that this will alleviate those pressures at the pump?

Finally, just on the minimum wage: “Ensuring minimum living wages through statutory processes or collective bargaining is crucial to ending poverty”—and I saw a lot of poverty when I was in North Bay. I know the member from Sudbury has often talked about the poverty that’s up in Sudbury, and Thunder Bay–Atikokan, our member there.

I'm going to talk about a professor I met at Nipissing last week because she mentioned the hook, if you will, or drawing or attracting people to northern communities is sometimes quite possible. People are hopeful, and the north is beautiful, but if you don't have that social capital, that infrastructure there, you don't retain them. You lose them. They leave the community. People need to find community in the province.

Just to finish this off: "Reversing the long-term trend of declining labour income shares; increasing demand; and building the basis for recovery—with jobs, decent work and resilience—in an increasingly unequal world" can be undone if you actually address the core wages.

And to the credit of many businesses across this province, I will say the labour shortage has driven that conversation faster than any government would have taken it on. People know that if you do not pay your employees a decent wage, offer respectful conditions, then you will find yourself without those employees.

When I did meet with the chamber in North Bay last week, the labour shortage is undeniable. It's a real barrier to moving some businesses forward, and employers have said, "Okay, \$15.50. We're going to have to go well above that." So we provided a timeline for the government of the day.

What a missed opportunity, though, as we talk about affordability, that—you have an opportunity to right a wrong, and again and again, you choose not to. You don't seem to understand that the affordability issue is a very real issue for the people we serve. The fact that we are so close to this election and this may, in your minds, tick off that sort of election promise box but not really address the core issue that people are facing is quite amazing.

I do want to say that this whole debate is actually happening, as well, as our Chief Medical Officer of Health has recently just wrapped up a press conference after some one month or five weeks of not presenting the concerns or the thoughts or the data to the people of this province. Dr. Moore strongly recommends masking—strongly recommends masking. We are seeing, on average, 120,000 new cases of COVID a day. It is alarming for us.

This is the feedback I get from the majority of people I serve in Waterloo: Why do you keep making the same mistakes? It's a cycle of rushing to reduce public health guidelines, particularly in our schools.

1600

I asked the question this morning of the minister: Why did some people get access to rapid antigen tests? In my riding of Waterloo, one private school received 14,000. I remember people lining up outside the LCBO on the main street in uptown Waterloo; there were only 200 kits. They were gone in minutes. So this inconsistency in policy application as it relates to the pandemic, as it relates to public health guidelines, is truly alarming.

Now, I do want to also talk a little bit about the context. The northern opposition day motion was pretty much shut down by the government. They don't want to talk about affordability for northerners.

For Bill 111, they didn't bring the public consultation process to it, which usually strengthens a piece of legislation. We're currently actually in committee with Bill 106 right now. We're trying to get the government to listen to the delegations that came forward and called it, quite honestly, unconstitutional. This is from the Equal Pay Coalition, and this was Patty Coates, who came here last week, and Cathryn Hoy, the president of the Ontario Nurses' Association.

Fay Faraday and Jan Borowy, the Equal Pay Coalition co-chairs, said, "It is incredible that less than a week before Equal Pay Day the government is rushing an unconstitutional bill through the Legislature to override women's pay equity and collective bargaining rights." This was from Equal Pay Coalition co-chair Fay Faraday. She goes on to say that "Bill 106 overturns hard-won Supreme Court victories and doubles down on Bill 124, attacking the rights of women in health and social services who continue to carry us through this pandemic."

Now, I've heard the government talking about how Bill 111 will alleviate—

Interjection.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Order, please.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I heard the member from Oakville. I love it when they don't like what I'm saying, I have to say.

But Bill 106 is actually really interesting, because the members opposite said how Bill 111 is actually going to alleviate some of those cost pressures for women, but you've had Bill 124 on the docket. I'm so surprised that you haven't repealed this piece of legislation. It is, in and of itself, a job-killer piece of legislation. People are running away from the health care sector because they recognize that the government will only put a 1% increase on the pay sheet; with the rate of inflation at 5.3%, this is a cut. The members opposite are going to say that Bill 111 alleviates some of those cost pressures for women; \$7.50 a month is another insult to the majority of people in this province who are just struggling to hold on, day in and day out.

But the Equal Pay Coalition have weighed in on multiple pieces of legislation, and they put that gender lens on the legislation for good reason: because if you look at the workers in the province of Ontario who have been disproportionately affected by your policies and by the pandemic, you are looking at ECEs, personal support workers, RPNs or nurses. Women in this province feel disrespected by the Ford government. They do. It is true.

They go on to say, though, that in a new Environics Research poll commissioned by the coalition, 85% of Ontarians said that "it is important that the provincial government do more to promote women's economic equality. When asked about policy solutions, 88% said decent wages for women working in publicly funded care work and community and social services were important," with 60% going on to say that this was key, that it was "very important."

"Ontario voters care about women's economic equality," says Jan Borowy. "They want to see strong policies

that support women's ability to access decent work, not stealth attempts to undermine their labour rights."

Earlier today, my colleague from Timiskaming–Cochrane said this is a place of words. Well, these are harsh words for this government, particularly when you are considering the impact that it has had on women. And Equal Pay Day is tomorrow. Ironically, Bill 106 may come to the floor of this Legislature, a piece of legislation that undermines women's equality, undermines their collective bargaining rights and sets them further back is going to come to the floor of Ontario's Legislature on Equal Pay Day. And not only that, Mr. Speaker, provincial leaders have been invited to debate tomorrow on this very important issue. You can't ignore 51% of the population of the province—well, you have been trying. We have been trying to get you to pay attention to them. But there is a debate tomorrow evening with all the leaders. Our leader has agreed to be there, but the Premier of Ontario has a scheduling conflict. So women are not a priority in this instance.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: "Scheduling conflict?"

Ms. Catherine Fife: Oh, quotations, yes, okay—a "scheduling conflict." He won't be at the town hall at the University of Toronto tomorrow. So there you go. This is a non-partisan organization that's been very focused on how women have fallen behind based on the wage portfolio across this province, and I have to say, it's disappointing, it really is.

The other piece that, of course, our caucus has been trying to get this government to pay attention to is the housing. The member from Aurora mentioned this as well: all these new housing starts. What we have said to this government, what the people of this province have said to this government—particularly around Bill 109, where there's a huge amount of conflict now between municipalities and this minister, because members of the PC caucus have said, "It's municipalities. They're not doing their job," specifically in the Hamilton area. The PC solution is that you pave over agricultural land—white picket fences, detached homes as the solution. But what we have said to this government is that if you are building unaffordable housing, that does not solve the problem, and it doesn't. And that's actually what you are doing.

We have a lot of evidence. Our critic on this has been very strong. And we've heard, actually, when we used to have delegations—which, as I mentioned, we haven't heard from on Bill 111. But on the financialization of the housing market, what's interesting on this front is that during the delegation—and on Bill 109, we're hearing from some folks today and we heard from an organization called Transparency International Canada. They have been coming to budget consultations for quite some time now, because they have been tracking how predatory investments and, really, the hoarding of real estate is impacting Ontarians. Now, we have seen this play out in BC and around Vancouver, and this is what one of the members who came to speak to the committee said: that the government is essentially allowing, so is being permissive in this practice of allowing "empty safety deposit boxes in the sky

which are harbouring dirty money." That's their language. It's part of the Hansard. They came forward. This dirty money is actually one of the things that we have very good data on: that there is money laundering happening through the real estate market in the province of Ontario.

Has this government taken on this initiative? It's billions of dollars. It's driving up the cost of homes, homes that people need for shelter and also as an economic stabilizer. That is the power of shelter. That's the power of affordable housing. This is the economic stabilizer for Ontario. If you don't address this, then you are part of the problem. And on the housing file, we have actually seen this now—the government really just turn away from this evidence, turn away from this research, even in the face of fellow colleagues raising this issue, including PC federal MPs who have raised this at the federal level.

I think I did quote the member from Windsor–Tecumseh when we look at Bill 111 as a whole and how it misses the mark in addressing key issues of affordability. He called it lipstick on a pig, and of course I said "no offence to pigs." But we are really looking at a missed opportunity and, I would go so far as to say, tokenism around recognizing some of the cost pressures. Because you made a promise that you were going to address this issue, now, 23 days before an election, we're talking randomly about \$7.50 a month in savings for drivers.

1610

That's why we brought forward the motion, because there are people who are not drivers who also have a great need to see leadership on affordability.

I did note the parliamentary assistant, as well, referenced—why is Bill 111 going to be activated after the budget? You talk with words that seem to say, "Oh, there is some urgency here." And he said that there is just due process and this will happen after July 1, when people load into their cars and drive south, and now they will save \$7.50 on that drive. However, it is alarming for us how a government can pick and choose the priorities about what you actually are going to act on.

I will note that the small business grant, Mr. Speaker—we did go to committee. We did discover, as the Auditor General had confirmed, that \$210 million of that small business grant actually went to companies that didn't qualify. They were not eligible within the parameters of applying for that money. They were sometimes not even in the right sector to qualify for the funding. Some of these businesses were not in Ontario. Some of these businesses were not in Canada—\$210 million.

I still think that \$210 million is a lot of money. In Bill 111, the costing will be \$645 million. But \$210 million—I asked a question at finance committee, when the deputy minister was there. I said, "Listen, if somebody is on ODSP and they work an extra two hours over their allotment to subsidize the very poor levels of ODSP funding that those folks get, the government goes into their pocket and pulls out that extra two hours' worth of work. How can the government figure that out? How can you do that, but not figure out how to go back and get the \$210 million that you, in error, gave to these ineligible businesses?" It's

a conundrum, really, but it also speaks to the priorities of government. That's what I come back to. It is amazing how a government can figure out how to claw back \$15 from someone who is on ODSP, but they can't figure out how to go after the \$210 million they gave to businesses that didn't qualify for the money.

The contradiction, I think, is the big item for us with regard to Bill 111. Unfortunately, we didn't get a chance to actually hear from the public or go through clause-by-clause to see if we can actually address some of the inconsistencies with this legislation. And so, Bill 111, the Tax Relief at the Pumps Act, does not recognize the urgency of the affordability issue that many people are facing.

To complicate that day-to-day affordability issue is the report that we got from the Financial Accountability Officer last week, whereby Ontario has the lowest per capita spending for programs and services in the country. Not only have people—one of the first things you did was end that increase with the minimum wage, so you had a direct impact on the day-to-day lives of the people who work and live in Ontario. But slowly you were following the Liberal lead of holding the line or even reducing health care spending and education spending.

That was quite something to see, that five years of budget freezes for hospitals—which again, was a cut. It was a cut under the Liberals. The operational funding formula for our hospitals and our health care system has not kept pace with the changing demographics, aging population, new immigrants and refugees who are coming to this province. It just has not kept pace. And so you have a hospital care system that was, of course, going to be undermined, if you will, by a major health crisis, which is what we saw in Ontario.

And we do have some—the Ontario Health Coalition and the Waterloo health privatization summit—to address this trend where this government is talking about privatizing our core health issues. The Minister of Health is on the record as saying, “We can create these clinics over here and they'll alleviate the pressure on our overall health care system because they have money and they can get their services. They can pay for their services.” Well, we know that this has been proven to not actually strengthen the health care system, nor does it address the cost pressures on the overall health care system for the majority of the people in the province.

One of the first speakers that came to the Ontario Health Coalition in Waterloo was Erin Ariss, who is a registered nurse. She led the St. Mary's emergency department and has done investigations on how to improve emergency departments. So the system as a whole is, in and of itself, resilient, because they have to be. They actually have to be creative to stretch those dollars as far as they can. She goes on to say:

“Ontario's health care system is on the brink of collapse. Two years into the pandemic, continuing risk of new variants and waves, surgical backlog that needs to be addressed. Following decades of underinvestment in public health care system, now is the time we need to shore

up, and not tear down, health care. Nurses and health care workers cannot stand while the Ford government privatizes health care. ONA is calling this out—calling out the failure to address the critical shortages of nurses and health care workers in this province.” You may be interested to hear this, but “Ontario has the worst RN-to-population ratio in Canada”—and you know this, yet you've kept Bill 124 alive, which holds the wage increase to 1%.

It goes on to say that “this has been going on for years. Decades of underfunding has left” Ontario “22,000 nurses short, situation only becoming worse daily. Compared to other provinces, per capita, Ontario has the fewest RNs, the lowest health care funding, and the lowest hospital funding.”

So the narrative of the government, through Bill 111, trying to follow their own narrative, is the affordability piece. But also, when I was in North Bay last week, there is this definite connection between the health and well-being of their citizens and the economy. I raise this because in North Bay there was a survey by the North Bay police which said that people are feeling less safe in their community. If you're feeling less safe, you're less likely to go downtown, less likely to shop local, less likely to visit those restaurants and stores in the core. The mayor at the time—well, the mayor still—Mayor McDonald, had also expressed his concerns. But when I was just talking to shop owners and business owners in North Bay last week, they said, “The people who are down in the core, they need help.” And so there is this connection, this growing understanding, and I think it's coming from, probably, a greater understanding of the complex issues of addiction and mental health, but also that these people who require assistance are having an impact on the culture of the downtown area.

They go on to say: “But what I do take away from the survey is the aspect the public pointed out that they believe the ... crisis is a substantial threat to our community.” If this is happening in North Bay, it's obviously happening in other small, rural, northern towns across Ontario.

The mayor goes on to say: “I also believe it is an example of really in the broader society with the increase of homelessness within our society and it's not just North Bay but many other communities.” So he just made my point.

In the context of the promise of the Northlander, though, in the meeting with the chamber, they've had jobs ready. That connectivity piece is so key. That's when I met with a professor at Nipissing. Her name is Natalya Brown, and she focuses on sustainable tourism. Her research involves politics and the economy, and she does macro-economics. What we are finding with northern communities is that it's not just physical infrastructure like the Northlander, so that people can move from the north to the south and not always have to drive, but there is a direct connection to family, to community, that holds people in these areas. I really appreciated her perspective and the fact that this research is out there, it's just not being necessarily applied by the people who are making policy decisions, which leaves you wondering.

1620

The fact that Bill 111 does so little, so late, is obviously of concern to us, especially when our member from Timmins has brought forward a motion around addressing the high cost of gas and to end the gouging. We just heard from the member opposite that as you drive south, the cost of gas becomes more affordable, even though a vast majority of people feel that it's still very costly.

We have brought forward the Fairness in Petroleum Products Pricing Act, and it will require the Ontario Energy Board to regulate the retail price and wholesale markup of petroleum products in Ontario. Our member says, "Ontarians are paying record high prices—over \$1.50 per litre in the greater Toronto area, and over \$1.70 ... in Timmins," and this is actually now much higher, I would imagine.

The senior economist at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives says, "Gas price regulation would put a lid on gouging behaviour, stabilize prices for consumers and make the industry more transparent to all concerned. Companies should not be able to jack up prices whenever a convenient excuse to do so comes along." You know who believes this? You know who agrees with that statement? The people who do drive in Ontario. They believe that this is random. They believe as consumers, as drivers and as those who need gasoline to move from point A to point B, as most people in northern Ontario must do, that they have no protections.

Bill 111 fails to protect them as well. As the day progresses—we're going to go back to Bill 106, I think, at 5 o'clock; I'm looking forward to that clause-by-clause process. But what I will say to the government is that Bill 111 would have benefited from that process. It's very similar to when the Liberals used to bring piece after piece of legislation to the floor of the Legislature, having accelerated or bypassed the consultation process, and then we ended up with a flawed piece of legislation. I think at this stage in the game, this government, with only 23 days—or maybe 19 days—left in this schedule, in this Parliament, should know better, quite honestly.

Mr. Speaker, with that, I think I'll conclude my comments.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I want to thank the member for Waterloo for her speech. I wasn't expecting her to quit so early, but then again, I guess she has to get to committee; she did mention that.

She keeps talking about this regulation of gas prices. Apparently they don't want to see gas prices go down for their constituents, unlike myself. I know the people who drive in Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke are going to look forward to this reduction in gas prices. But I would ask the member, because she spent a lot of time on this and she keeps talking about it: Can you explain to the House and specify jurisdictions in Canada that have gone to the regulation of gas prices, that have seen the prices go down or seen prices lower than they are in Ontario? You have the history. Could you explain that to the people of Ontario?

Ms. Catherine Fife: What I will say to the member opposite—and thank you for your attention—is that the cost of everything has gone up under this government's watch. I heard all the parliamentary assistants talk about labour costs, about transportation costs, about food costs, and what I will say is that the affordability has become a major issue for families. You've claimed that Bill 111 is the solution, that \$7.50 a month is going to be a huge cost relief for people across this province. That simply is not true. I'm surprised to hear the member say that people in your riding are going to be so relieved by the \$7.50 they're going to save on gasoline.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I know that when we talk about the Tax Relief at the Pumps Act, 2022, in Wunnamin Lake, it's \$2.50 a litre; in Webequie, it's \$2.99; in North Caribou Lake, it's \$1.80; in Wapekeka, it's \$2.50; in Sandy Lake, it's \$2.50 today.

I know one of the other things as well is—I always talk about this—we have 14 long-term boil-water advisories, and I know we cannot drink gas. I know when we talk about these issues—I ask the member, how will this help the northern First Nations that are paying \$3 per litre for gas?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you very much to the member from Kiiwetinoong for that question. He always speaks with such passion and conviction around the people that he serves.

What I would say is that at those prices around gasoline, Bill 111 offers very little support. That is why we brought forward the oppo day motion which he was going to be speaking to prior to the government shutting it down, because Bill 111 has no requirement for gas companies and other retailers to lower prices after the gas tax is reduced. So to the member from Kiiwetinoong: It would have negligible impact on the residents to be able to afford gasoline. By the government's own calculations, they show that the average driver will save as little as \$45 over six months—\$45 over six months.

To you, sir, keep fighting, because this government needs to eventually listen.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member from Oakville has a question.

Mr. Stephen Crawford: I'll go back to the member as well. My colleague who graciously sits beside me asked a question about which jurisdictions in Canada can you point to that have regulated gas prices where people actually save money. I know the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies did an analysis in 2017 on gas price regulation in the Atlantic provinces and found that, actually, gas price regulation had taken an additional \$63 million out of the pockets of consumers. So which jurisdiction in Canada can you point to that has regulation where people are actually saving money?

Ms. Catherine Fife: What I would say is that government after government has turned their back on trying to take on gas companies, the oil and gas companies, and so they just keep gouging. You can't ignore the problem

away. By doing nothing, nothing actually changes. The Ontario Energy Board—and this is within your jurisdiction; you should be really focused on the province of Ontario—can and should regulate the retail price and the wholesale markup of gas so that prices are fair, stable and competitive, regardless of where you live. You have the ability to take on this issue. You have just chosen not to by bringing forward a token bill like Bill 111 to the House.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The next question.

1630

Mr. Gurratan Singh: My question to my colleague is, we've outlined a lot of the issues—you outlined; you did a fantastic job outlining a lot of the issues that folks are dealing with, from affordability and more. What do you think is the real way we can tackle this affordability crisis, we can tackle the issues that people are facing, and create more justice and equity across our province? When you rise in this House so passionately and so dedicatedly, what do you think are the actual solutions to these problems that people are facing?

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you very much for the question. It's a very good question, because tinkering around the edges, as this government has done, is not working. One of the highest cost drivers for Ontarians is housing. Has this government addressed the high cost of rent? Has it tried to control the high cost of rent? Are you building affordable social housing that's rent-geared-to-income so that people have a consistent level of housing, so that they can actually build forward? No, you have not.

This government was the last to sign the child care agreement. You know how expensive child care is in Ontario. And you didn't get a better deal; you got an extra year at the same amount of cost, which the federal government has already said they were going to do anyway.

I would advise the government to stop getting in the way of progressive ideas that will assist everyone. We need to be fighting for an inclusive economic recovery, not just selective picking and choosing of what you want to do.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Perth–Wellington has a question.

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: Speaker, I'm sure that as you leave this place, not to come back—as I look at that too, I'm going to miss the member from Waterloo. I've always enjoyed her oratory, her presence in the House, her demeanour. But I would like to also ask her a question. I'm probably not going to get to ask you another question, because I'm only going to be here for a little while, so I wonder if you could answer this question as I ask it: What other jurisdictions in this country that have regulated gas prices are there where the gas prices went down?

Ms. Catherine Fife: I just want to say, I also really like the member from Perth–Wellington —

Interjection.

Ms. Catherine Fife: —better than the other guy. But I do want to say that you have always been a gentleman in this place, and I think that that needs—

Interjections.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I will say, though, that what I would encourage from the member from Perth–Wellington—maybe you can influence your colleagues. Maybe you should have them focus on Ontario. You have the tools within your toolbox to address these high prices. You made a promise. You broke a lot of promises along the way, but you do. You're cutting it pretty close, with 23 days—or, as I say, 19 days—until the election to actually bring forward a piece of legislation like this, and so perhaps you can encourage your colleagues just to stay focused on the province of Ontario and do their work here in this province.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We do have time for a quick question and a quick response, if there's somebody on the opposition bench who has a question.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I have a question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke has a quick one.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I'd really appreciate if I could just ask the member one more time—please, I need to know. Could you point to one jurisdiction in Canada that has brought in regulated prices on gasoline where they have actually seen prices go down? Just name one for me, please, before the clock runs out. You have 20 seconds.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Back to the member from Waterloo for her final answer.

Ms. Catherine Fife: The member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke is a very colourful character here in this place. I thought you were leaving, but apparently you're staying, so I'll see you after the next election.

Mr. John Yakabuski: That's a day you're longing for, I know.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Oh, I cannot wait.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you. It's time to end the cross-aisle chatter and get back to serious debate on a serious bill.

I call for further debate.

Mr. Norman Miller: I'm pleased to have the opportunity to speak to Bill 111, to debate on the Tax Relief at the Pumps Act. Of course I'm going to be supporting this bill. One of the most common issues in my riding of Parry Sound–Muskoka is the issue of affordability: the affordability of everything from groceries to housing. This spring, for reasons outside of the control of the Ontario government, we have seen fuel costs suddenly jump. The supply restraints through COVID, I'm sure, had something to do with it, and refinery capacity. Of course, more recently the war in Ukraine is having a significant effect. It does bring up the question of why we aren't making it easier to get oil and gas in Canada to the seas, so that we can supply some oil and gas to Europe, but that's another question.

Rising fuel costs are having a significant impact on businesses and families, not only when they buy gas for their cars but also when they purchase anything else—of course, for all the transportation, whether it's groceries or products, the price of gas and diesel fuel affects that.

That's why our government has introduced Bill 111 to help provide direct relief to people and businesses at the pumps. This bill, if passed, would temporarily cut the gas tax by 5.7 cents per litre and the fuel tax by 5.3 cents per litre, and the fuel tax is applicable on diesel. I think I heard the opposition talking about \$7.50, and I can say that based on my calculations, for the amount I drive, it's way, way, way more relief than that. This change would be in place from July 1, 2022, to the end of the calendar year, and if this bill passes, it's not something that's dependent on who wins the next election. If the bill passes here in the next week or so, it comes into effect on July 1.

People and businesses across this province have had a difficult two years, and as our economy recovers, it's important we do what we need to do to protect this progress. We can do this by putting money back into the pockets of Ontarians and tackling the rising cost of living, including the rising cost of fuel. We've already started as a government to provide relief on a bunch of different fronts. Particularly, I know I received a cheque in the mail just a couple of weeks ago on the licence plate renewal fees. I'm sure there's people around the province who are receiving that because it's not only that you don't have to pay a licence renewal fee going forward but it's also retroactive to March 2020, keeping in mind the additional challenges of COVID.

Now, on top of the annual savings and the rebate that drivers will receive for renewals after March 1, 2020, drivers will save even more when they go to fill up their tank. In my riding, like in many rural northern and central Ontario ridings, cars or trucks—pickup trucks, I would say—are the primary mode of transportation for most people. In urban areas, such as the GTA, people can get around using public transit, walking or cycling, and when they do drive, they often don't have to go far to get essentials. I should say that for people living in urban areas, the government is also making huge, huge investments, particularly in subways and other transit and public transit around the GTA and around the province.

But of course, we don't have that sort of transit in Parry Sound–Muskoka. There are some very, very limited community buses. I think there's a Highway 11 corridor bus with some limited times it runs, but the great majority of people rely on a car or a truck or someone giving them a ride.

In many parts of my riding, even getting to the nearest town is difficult without a car. People have to drive long distances to access essentials. People use their cars to get back and forth to work, to go to the grocery store, to go to medical appointments, shop at businesses and visit family and friends. As an example my spouse, my wife, Christine, drives each day from Parry Sound to Bracebridge and back to work. That's 200 kilometres a day, five days a week pretty much, and that's not an uncommon situation.

Just to give an idea of the size of the riding and just how much people do drive—I mean, we formerly lived in Vankoughnet, which is in kind of the southeast corner of the riding of Parry Sound–Muskoka. When I would go and visit the Dokis First Nation, that was a three-and-a-half-

hour drive one way to get to Dokis First Nation, to give those folks in the city maybe a bit of perspective on just how big it is. If you need to go for medical appointments, of course, there are hospitals in Parry Sound and Huntsville and Bracebridge, but often you're sent out to the bigger centres—RVH in Barrie, for example. My mother had cancer treatment and was going every day from Muskoka down to RVH, or if you're on the Parry Sound side of the riding, you would probably be going up to Sudbury, or on the east Parry Sound side, you'd be heading up to North Bay. In all cases, it's at least an hour's—at highway speeds—drive, so very much reliant on automobiles. Because residents in my riding rely on cars for so much in daily life, I'm glad to say that these people would see the largest savings from Bill 111.

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Our government is also working to provide residents in my riding, and elsewhere in northeastern Ontario, alternatives to driving everywhere. Just yesterday, there was a great announcement for northeastern Ontario. It was announced an investment of \$75 million to bring rail service back to northeastern Ontario.

A few months back, I had the opportunity, along with the Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade and I believe the CEO of ONTC, Corina Moore, and a lot of the northern mayors to get on the train at North Bay. There was a bit of a blizzard that day, and we had a very enjoyable ride down to Union Station in Toronto on a test ride of that train, so it's really encouraging to see that there is going to be this significant investment to bring this service back. Not only will this connect residents from my riding to neighbouring areas and towns, but it will spur economic growth in northern Ontario by providing a safe and reliable method of transportation between Toronto and Timmins.

I wasn't able to join the Minister of Transportation and the Premier in Timmins for the announcement yesterday, but I note that the revised initial business case for the Northland train service now includes a plan for a stop in South River, and I'm very pleased with that. I had written to the minister about that and did the lobbying for that. The first version of the plan didn't have a stop between Huntsville and North Bay, so I want to thank the minister and ONTC president and CEO Corina Moore for listening to people in and around east Parry Sound at South River, because I think that's very, very significant.

Although this will provide an important alternative to driving on some routes, this reality is still a few years away, and people in Parry Sound–Muskoka are already feeling the impact of high fuel costs. That is why the gas tax rate should temporarily be cut from 14.7 cents per litre to 9 cents per litre and the fuel tax rate, including on diesel, should be reduced from 14.3 cents per litre to 9 cents per litre to make essential transport for people in my riding more affordable.

Our government is making life more affordable in other ways. I should also mention, of course, when the government was newly elected in 2018, one of the first things they did was keep an election promise and remove the 4.3-

cent carbon tax from the price of fuel. Now, of course, as we know the federal government just increased the carbon tax, so it's too bad they're not doing their part to make life more affordable for Ontario residents as well.

Some of the other initiatives—there is a wide range of initiatives that the government has taken to try to affect the costs that people are facing in their lives, for example, the Ontario child care access and relief tax credit. The CARE tax credit allows for families to claim their child care expenses to put money back in their pockets while allowing them to use the child care options that work best for them. This, in many cases, can be used for licensed child care, it can be used for camps, it can be used for the neighbour down the road that does child care. It's very flexible, and I think that in a riding like mine where you live in a rural area and there's probably not a child care centre near you unless you live in one of the towns, it's just flexibility for those people that aren't near an urban area, or perhaps they work the night shift and they just don't have child care available when they want.

This is significant. It's up to \$6,000 per child, and there is a top-up this year of an additional \$1,200 for children under seven years old; \$3,750 for seven-to-16-year-olds, and again, a top-up this year of plus \$750; and for a child with severe a disability, it's \$8,250 and again with an additional top-up this year of \$1,650—so very, very significant.

There is the Ontario Jobs Training Tax Credit that helps workers who are retraining for jobs of the future or are taking courses or exams to help them reach the next level of their careers. This is very significant as just about any business that I visit in Parry Sound–Muskoka is looking for people. So if people are trying to move up the income scale, doing some job training to get a more skilled job is going to result in them earning more money, and the government is making it more affordable for them to do that with up to \$2,000 per year for 50% of eligible expenses. That's quite significant.

For seniors, the Seniors' Home Safety Tax Credit helps Ontario seniors stay in their homes by providing a refund on renovations to make their homes safer or more accessible—again, very significant. It's one of many initiatives, but that's for if you do \$10,000 in renovations to your home. Perhaps you put a ramp in; perhaps you make your bathrooms more accessible, or other things to make it more efficient. You can save 25% of the cost of up to \$10,000 in work, so a \$2,500 saving.

That's important when we look at health care. I mean, in my area, at Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare, I think 40% of the beds right now are alternate-level-of-care beds. Anything we can do—and that includes increasing home care and building long-term-care beds—to help people to be able to stay in their home helps alleviate that challenge of the ALC beds. Another program that the government is running is the community paramedicine program, which is, I think, a great program to help provide support for seniors who want to be able to stay in their home—of course, I think all of us want to stay in our home—and it also helps with the hospitals that have too many people who really should not be there.

The low-income individuals and families tax credit, or LIFT tax credit, provides relief on income tax to low-income workers and families. Again, this is quite significant: It's \$850. If you're an individual working on minimum wage and you make \$30,000—first of all, in Ontario, you pay no tax on that, which is, I think, different than most provinces, and as well, you receive an \$850 tax credit. So it's quite significant.

The Ontario Energy and Property Tax Credit provides relief on energy and housing costs. That's \$1,121 if you're between 18 and 64 years of age, or \$1,277 if you're over 65.

The Northern Ontario Energy Credit helps people in northern Ontario, including those in Parry Sound district, with the higher costs of energy that come from living in the north. Generally speaking, it's colder in the north, so this helps, in addition to these other measures—for a single person, \$160; for a family, \$249.

And, of course, the government has recently signed the \$13.2-billion agreement with the federal government to fund an early learning and child care system to make child care more affordable for all families. Ontario families with children five years and younger in participating licensed child care centres will save up to 25% on their child care costs to a minimum of \$12 per day, retroactive to April 1, 2022. By September 2025, this agreement would deliver an average of \$10-a-day child care to Ontario families. This will make a big difference for working parents across the province.

You know, when people think of Parry Sound–Muskoka, they often think of the expensive waterfront cottages of the wealthy. Many people don't realize that the riding also has one of the lowest average incomes among year-round residents—much below the provincial average. So when costs rise, residents in my riding feel the impact of it deeply. That is why our government is taking measures to help ease the pressure of inflation on people's lives.

Through this legislation and through the cancellation of cap-and-trade, we've taken steps to reduce gas and fuel prices. That is also why we are calling on the federal government to do their part by cutting the carbon tax, which went up on April 1 of this year. This increase is happening at a time when gas prices are skyrocketing, so we are asking the federal government to join us in providing much-needed relief to Ontario families and businesses.

1650

As I've mentioned, this legislation will have a direct impact on the wallets of people who live in my riding, but it will also have a wider impact on our economy. This cut to the gas tax comes just in time for the summer camping and vacation season. With travel restrictions in place for most of the last two years to protect public health, the tourism and hospitality sector in my riding has been struggling. This sector drives my local economy, providing seasonal and permanent jobs and supporting small businesses in the area. I'm happy to say that when this legislation comes into effect, people from southern

Ontario will be able to save money while driving around our beautiful province, including to visit tourist attractions in Parry Sound–Muskoka.

On top of these savings on gas, visitors to Parry Sound–Muskoka and from elsewhere in the province can use the staycation tax credit to claim accommodation expenses. The staycation tax credit allows Ontario residents to claim up to 20% of their eligible 2022 accommodations expenses on their 2022 income tax. Individuals can claim up to \$1,000 in expenses, and families can claim up to \$2,000 in eligible expenses, meaning you save \$200 and \$400 respectively.

Eligible expenses include accommodation expenses for leisure travel of up to a month at places like hotels, motels, campgrounds, cottages, resorts, lodges and bed and breakfasts. This is money that can instead be used to eat at local restaurants and experience local attractions. This is a great opportunity for Ontarians to experience a new local destination and support our province’s economic recovery at the same time.

I encourage people to take advantage of the staycation tax credit and gas and fuel tax cuts to visit places like Santa’s Village in Bracebridge. That’s a great place for young kids right along the Muskoka River. We’re making it an annual tradition to take our four grandkids there. Oma and Granddad have a fun time with them for the day, and they’ve had a tough couple of years as well. I would highly recommend visiting Santa’s Village with a young family. This Christmas-themed amusement park provides a little bit of holiday cheer in the summer, with attractions for the whole family.

Or you can explore the waters of Georgian Bay on cruises like those of the 30,000 Island Cruise Line in Parry Sound, which is a fantastic cruise: a three-hour cruise going out right to the edge of Georgian Bay and through the islands, through Hole in the Wall. I highly recommend it.

Or if you prefer something more adventuresome, take a flight on Georgian Bay Airways in one of their float planes right on our waterfront in downtown Parry Sound. They’ve got lots of various tours. You can fly out to Henry’s fish restaurant on the edge of Georgian Bay, have some pickerel, perch or whatever your choice is and see the beauty of the 30,000 Islands at the same time.

Or you can learn about the history of the area by visiting Muskoka Heritage Place in Huntsville, which includes a pioneer village and an iconic steam train, or by visiting the Muskoka Steamships and Discovery Centre in Gravenhurst and going for a cruise in the Segwun. That discovery centre, they’re in the midst of a \$70-million expansion right now. They just had a Science North exhibit on this past weekend. They have the oldest operating steamship in North America, the Segwun, that runs out of there. If you’ve never been on it, I would highly recommend it. It’s quite a treat going on that boat.

There are so many other activities, and I can see I’m out of time. But if you like fishing, there are great opportunities. I think the Speaker likes fishing around Parry Sound–Muskoka. Cycling: There are lots of paved shoulders

being built. Golf: We have golf courses galore, from middle-of-the-road to championship courses; unique activities like the Back of Beyond Equine Centre, Festival of the Sound in Parry Sound and many other festivals around the riding.

Mr. Speaker, I can see I’m out of time, so I won’t be able to promote any more activities in Parry Sound–Muskoka.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I listened quite intently to the member from Parry Sound–Muskoka sharing in this debate. I cannot believe that I’ve heard over and over again this afternoon that there is relief and rebates. Licence plate renewal fees: “We’re going to rebate the residents of Ontario.” And then: “We’re going to rebate the drivers to fill up their tanks, their huge pickup tanks.” In my community, it’s only a privilege to be owning a car. It’s a privilege to own a large pickup truck, because the young people can’t afford to even live in St. Catharines.

Speaker, why does this government keep giving rebates and relief to rich people and making them more fortunate than the residents who live on ODSP? Will this government, or the member across, explain to me what they’re going to do to help that individual in St. Catharines on ODSP during—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you very much for the question. We go back to the member from Parry Sound–Muskoka to reply.

Mr. Norman Miller: I think it’s always a good thing when you’re giving people their own money back to them, especially for all those working people who rely on an automobile to get to work.

Of course, as I mentioned in my speech, for urban areas, the government is investing billions and billions of dollars into subway and other rapid transit so that people can have an inexpensive way of getting to work. In terms of housing, I think the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing should be congratulated. I know in my riding there is more purpose-built rental housing being built than has ever happened in the history of the province: 236 units in Gravenhurst alone that are being built, as we speak, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question?

Mr. Lorne Coe: First of all, I want to congratulate the member from Parry Sound–Muskoka for his length of service here in the Legislature, but then again ask him to speak about the aspects of this legislation that cut costs and keep life more affordable here, not only in his riding but in other parts of Ontario?

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you to the member. Thank you for that kind comment. Twenty-one years have gone quickly and it’s been a privilege to represent the people of Parry Sound–Muskoka. So thank you for that.

As I mentioned in my comments, the government has many, many different ways—and I haven’t illustrated all of them—that we are actively working to try to reduce

costs for the average person who is trying to pay their bills at this challenging time. We've just been through two years of COVID where, if you're a small business-person—just about anybody has been adversely affected.

I think the economy is really starting to rebound. We saw some excellent job numbers recently. I think the biggest challenge going forward is going to be finding enough people to fill all those jobs and upskilling them so that they can fill the jobs, make a great income and be able to afford a great life here in Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for London North Centre has a question.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to thank the member from Parry Sound–Muskoka for his presentation. We must be getting close to an election, Speaker, because you can see this Conservative government, like the Liberals before them, are spending like drunken sailors. We see that with the licence plate stickers. There's \$1 billion. Money flushed down the toilet by not pursuing the \$1 billion that the international owners of the 407 collected—flush that down the toilet. This is money that could be spent on health care, could be spent on education, could be spent on long-term care. It could be spent on strengthening home care.

Unfortunately, this government is bringing forward a temporary gesture, a band-aid solution. Worse yet is that it's happening after the election. We're all familiar with the Liberals and how they would make promises and then, when they didn't feel like fulfilling them, would call them "stretch goals" later on in the game.

Why is this government not focusing on lasting solutions? Why is this government not focusing on more important ways in which to make the cost of living better for folks? Why are they not doing the heavy lifting by taking on oil and gas companies, once and for all?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): There's a lot of questions there, but the member from Parry Sound–Muskoka will give it his best shot, I know.

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you to the member for that question. Again, I'm not going to apologize for giving money back to people that they've earned in the first place, especially in these challenging times. I should point out that this legislation, if it passes, which it likely will in the next week or two, is going to be put in place, no matter who forms the next government. Of course, I'm hoping that it will be a Progressive Conservative majority government, as the House leader likes to say.

The member mentioned health care and long-term care. I would also point out that I'm seeing the largest increases in spending in long-term care that I've seen in the 21 years—I think over \$6 million, \$7 million this year. In hospitals, the government finally addressed medium-sized hospital funding. For the first time in 21 years, Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare has a surplus and is projecting balanced budgets for the next five years, so they can concentrate on looking after people and not whether they're going to make payroll.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke has a question.

1700

Mr. John Yakabuski: I did want to ask the member to expand a little bit more on the comments from the member for London North Centre, who seems to be opposed to us giving relief to his constituents. Those drivers in London North Centre are saying thank you very much to the Ford government for removing the cost of licence plate stickers, but he doesn't seem to think that. He's talking about some fictitious money that actually doesn't exist.

Well, I ask the member for Parry Sound–Muskoka: Could you expand on some of the measures that this government is taking to actually reduce the cost of living, make life more affordable and put more money back into people's pockets?

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you very much to the member from Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke for that question. I don't want to redo my speech, but I did illustrate a number of different initiatives that the government is taking, a whole bunch of different tax credits.

I would say to the member from London North Centre that if he doesn't want to use his licence renewal tag, I believe the chiefs of police are saying that if you really don't want it, you can give it to an effort to provide funds for Ukraine. I would suggest that would be a reasonable thing to do with your licence renewal fee if you don't want to use it yourself.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Next question?

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: It's always a pleasure to be able to rise twice for the residents of St. Catharines.

I'm going to go back to the member across the way from Parry Sound–Muskoka and ask him the question again. We have people who live on the Ontario disability program in St. Catharines. They can't afford a car. They can barely afford public transit with this government's constant cuts and not giving them anything back. They're not going to see any of these rebates—licence plate renewal rebates or gas pump rebates.

I'm asking this government, the Ford government: What are you going to do for the people on Ontario disability in St. Catharines to give them money back?

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you to the member for St. Catharines for that question. I note that in COVID times, the government has taken a number of initiatives to help those who are most vulnerable in society, particularly the social services relief fund. I believe that was greatly increased throughout COVID times to provide shelter spaces and additional costs for people who are at risk of being homeless. I know in my riding, the district social services administration board was very appreciative of that. We had Minister Clark, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, up to the riding. He met with them midway through COVID to find out what other needs there are.

I know we're making record investments in mental health. Minister Tibollo also visited the riding and met with about 30 people involved with mental health to see how we can better address the needs of people with mental

health issues. I'm pleased to see all these initiatives going forward.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for Scarborough–Agincourt has time for a quick question.

Mr. Aris Babikian: My question is related to the price at the pumps. The prices at the pumps change frequently and are influenced by factors beyond government taxes, particularly the global price of oil. How much will cutting the gas tax impact the price that drivers pay at the pump?

Mr. Norman Miller: It's a five-cent-per-litre reduction in the cost of fuel from July 1 to December 31. I think with the inflation we've seen recently, that is going to make a significant difference for drivers and families around the province.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Further debate?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch. Good afternoon. *Remarks in Oji-Cree.* It's always an honour to rise and speak on behalf of the people of Kiiwetinoong.

The member from Parry Sound–Muskoka spoke about the size of his riding. He had about 19,275 square kilometres. Kiiwetinoong is 294,083 square kilometres. Mr. Speaker, that's about 27% of the Ontario land mass. We are rich over there—rich in resources, rich in waters, rich in the people, rich in the way of life of who we are as Indigenous peoples, as Anishinaabe. But we have, again, 14 boil-water advisories in those communities.

I mentioned earlier some of the costs, the price of gas per litre in some of the First Nations. Webequie First Nation: \$2.99. Who else would accept that? Who else in your riding would accept \$2.99? Wunnumin Lake: \$2.50 per litre. Who else in a riding in Ontario would accept \$2.50? In Round Lake, also known as North Caribou Lake, it's \$1.80 per litre. Another First Nation—two First Nations, actually: Wapekeka First Nation, Sandy Lake First Nation: \$2.50. That's normal.

One of the things I've known is that when you continue to live under those conditions, under those prices, you learn to accept that it's just the way things are—normal and acceptable. I don't know how that five cents will help with these First Nations because these First Nations do not have access to roads. We don't have access to provincial highways. But we have access to these gravel air strips known as airports, highways in the sky. And the price of plane fare to get to Sioux Lookout is \$500, one way; \$1,000, return. How will this bill, the Fuel Tax Act, the Gasoline Tax Act, help these people?

I was talking to this guy this morning and he was telling me about the price of a four-litre bag of milk: \$15. What is the cost?

Mr. Speaker, I've been here almost four years, and one of the things I find about this place is that it's nothing but just partisan politics. I see it happen back and forth. It's a place where we use "victory" when we put somebody down. It's an institution that ignores the minority. I see it. I live it when we talk about access to clean drinking water. Is it democracy when we do that? Is it democracy when this institution continues, again, to ignore the minority?

One of the things I've learned as well, Speaker: This place is where the party is greater than the people. I say that because sometimes we talk about—no matter what, I know when they say "our government," it is my government too. But they don't respond to the requests that people want.

I know that in Kiiwetinoong—not just in Kiiwetinoong, but all over the province, the cost of living has significantly risen, all over. The cost of living is high. We know that hard-working families in Ontario are struggling with everything. There's minimal relief, and the government's temporary gas tax will not begin until June. What is that going to help when you're paying \$3 a litre for a litre of gas?

1710

In our communities, we measure gas in jerry cans, 22 litres, 23 litres, five gallons. In order to go on a boat ride with a jerry can, that's \$69 to do that. Families in Ontario, families in Kiiwetinoong need relief now.

I know that under this government's plan individuals will only receive \$8 a month for six months. Maybe that's a loaf of bread. I don't know. But that price, that's a loaf of bread. We know that \$48 is not going to provide meaningful relief, not even a full jerry can for those six months. We need gas to be able to hunt the waters, the lakes and the forests: a way of life for Indigenous people, for Anishinaabe, for First Nations people becomes expensive, and that's how colonialism works; that's how oppression works, because it limits us to get on the land. It limits us to access our territories. It limits us as to our way of life, which is being on the land.

Again, I think it's fair to say that no one is feeling the rising cost of living more than those who are in the north. Again, when you continue to pay those prices, it becomes normal and acceptable. It's good to be Anishinaabe sometimes. It's good to be First Nations sometimes. It's good to be Indigenous sometimes in Ontario. I say "sometimes" because when I go to buy gas on a reserve, I put in my status card and I get 14.5 cents off that gas. That's what I mean by sometimes it's okay; sometimes it's good. It's a good day—sometimes it's good to be First Nations; not always.

I know that when talking to community members across Kiiwetinoong, they need immediate support. People have their own snow machines, four-wheelers. They have their trucks. They have their boats and motors. We do not have access to mass transit options. Everybody talks about provincial highways. A provincial highway is a luxury. The subway is an extra luxury. Trains are an extra luxury. Buses are an extra luxury—not in Kiiwetinoong.

I spoke about the airports as lifelines for people to access economic development, to access foods, food security. Airports are lifelines for health, to access medical care, because we have no hospitals.

Airports are lifelines because that's how our children get an education. At 13 years old, they have to leave for school, to attend high school in an urban setting, because there are no high schools in most of the communities. That's what I mean by lifelines.

What I'm getting at, simply put, is that the cost of living in far northern Ontario is higher than in the rest of the province. We know that. We know that because we live it. We need relief that is equal to this cost.

I was talking about gas. It's not just the gas that northerners need to worry about; the food in Kiiwetinoong is also very expensive. I don't know how many of you members here who are listening—I don't know if you're paying \$15 for a bag of milk, four litres. That's how much we pay, sometimes closer to \$20. It's something that you might want to think about. The groceries here in Toronto get marked up. The cost might be two or three times more in the north.

Sometimes, we talk about this relief, tax relief this government does to Ontarians. This government always—there's always an opportunity to give people clean drinking water, but that doesn't happen because jurisdiction is used as an excuse to be complacent, to say no to the people of Kiiwetinoong.

I know that there was some relief. I got some calls about the plate stickers, people getting cheques. I don't know how much that costs to refund that. I would imagine it's over a billion dollars. If this government fixed 14 long-term boil-water advisories at \$50 million each, that would be so—I don't know, is it that easy? I don't know.

Why? Why is the question, I guess. Why? Why do you do that to Indigenous people? Why do you treat First Nations people like that? I don't know; maybe because we're on reserve, because of that colonial, oppressive, racist policy called the Indian Act. That's the only thing I can think of, because whenever I ask about the cost of fuel, access to water—I know this much: We cannot drink gas. I know that. We cannot eat gas.

1720

About a month ago, sticking to water—I know some people rely on canned and preserved fruit instead of fresh food in the north. The cost of living has made it worse—the fact that many First Nations in Kiiwetinoong are relying to buy bottled water because for decades, governments have failed to deliver on the promise of clean drinking water.

There was this post that I saw from Sachigo Lake First Nation about a month ago. There was this receipt that was provided by this lady. She bought 30 cases of bottled water, 500 millilitres in each, and there are 24 in each case. She paid \$34.99 for each case, and she bought 30 cases. She paid \$1,049.70 to get those 30 cases.

This is Ontario. This is the other Ontario. There is no way you would allow for that to happen in your riding. That's the continuation of being complacent, the cost of doing nothing. It's the kids that suffer at the end of the day. It's the health and the wellness of those elders. People pay in full with their health and with their lives when we continue to treat people like that.

Speaker, in Kiiwetinoong, the government's plan is not real relief. The government talks about delivering promises on concrete actions. I hear "economic revival." I hear "economic recovery due to COVID." I hear that type of

talk. How can we recover if we do not have the basic human right of access to clean drinking water?

What I'm saying is, the other Ontario, northern Ontario and northerners need real, direct and immediate support. We need to be able to take the burdens off families in Kiiwetinoong and the rest of the north who are trying their very best to stay afloat. I'll say this: We are tired of this government's empty promises and vows to do better. We need action, not words.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for questions.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I want to thank the member for Kiiwetinoong for his address to the chamber today. I think we've talked about this once before: I have a daughter who lives in the Northwest Territories. I also have a brother who lives in the Northwest Territories. He's married to a Dene woman. And of course, the price of things—not to the same extent as it is in the Far North, but it is more expensive there as well. So food is more expensive in Fort Smith where my daughter lives with her four children and her husband, but the reality is that everything, including the price of gasoline, affects those food prices—there's no question about it. And gas is an input cost for everything we do, either diesel fuel or gasoline. Would it not be fair to say to the member that a reduction in the price in the tax on gasoline will at least have some positive effect on those other costs for—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): You ran out of time to conclude your question, but I'm sure the member can respond.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch for the question. If a community is paying \$3 per litre for gas and they end up paying \$2.95, maybe that's an extra loaf of bread. I don't know—half a loaf maybe. It's this much—that's the relief.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The member for St. Catharines.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: To my colleague from Kiiwetinoong, thank you very much for your words this afternoon—it's almost evening. Anyway, a quick question: The government side had commented that they were excited because they got their \$260 rebate for their licence plate sticker. I heard that we could donate our \$260 to the Red Cross, which is a really good program as well.

But what would the residents of your riding do if everyone who had the privilege to be able to drive an automobile got the \$260—because it is a privilege to drive an automobile—and rebate it to your community, what would that buy? What human necessity would that buy for your people in your riding?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: My wish is always at least one community to have clean drinking water—at least one out of the 14. Maybe it would bring that, and I think that's what I would like to see. We cannot continue to use jurisdiction as an excuse to be complacent. We cannot use jurisdiction as an excuse not to provide water to members that have been in—there's one community that has had over 27 years of long-term boil-water advisories. That would be a dream; that would be my wish.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The Attorney General has a question.

Hon. Doug Downey: I was very pleased in the last answer to my colleague that there's an acknowledgment that it is in fact relief, and now that we've set the principle, we're discussing the amount of the relief.

My question to the member is whether he will continue to follow our lead and provide even more relief, or whether the NDP government would claw it back and go the other direction?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch for the question. I know sometimes they're set-up questions. They're really good at that. I see it. Sometimes when you guys talk to me, when you guys say things, I just want to join you guys. I want to become a Conservative. And then I wake up.

But I think it's important that sometimes we have to take the lead from First Nations as well. I know the approach that we have here, it's a colonial system, it's an oppressive system and it's a top-down approach, not a bottom-up approach where Indigenous people should have the right to say that we want this.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have time for an opposition question.

Ms. Doly Begum: I want to thank the member from Kiiwetinoong for his statement. He spoke so beautifully for his community. You were just talking a little bit about some of the things in terms of First Nations leadership. I would ask if you could elaborate a little bit on what they would ask for that we in this House as representatives can take on. I know you mentioned water is one of them and housing is one of them. Just elaborate a little bit more on that.

1730

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: I know that there's certainly a number of issues. I think it's important that—again, I'll talk about water, that infrastructure. When we talk about airports, actually, the province of Ontario runs the airports, funds the airports. Those are lifelines. Even if they paved those airports or extended them maybe another 500 feet, that would make such a big difference for these First Nations. You know, I think that's one piece.

Housing is another piece, and youth mental health. I don't know how many times I've been to a funeral where—you go to a funeral for children that were 11 or 12 years old. I think it's important to be able to—those are some of the stuff that we need to be able to address.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): The government House leader has a question.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I have been listening intently to the member opposite, Speaker, and I wonder if the member—he talks about the fact that the gas tax isn't

enough, that it should be more. Now, we previously cut taxes on aviation fuel, but that's a different story. He says that the validation stickers, the fees that we cut, are not enough.

How does the member opposite square with me—when he talks about how important fuel costs are to the people in his community—and I completely agree with him. How does he square the circle that he sits in a party and he votes in favour of actions like a carbon tax, which has continued to increase and which his party has suggested should increase to \$200? How does that play in the north, in the communities that he represents here today, when he is suggesting that the relief that we're putting forward isn't enough, yet he would vote in favour of a massive increase in carbon taxes, which we have seen has cost the people of all of the province, including in his community, extraordinary amounts of money? Please, could he explain to me how he supports that tax and somehow a reduction is not enough?

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Meegwetch for the question. A couple of nights ago, I had this dream: The member from across is talking to me. The member from across is talking to me about how he can help me address this issue. I don't know what it was, but for some reason, a couple of nights ago, that's what I dreamt of.

But I think it's so important. Again, the question is very direct, yes. I know that—again, a loaf of bread for one family is just not enough. I mean, it's election time. I know that. I see it happening: things being rolled out. That's important. I think I said before, this place is nothing but partisan politics. I see some of the questions that come at me, and that's exactly what it is.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): We have to save time for one final question.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: It's always a pleasure to be able to ask my colleague a question. Like I said, I've listened very, very respectfully to his comments this afternoon for Bill 111, and my question is going to go back to my colleague: What can this government do that they haven't done for your community?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Well, you have 15 seconds to respond.

Mr. Sol Mamakwa: Neskantaga has been under a boil-water advisory since February 1, 1995. That's 27-plus years. If they can just access—give them clean drinking water. I would be so happy. Meegwetch.

Report continues in volume B.

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Mantha, Michael (NDP)	Algoma—Manitoulin	
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Miller, Paul (IND)	Hamilton East—Stoney Creek / Hamilton-Est—Stoney Creek	
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Smith, Hon. / L'hon. Todd (PC)	Bay of Quinte / Baie de Quinte	Minister of Energy / Ministre de l'Énergie
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Yakabuski, John (PC)	Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke	
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permanent des affaires gouvernementales**

Chair / Président: Logan Kanapathi
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Mike Schreiner
Jill Andrew, Robert Bailey
Will Bouma, Guy Bourgouin
Chris Glover, Mike Harris
Logan Kanapathi, Sheref Sabawy
Amarjot Sandhu, Mike Schreiner
Daisy Wai
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

**Standing Committee on Government Agencies / Comité
permanent des organismes gouvernementaux**

Chair / Président: Gilles Bisson
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Aris Babikian
Deepak Anand, Aris Babikian
Gilles Bisson, Lorne Coe
Wayne Gates, Robin Martin
Norman Miller, Billy Pang
Amanda Simard, Marit Stiles
John Yakabuski
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tanzima Khan

**Standing Committee on Justice Policy / Comité permanent de
la justice**

Chair / Président: Daryl Kramp
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Lucille Collard
Lucille Collard, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Natalia Kusendova
Jim McDonell, Suze Morrison
Randy Pettapiece, Gurratan Singh
Donna Skelly, Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Kevin Yarde
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Thushitha Kobikrishna

**Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly / Comité
permanent de l'Assemblée législative**

Chair / Présidente: Laurie Scott
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: France Gélinas
Rima Berns-McGown, France Gélinas
Goldie Ghamari, Mike Harris
Faisal Hassan, Jim McDonell
Sam Oosterhoff, Laurie Scott
Vijay Thanigasalam
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tanzima Khan

**Standing Committee on Public Accounts / Comité permanent
des comptes publics**

Chair / Président: Taras Natyshak
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Christine Hogarth
Deepak Anand, Toby Barrett
Jessica Bell, Stephen Blais
Stephen Crawford, Rudy Cuzzetto
Christine Hogarth, Michael Mantha
Taras Natyshak, Michael Parsa
Amarjot Sandhu
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell

**Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills / Comité
permanent des règlements et des projets de loi d'intérêt privé**

Chair / Président: Aris Babikian
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: John Fraser
Aris Babikian, Lorne Coe
John Fraser, Vincent Ke
Laura Mae Lindo, Paul Miller
Billy Pang, Jeremy Roberts
Dave Smith, Daisy Wai
Jamie West
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

**Standing Committee on Social Policy / Comité permanent de
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Chair / Présidente: Natalia Kusendova
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Bhutila Karpoche
Aris Babikian, Jeff Burch
Amy Fee, Michael Gravelle
Joel Harden, Mike Harris
Bhutila Karpoche, Natalia Kusendova
Robin Martin, Jim McDonell
Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Vanessa Kattar

**Select Committee on Emergency Management Oversight /
Comité spécial de la surveillance de la gestion des situations
d'urgence**

Chair / Président: Daryl Kramp
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Tom Rakocevic
Robert Bailey, Gilles Bisson
John Fraser, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Robin Martin
Sam Oosterhoff, Tom Rakocevic
Sara Singh, Donna Skelly
Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell