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Lundi
26 février 2024

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

Monday 26 February 2024

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

Lundi 26 février 2024

The House met at 1015.

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

Prayers.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I want to acknowledge that we are meeting on lands traditionally inhabited by Indigenous peoples. We pay our respects to the many Indigenous nations who've gathered here and continue to gather here, including the Mississaugas of the Credit. Meegwetch.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

CORDELIA CLARKE JULIEN

Mr. Lorne Coe: I'm pleased to speak about Cordelia Clarke Julien, esteemed chair of the board of trustees for Lakeridge Health, who's been recognized as one of the 100 Accomplished Black Canadian Women. Cordelia's recognition showcases her excellence in leadership, not only as our board chair, but also in her commitment to inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility and anti-racism efforts within Lakeridge Health. Speaker, Cordelia's journey is not just an individual triumph, it reflects the collective support and mentorship she received along the way.

Cynthia Davis, Lakeridge Health president and chief executive officer, rightly describes this achievement as a tremendous accomplishment and a wonderful moment for Lakeridge Health. Cordelia's dedication has played a pivotal role in helping Lakeridge Health achieve its vision of "One System, Best Health."

As we look forward to the 2024 edition of the biennial book, which features all of the 100 honorees, let me quote Cordelia: "My advice to Black women would be to never diminish the light within you, as that is what makes you great. So when someone tells you that 'You are too much,' just know that your light is shining bright, and they just need to get a pair of sunglasses."

COLDEST NIGHT OF THE YEAR

Mr. Wayne Gates: This past Saturday, I attended the Coldest Night of the Year in my community of Niagara Falls. The Coldest Night of the Year is a fundraiser for Project Share, an organization that does incredible work in our community supporting food security, housing help and healthy living. On Saturday, they raised \$65,000.

But their job is getting harder and harder. We know we have a cost-of-living crisis across the province of Ontario. In Niagara, 20%, or one in five households, are food insecure. Over 75,000 individuals in Niagara experience food insecurity.

When it comes to housing, a person earning minimum wage in the province of Ontario needs to work 81 hours to afford a two-bedroom rental.

We have several encampments throughout the region of Niagara of individuals experiencing homelessness. In this last fiscal year, Project Share served one in eight residents in Niagara Falls.

1020

As a province, we must do more to tackle the affordability crisis. We must get government back in the business of building affordable housing and bring back rent controls, which this government took out. We must increase social assistance, end the practice of deeming and fund social services agencies appropriately. Finally, we must have the courage to take on corporate price gouging wherever we see it. By taking action, we can make life more affordable for the residents of Ontario.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Mr. Speaker, on Friday, March 8, I will be hosting my annual Carleton women's day breakfast once again in Richmond.

International Women's Day is a global celebration of the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. Each year, this day serves as a powerful reminder of the progress made toward gender equality. It also serves to remind us of the work that still needs to be done.

The theme for this year's International Women's Day is "Inspire Inclusion." The campaign theme underscores the crucial role of inclusion in achieving gender equality. It calls for action to break down barriers, to challenge stereotypes and to create environments where all women are valued and respected. "Inspire Inclusion" encourages everyone to recognize the unique perspectives and contributions of women from all walks of life, including those from marginalized communities.

I cannot forget to give a shout-out to the Iranian women and the Iranian men supporting them who won the 2022 Heroes of the Year award from Time magazine. Standing up for women's rights around the world has never been as important as it is today. That's why events on International Women's Day are so important. I truly hope all members

get a chance to host or participate in an International Women's Day event in their riding.

In closing, I will share these poignant words delivered by Gloria Steinem: "The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist, nor to any one organization, but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights."

As we say in Iran, "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi"—"Woman, Life, Freedom."

HEALTH CARE WORKERS

Mr. Jeff Burch: Workers scored a major victory when this government was forced to repeal Bill 124, which suppressed public sector workers' wages, after the courts ruled that it violated charter rights. The court stated, "Because of the act, organized public sector workers, many of whom are women, racialized" and "low-income earners, have lost the ability to negotiate for better compensation or even better work conditions that do not have a monetary value."

Speaker, now, with our public health care in crisis, Ontarians must live with the consequences of Bill 124. In Niagara, we've lost after-hour emergency surgical services at the Welland hospital and reduced hours at the Port Colborne and Fort Erie urgent care centres. We have a shortage of beds, long wait times, frequent 911 crises in EMS, unacceptable off-loading delays and health care workers fleeing the sector.

I've been meeting with front-line health care workers, including PSWs, and was shocked when some of them told me they were still for fighting their \$3-an-hour pandemic pay and pay equity—this despite huge pay increases for managers in the public sector.

After wasting an untold amount of public dollars fighting front-line workers in court, it's time to start fixing the disaster Bill 124 created by ensuring health care workers are treated with dignity and receive fair, competitive compensation for their work.

ZEDA ALI

TAJON BUCHANAN

Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal: I'm honoured to rise today to talk about a few amazing, outstanding individuals from my community of Brampton East and Brampton in general. Speaker, I'm honoured to represent a community that's full of so much diverse talent. Time and time again, Bramptonians showcase remarkable contributions in arts, culture and sport.

Today I would like to recognize the outstanding achievement of two great Bramptonians, Zeda Ali and Tajon Buchanan. Zeda Ali is a dedicated music teacher at Sunny View Middle School in Brampton East and will be heading to the Juno Awards on March 29, as she has been nominated for the MusiCounts Teacher of the Year Award. I'd like to extend my heartfelt congratulations and best

wishes to Zeda for her outstanding achievement and well-deserved recognition.

Speaker, I would also like to recognize 24-year-old Tajon Buchanan. Tajon recently made history by becoming the first Canadian player signing with Serie A club Inter Milan in January. Tajon's journey from starting soccer at the age of eight in Brampton to the international stage serves as a great example of talent and success.

Zeda and Tajon are a great example of individuals who contribute their talents to make Brampton a hub of creativity, diversity and excellence.

Bramptonians continue to shine and impact the world, leaving a legacy of achievement and inspiration for generations to come.

Once again, congratulations, Zeda and Tajon, on this well-deserved achievement. Good luck in all of your future endeavours.

DOCTOR SHORTAGE

Ms. Jessica Bell: We recently hosted a town hall in our riding, in the Chinatown area, and the top issue that came up was that people are losing their family doctors. If you are 75 years old and you don't have a family doctor, then your health could be at risk. We decided to investigate the problem. We did a review of the number of doctors in downtown Toronto who could provide service in Cantonese or Mandarin, on the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario website, and we discovered a very concerning fact: Of the 24 doctors operating in downtown Toronto, 80% of them have been practising for 43 years or more, which means that they are about to retire. And that is what we are hearing in our community. Five doctors have just retired, and there are two more who are about to retire. That means there are thousands of residents in Chinatown who have just lost their family doctor.

This is not an issue that is unique to Chinatown. We know that 2.2 million Ontarians do not have access to a family doctor, and that number is expected to double in just two years.

Our health care system depends on people having a primary care provider, or a family doctor. Residents should not have to go to the emergency room at Toronto Western just to get a prescription for antibiotics because there is nowhere else for them to go.

This is the message from Chinatown to Queen's Park: Fix the family doctor shortage in Chinatown and across Ontario by investing in primary care.

BOB HAYWARD

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: I rise today to share the story of Bob Hayward, an Oxford local and Canadian motorsports legend. Over 60 years ago, Bob and his boat, Miss Supertest III, had a winning streak that is unmatched to this day.

Bob was born and raised on his family's chicken farm in Embro, becoming interested in drag racing as a teenager. His knowledge of racing engines led him to join the

all-Canadian Supertest speedboat team in 1957, as their mechanic. They were determined to end the 39-year American domination of the Harmsworth Cup, an international speedboat competition. To do so, they needed the fastest speedboat around, so they built Miss Supertest III. They also needed the best driver, so Bob was promoted to pilot. Together, they won the Harmsworth Cup in 1959 and successfully defended the trophy for 1960 and 1961.

Unfortunately, Bob's life was tragically cut short. While he was piloting the older Miss Supertest II in a race, it flipped at over 155 miles per hour. He was 33 years old.

Bob and Miss Supertest have not been forgotten. He was inducted into the Canadian Motorsport Hall of Fame, and Canada Post issued a stamp honouring Bob and his boat.

In celebration of Bob's achievements, the Thistle Theatre in his hometown of Embro is also putting on a play about his life and racing career next month.

Bob was a quiet and humble man, but it's safe to say that this Oxford underdog made a big impact in speedboat racing.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Community organizations play a crucial role in addressing social issues and inequality. Whether it's offering food assistance, mental health support, education and rehabilitation programs, or assistance to find housing, these organizations work tirelessly to uplift the most vulnerable members of society, addressing gaps in government services. The Vanier Community Services Centre, the CALACS, Montfort Renaissance, Le Cap, Lowertown Community Resource Centre, St. Joe's Women's Centre, Centre espoir Sophie, Gloucester Emergency Food Cupboard—all these organizations and many more play this important role in Ottawa–Vanier. All of them, however, have described to me how the decreased funding they have seen over the last few years is threatening their very survival.

1030

Because of their deep roots in the community, these organizations are uniquely positioned to develop and implement tailored solutions to local challenges in an efficient and cost-effective manner. By providing adequate financial support to these organizations, the government can amplify their impact and achieve greater outcomes at a fraction of the cost. So I beg the government to provide the financial support required to keep these entities alive and thriving.

RIDING OF ETOBICOKE–LAKESHORE

Ms. Christine Hogarth: It is my pleasure to rise in the House today to once again speak on behalf of the beautiful community of Etobicoke–Lakeshore. Recently, I joined the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre in my riding to celebrate Losar, the Year of the Wood Dragon. The Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre has played a key role in nourishing the community's rich heritage through initiatives promoting Tibetan language and performing arts. It

brought great joy to spotlight their contribution during Losar celebrations and reaffirmed my commitment to supporting efforts to improve the lives of over 5,000 Tibetan Canadians who call Ontario home, many within the riding of Etobicoke–Lakeshore.

During not-for-profit appreciation week it was an honour to recognize the work of Franklin Horner Community Centre, WoodGreen and the Jean Tweed Centre, and I cannot thank them, the workers and the volunteers enough for what they do every day to make our community stronger.

I recently also had the opportunity to tour Holy Angels Catholic School with Minister Lecce, and I'm so happy to report the new school, which will accommodate 600 students, with 88 child care spaces, is near completion, with an anticipated opening of September of this year. Congratulations.

I have also some more great news, that, finally, the Queensway urgent care centre is open. I know many of my residents have been asking for this. This expanded and renewed facility is open for service, providing expert care and comfort to many in the riding.

It's a great time to live in south Etobicoke and the province of Ontario.

HOUSING

Mr. Trevor Jones: Good morning. We know communities across Ontario are experiencing challenges with our housing supply. Our government is taking bold, decisive action to build more housing faster and improve quality of life for everyone. I'm so proud of my community for working together and demonstrating leadership, because Chatham-Kent, just like our legendary MLB hall of famer Fergie Jenkins, literally hit it out of the park, exceeding our housing target by 554% last year.

On Friday, I was honoured to be joined by Minister Rob Flack and Chatham-Kent mayor, Darrin Canniff, to celebrate our 522 new housing starts last year, which unlocked \$440,000 in funding through the Building Faster Fund. Our success is a direct result of the hard work and dedication of our home builders, trades professionals, realtors and Chatham-Kent municipal officials, who, together, are building a wide range of homes for families and individuals across Chatham-Kent. We're thrilled with our progress to date and excited for the future.

I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone involved, and a special thanks to the team at Maple City Homes for hosting us on Friday at their beautiful show home.

Fortunately, Speaker, this is just the beginning, and I'm grateful to be part of a government that will continue to create the conditions for success in home building, business, industry and agriculture.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

Mr. Kevin Holland: I'd like to give warm welcome to Mr. Joachim Stroink from SustainAgro. Joachim is a

former MLA in Nova Scotia, having served from 2013 to 2017. Welcome to Ontario.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I'd like to welcome a delegation of students from the Canadian Federation of Students—Ontario who are with us today in the member's gallery: Maryan Amalow, Faraz Khorsandi, Mitra Yakubi, Hisham Barakat, Christian Alvarez, Nawfal Sbaa and Mohammed El-Mendri. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I'd like to welcome Julie Wheeler. Julie is the director for seniors' services at Sunnyside seniors' services in my riding of Kitchener Centre. Thank you, Julie, for your selfless work for seniors in the region of Waterloo.

Hon. Stan Cho: It's my privilege to welcome some fine folks from AdvantAge Ontario—in fact, 27 of them, including CEO Lisa Levin and chair of the board Sue Graham-Nutter.

AdvantAge is one of our government's fantastic partners in the long-term-care sector, representing non-profit homes and the vital work they do for our seniors. Let's not forget it's their advocacy day, so everyone, please join them in committee rooms 228 and 230 at 5 p.m. for a fun reception. Thank you for coming to Queen's Park.

Mr. John Vanthof: On behalf of the official opposition, I'd also like to welcome the board of AdvantAge, and in particular, one of the members of the board is from my riding, Paul Chatelain. He is the administrator of Rosedale Manor in Matheson, South Centennial Manor in Iroquois Falls and Villa Minto in Cochrane. He's also the CEO of those three respective hospitals. He's a very busy guy. Welcome, Paul.

Mr. John Yakubuski: I'd like to welcome, from my riding, Linda Tracey, the CEO of Marianhill long-term-care home in Pembroke, who is also here with AdvantAge Ontario. Linda also encourages everyone to join her and her colleagues at the reception between 5 and 7 in 228 and 230. Thank you for joining us, Linda.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: It's my pleasure to welcome to the House the Rehoboth students from Rehoboth Christian School. I had the pleasure of meeting them this morning and am looking forward, very much so, to their singing of O Canada today.

I want to remind them: There's the eagle that I told you about. You can't see the owl, but maybe later on you can. Thank you so much for being in the Legislature today.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: I want to wish a warm, warm welcome to four from the University of Windsor: Maryan Amalow, Brahmjot Singh, Hisham Barakat and Kayla Weiler. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: It's my pleasure to introduce this morning Tamara Witcher, president of OSSTF District 30; David Sykes, executive coordinator of OSSTF District 30; and Julien Abraham. Welcome.

Hon. Victor Fedeli: In 1978, if you phoned 476-5044, you would have got me at the end of the line. But today, 45 years later, you will get Scott and Cheryl Clark on the line, and they're here in the audience.

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Good morning, everyone. Good morning, Speaker. I would like to welcome the Citizens' Climate Lobby Canada to Queen's Park. It's wonderful that you were able to host a reception this morning.

I also want to extend my personal warm gratitude and welcome to Sue Graham-Nutter, the CEO of the Re kai Centres, a distinguished long-term-care facility in our community of Toronto Centre, and also the chair of AdvantAge Ontario.

Mr. John Jordan: I also want to welcome all the members from AdvantAge Ontario and recognize the great work that they do for seniors in this province, and a special welcome to Carey Duncan, director of Lanark Lodge, in beautiful Perth, Ontario. It's one of our most preferred homes thanks to the hard work of Carey Duncan and all her staff. Welcome to Queen's Park.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): There are still members who want to introduce guests. Unless there are objections, I'd like to continue.

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I'm pleased to welcome a neighbour from Oshawa, Glady Farquharson, who is here this morning with the Citizens' Climate Lobby. Welcome to your House, Glady.

Mr. Rick Byers: It's my pleasure as well to welcome a member of the board of AdvantAge Ontario: Jennifer Cornell, who is director of long-term care for Grey county, does a great job in our riding. Thank you for all your great work, and welcome.

1040

MPP Jamie West: I'd like to welcome Sudburians from the Citizens' Climate Lobby: Cathy Orlando, Claire Orlando, Maggie Fu and Sophia Mathur.

Maggie now lives in Toronto, Speaker, but she reminded me that when I was there, her and her father became Canadian citizens. It's very special to me that she's here today.

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: I'd like to welcome two guests from Haliburton-Norfolk, Laurie Burroughs and Jeff Muller. Welcome to your House.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: I would like to welcome Tanya Baker, who is here from Thunder Bay, representing AdvantAge Ontario.

I would also like to welcome, from OPSEU: Noah Freedman, Simon Chateauvert, JP Hornick, RM Kennedy and Simran Ghuman, who are all here to represent the interests of forest firefighters.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: I'd like to introduce Ontario Genomics, with us here today in the gallery. I'd also like to invite my colleagues to attend their lunchtime reception taking place in room 228 right after question period. Welcome to Queen's Park.

Mr. Mike Harris: Thank you very much for granting me leave to take a little extra time to introduce Steven Harrison, who is here with AdvantAge from my riding of Kitchener-Conestoga.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): This being the first sitting Monday of the month, this morning we have with us in the public gallery the Rehoboth Christian School

choir from the riding of Flamborough–Glanbrook to perform O Canada and God Save the King. Please stand and join them in the singing of our national and royal anthems.

*Singing of the national anthem / Chant de l'hymne national.
Singing of the royal anthem / Chant de l'hymne royal.
Applause.*

QUESTION PERIOD

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

Ms. Marit Stiles: This question is for the Premier. During the Integrity Commissioner's investigation into the greenbelt grab, the Premier's chief of staff, Patrick Sackville, said under oath that he did not discuss removal criteria with anyone until October 27, 2022. But late last year, we in the NDP obtained an email sent from the personal account of Ryan Amato to the personal account of Mr. Sackville, discussing the removals and dated October 17, 10 days earlier.

To the Premier: Can the Premier explain this 10-day discrepancy in the testimony of his chief of staff to the Integrity Commissioner?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): And to reply, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

Hon. Paul Calandra: My understanding, of course, is that the chief of staff has reached out to the Integrity Commissioner to highlight the fact that there is actually no inconsistency with the testimony.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: Speaker, it doesn't add up, clearly.

This email was sent on the same day as a dramatic meeting between ministry staffers and the Premier's housing policy adviser, Jae Truesdell. You might recall that was called a "train wreck of a meeting." Mr. Truesdell was learning about the greenbelt scheme for the first time and, evidently, what he heard alarmed him. Mr. Amato said Mr. Truesdell didn't know about the greenbelt scheme because he was told to "leave him in the dark." According to the Integrity Commissioner, Mr. Amato identified Mr. Sackville as the "decision-maker in the Premier's office for this project."

Back to the Premier: Why did the Premier's chief of staff tell Mr. Amato to leave his own housing policy adviser in the dark?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Of course, the Integrity Commissioner has reviewed that. Mr. Sackville has reached out to the Integrity Commissioner to ensure that there is no confusion with respect to his testimony and that there, of course, is no change in the testimony in any way, shape or form. There are no inconsistencies.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: Well, the NDP has obtained yet another document showing that Mr. Amato sent an email

later that evening, asking for a meeting to get everyone on the same page following that same "train wreck of a meeting" earlier that day. The request was sent to several top staffers in the Premier's office. According to this document that we've acquired, Mr. Sackville agreed a meeting was needed, telling the group, "This is timely and critical."

So I want to go back to the Premier again: In addition to Mr. Sackville, how many other officials in the Premier's office discussed the greenbelt scheme earlier than what they told the Integrity Commissioner?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, the Integrity Commissioner has reviewed and issued a report. At the same time, the chief of staff has already reached out to the Integrity Commissioner to highlight some of the pronouncements made by the Leader of the Opposition. There are no inconsistencies and, of course, the Integrity Commissioner has that and will review it.

UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE FUNDING

Ms. Marit Stiles: I understand why they're hesitating to answer some of these questions. The RCMP is, of course, investigating them as well right now.

This question is for the Premier as well. This government was warned by the Auditor General back in 2021 that an overreliance on international student tuition was going to put our post-secondary education sector in a very untenable financial position. There was a steady stream of warnings coming from colleges and universities, from the government's own expert panel, from us in the opposition, about the serious financial risk they were facing because of a lack of funding. The Minister of Colleges and Universities has claimed she wasn't even aware a cap on international students was coming. It defies belief.

1050

Back to the Premier: Was the minister asleep at the wheel here, or did she look the other way while private career colleges massively exploited the International Student Program?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

The Minister of Colleges and Universities to reply.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Thank you to the member of the opposition for that question. And that is correct: Quite frankly, we are very disappointed in the federal decision that was made, a unilateral decision without consultation with the provinces or any of the post-secondary institutions. We are working very closely with our institutions right now.

But I can tell you, this is going to be an economic hit across not only Ontario, but across Canada. That's what we were hearing from many different organizations. I talked to the tourism association during the ROMA conference and heard from them directly the impact that they foresee happening in the hospitality and tourism industry in Ontario.

As I have said, the Premier and the Prime Minister signed a historic health care deal. We need to ensure that

we have enough PSWs to fill those spaces for the Minister of Long-Term Care, and enough nurses in this province for the Ministry of Health. We are going to continue working very closely with our partners, and we will have more to say by the March 31 deadline.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question?

Ms. Marit Stiles: I will remind the minister that, under their watch, one university went bankrupt and now nearly half of our universities are reporting multi-million dollar deficits—under this government’s watch.

Speaker, the minister and this government knew exactly what they were doing by undermining the public colleges and universities to open the door to for-profit diploma mills. That’s what they were doing. Last week, we learned that those same colleges were making major donations to the minister’s re-election campaign.

So back to the Premier: Is this yet another case of wealthy donors and insiders shopping for policy changes behind closed doors?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

The Minister of Colleges and Universities.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Again, a unilateral decision was made without consultation with the provinces, as well as the sector in this province.

I’ve heard extreme dissatisfaction from many institutions—but more importantly, the economic impact this is going to have on Canada and Ontario. The Minister of Economic Development is bringing new companies here to Ontario every single week, and guess one of the reasons they come here? It’s because of the talented pipeline of students that we have in this province.

I will continue to work with our institutions and we will be addressing this by the March 31 deadline.

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

Ms. Marit Stiles: It seems like everything has to be pushed to the absolute breaking point before this government chooses to do anything at all.

It’s students and families who are paying a huge price for this government’s failure. They’re relying on food banks. They’re juggling multiple jobs just to make rent. I’ve talked to families who are seriously questioning whether they can send their child to college. But instead of bringing forward the funding, the minister responsible was busy funding her own campaign, bringing in over \$24,000 in a single night from directors and executives of those very same private colleges.

So, Speaker, back to the Premier again: Will there be any consequences for this minister, or does he approve of this return to Liberal-style cash-for-access fundraising in Ontario?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I’m going to once again caution the Leader of the Opposition on her choice of words.

And to reply, the Minister of Colleges and Universities.

Hon. Jill Dunlop: May I remind the whole House: Under Liberal leadership, tuition in this province rose. It was the highest tuition in all of Canada. Under the leadership of Premier Ford, in 2019, we decreased tuition by 10%. And may I remind the opposition, they voted against that initiative to make education affordable for students in this province.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier announced an additional tuition freeze moving forward for students. I want to ensure affordability for students. There’s an affordability crisis in Ontario and across Canada right now: the cost of housing, the cost of food and the cost of gas. But what this government is doing is ensuring that post-secondary education is affordable for all students in this province.

JUSTICE SYSTEM

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: My question is to the Premier. The Attorney General recently put two of the Premier’s buddies onto the committee responsible for judicial appointments. Shockingly, when the Premier was asked about these appointments, he said that he wants to ensure that the committee is only recommending Conservative-affiliated judges. He went so far as to suggest that if a judicial candidate had voted for the NDP or Liberals, they are a threat to public safety.

Yet, it is on this government’s watch that our criminal justice system has spiralled into chaos. It’s on this Premier’s watch that our courtrooms are closed every day due to understaffing. It’s on his watch that serious cases are routinely thrown out for delay.

Will the Premier reverse his partisan appointments, or is he just comfortable further undermining public confidence in the justice system?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

To respond, the Attorney General.

Hon. Doug Downey: I want to start with the acknowledgement that only those that would always be political expect others to always be political, Mr. Speaker.

It’s my obligation to make recommendations to the cabinet to appoint judges. I take that responsibility seriously and, obviously, I want advice from those that I respect. The advisory committee provides the advice. It has more than two members on it; in fact, it has three judges on the committee. So I don’t know if the member opposite is maligning all of the members of the committee or just the ones that she doesn’t agree with, which kind of is ironic given that she doesn’t want their advice and she doesn’t think we should have it.

I take the committee’s collective advice, Mr. Speaker, and these “Liberals in sandals” over here are no different than these Liberals over here in that they want to appoint advisers for me. Shocking that a Conservative government wants to hear from Conservative voices. As Brian Lilley said, they’re only upset because they think they should still get to make the decisions.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

Supplementary question?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: Back to the Premier: Six years in power and the Conservatives are still making up excuses for the worsening crisis in our justice system.

The Federation of Ontario Law Associations put out one of the more measured statements in response to the Premier's comments, saying that the Premier has a "juvenile misapprehension" of the judicial appointments and that his comments are irresponsible, harmful and dangerous to our democracy.

It is shocking that even in our criminal justice system, the Premier's focus seems to be entirely on producing favours for his insiders. Many people sitting across from me were given useless titles around King's Counsel, and now, this government is putting unqualified friends into a position where they get to do favours for more Conservative allies.

Will the Premier reverse these appointments and apologize to the public and the legal community for their interference in the judicial appointments?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats. To respond—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order. The House will come to order. Stop the clock.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Are we ready to continue? Evidently not.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Start the clock. The Attorney General to reply.

Hon. Doug Downey: I have to say, Mr. Speaker, I was missing Mitzie Hunter's five-in-one questions so that I can address the successes of this government, but I'm glad to see the tradition continue.

I can tell you that this government takes judicial appointments seriously. We have appointed 100 judicial positions, Mr. Speaker, and I would take exception if they could even point to one that isn't qualified. We have a committee that's been in place since 1985. It's been populated with volunteers and judges ever since. We have a gold standard of appointments of judges, and that standard has continued. Only because the Toronto Star wrote a story are the NDP now paying attention. I am happy to go through every single one of the judicial appointments, and you will see that they are, in fact, qualified.

1100

Mr. Speaker, you would think a government in waiting would have a little better understanding of how the system works—but I'm afraid we don't. So we will continue with the—

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

The next question.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mrs. Daisy Wai: My question is to the Associate Minister of Transportation. Many people living in my riding of Richmond Hill and across the GTA rely on public transit as their primary form of travel. Their experience using public transit should be convenient and affordable. However, many of my constituents have voiced concerns over steep transit costs.

Speaker, life is expensive, and hard-working individuals and families across our province are saying that it's very hard for them. Our government must continue to keep costs down for transit riders and deliver the financial relief that they deserve.

Can the associate minister tell the House how our government is removing barriers to ridership and making Ontarians' travel more affordable?

Hon. Vijay Thanigasalam: Thank you to the member from Richmond Hill for that question.

Mr. Speaker, let me be crystal clear. No government is doing more for transit riders than under the leadership of Premier Ford. We are making public transit more accessible and affordable than ever before. Our \$70-billion transit plan—we are building transit all across Ontario. Starting today, our new one-fare program will put more money back into people's pockets. Double fares are now gone. On average, this is a savings of \$1,600 every year. Liberals couldn't do it, but under Premier Ford, we got it done.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question?

Mrs. Daisy Wai: Thank you to the minister for the response, and thank you very much for the \$70-billion transit plan. People in my riding of Richmond Hill and across the GTA will be excited to know that they will save money when travelling, starting today.

With affordability being a top priority for everyone in Ontario, it's surprising that the NDP and the independent Liberals voted against this program. They voted against saving transit riders \$1,600 a year. That is shameful.

Our government will continue to ensure that our public transportation system is making it easier, faster and cheaper for people to get where they need to go.

Can the minister provide further details on how the one-fare program will make life easier for people in Ontario?

Hon. Vijay Thanigasalam: Mr. Speaker, while Bonnie Crombie hiked MiWay transit fares year over year in Mississauga, I was really disappointed that the Liberals and the NDP chose to play political games rather than supporting the one-fare program. This is the kind of program that makes a significant impact and difference in people's lives. But the Liberals and NDP voted against saving transit riders \$1,600 every year—they voted not just once, they voted against it twice.

Starting today, as I said, commuters can simply use the same card to tap to transfer from one transit agency to another transit agency. That's going to save them more money so they can save their money towards their future,

their children or for their most important things, like groceries.

We are the only party that is working to eliminate barriers and make life more affordable, under the leadership of Premier Doug Ford.

NATURAL GAS RATES

Mr. Peter Tabuns: To the Premier: In December, the Ontario Energy Board decided to protect Enbridge Gas customers from unreasonable rate increases for new gas line installation. We're talking about \$300 per customer over the next four years. The next day, the Premier's Minister of Energy said he would bring in a bill to overturn the decision and crank up the gas bills.

Will the Premier protect gas customers from higher Enbridge charges?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To reply for the government, the Minister of Energy.

Hon. Todd Smith: Since day one, we've been focused on ensuring that we have a reliable, affordable, clean energy system in this province. It's remarkable for me, Mr. Speaker, to hear the energy critic from the NDP now standing up and championing gas in our province when at every opportunity he has slammed the use of natural gas—not just slammed the use of natural gas, but he's also slammed our nuclear sector.

What we have done by introducing the bill last week—and we'll debate it at second reading today, Mr. Speaker—is ensure that there's at least one party in this Legislature that's standing up for homeowners and new homeowners and energy customers, and that is Premier Ford and the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario. They can be beholden to the environmental groups; they can be beholden to those who are ideological. We are not going to do that. We're going to stand up for the people of Ontario.

Interjections.

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

Restart the clock. The supplementary question?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Again, to the Premier, the question is pretty simple; I'm sure even the minister can understand it. Millions of Ontarians are having trouble paying their bills. Will the Premier support lower gas bills for customers or will he protect higher profits for Enbridge? What will he choose?

Hon. Todd Smith: This is like Twilight Zone stuff here, that this member is standing up for gas customers when he has wanted to shut down natural gas right across the province.

Mr. Speaker, there's one party in this Legislature that is standing up for those who want to enter the home market. They want to buy a home in this province. That's this party. The Ontario Energy Board's decision from just before Christmas would have driven up the price of a home by, at minimum, \$4,400. Our party won't stand for that. But in parts of rural Ontario, it was going to drive up the cost by tens of thousands of dollars a year.

We are in a housing crisis in this province. Every time our party brings forward plans, like the housing supply action plan, it's the NDP that stands up against it, Mr. Speaker, and this is the latest example of the NDP and the Liberals and the Greens standing up against the ability for people to buy a home in our province. We are going to stand with those who want to get into housing, Mr. Speaker, and make sure we're keeping shovels in the ground in Ontario.

MANUFACTURING SECTOR

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: My question is for the Minister of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. Under the leadership of the previous Liberal government, we saw Ontario garner a reputation as an extremely high-cost jurisdiction. Companies that had set up shop left in droves and international businesses overlooked Ontario as a potential jurisdiction in which to expand and grow and add jobs.

But since taking office, our government, under the leadership of Premier Ford, has recognized the importance of building a resilient manufacturing sector and we've made sure that these jobs are being created in every corner of this province.

Speaker, could the minister provide an update to the House on some of the manufacturing investments we welcomed in Niagara since the beginning of the year?

Hon. Victor Fedeli: Our government recognizes just how important the manufacturing sector is in our economy. Already this year, we've welcomed \$65 million in investment in Niagara region alone:

—Stanpac manufactures food, dairy and beverage packaging for global businesses—they invested \$35 million to retool their facility in Smithville;

—AMSI, a company that designs and constructs support buildings for on-site development—they invested \$20 million to construct a 67,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in Beamsville;

—St. Davids Cold Storage invested \$9 million to expand their cold storage facility for food and beverage manufacturers—they created a total of 46 good-paying jobs with \$6.7 million in investment support from the government.

Stay tuned, Speaker. The game-changing investments are just starting.

1110

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

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you to the minister for the answer and also the work he is doing to attract good-paying jobs to Niagara and to every corner of this province. It's great to hear that new, good-paying manufacturing jobs are being created in our province following years of news about manufacturing jobs—some 300,000 of them—fleeing Ontario under the Liberal government.

In fact, manufacturing employment in Ontario is now at one of the highest levels it has been since 2008. It is a testament to the measures our government has taken to cut

red tape, slash taxes and get our economy back on track while rebuilding the manufacturing sector.

Speaker, could the minister share more about how these manufacturing investments are coming to Ontario?

Hon. Victor Fedeli: This is such a historic number that it bears repeating: In 2023, Ontario created more manufacturing jobs than all 50 US states combined. In the last three years, Ontario has attracted more than \$29 billion in new manufacturing investments, creating more than 11,000 new jobs in that sector.

This year, Ontario welcomed an investment from a Kitchener-based med-tech firm, FluidAI. They're investing \$25 million, hiring 38 new technicians with a \$1.4-million investment from our government. This investment will strengthen our world-class manufacturing sector and create jobs for hard-working families in Ontario.

We have continued to create the right conditions for job growth in every region of the province.

PROVINCIAL SCHOOLS

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Students at Ontario's provincial schools are some of the most vulnerable students in our province, yet they are being forced to learn in horrific conditions. There are allegations of abuse, discrimination and neglect; a serious teacher shortage; crumbling school buildings; and absurd emergency response plans.

These schools are the direct responsibility of the Minister of Education. He could change things today if he wanted to. Students, parents, alumni, teachers and advocates have been begging him for years to act.

Will the minister finally take action and do something to protect these children?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: I do thank the member opposite for the question. We do agree; these are the most exceptional children within our care. It's why this government has announced an \$8.6-million investment to enhance and renew the facilities that lodge these kids. It's why the government actually appointed inspectors to ensure compliance. It's why this government announced a permanent executive director and a clinical manager and a new lodging policy that enhances safety through regulation.

We are committed to investing in supporting these kids, recognizing there are about 520 kids within our care and 610 staff that we have in place. We'll continue to support them and provide compassion, hope, opportunity and training for these children, whom I visited at these various lodgings and schools across Ontario. We are committed to their success, Speaker.

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

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Since the minister seems unaware of what's happening in these schools on his watch, let's talk about their record:

—a school with deaf students and deaf staff using a cowbell as the emergency alert system;

—students having class in the bathroom because it's the only place warm enough to take off their mittens, and they need to use their hands to communicate;

—students only getting assessments if their parents hire a lawyer or complain to their MPP;

—two class action lawsuits in the past 10 years, with the province paying \$23 million in settlements, and yet there are currently no less than three new lawsuits filed or pending.

Is this a record that the minister is proud of? What is it going to take for him to finally act?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Mr. Speaker, the concerns cited by the member opposite underscore why the government invested \$8.6 million to enhance the facilities for those kids. It's why the government did not defend the actions of the former Liberal government. We actually initiated the hiring of inspectors to ensure compliance. It's why the government announced a permanent executive director to support those kids, and we hired a clinical manager with a new, tougher lodging policy imposed by regulation. This shouldn't be a political matter. I understand these kids are very vulnerable. They need our support.

But you talk about a track record—the member opposite will need to explain to those families why you opposed the funding to enhance those lodgings, why you opposed the increase in special education funding for those kids, why you opposed the hiring of 3,200 EAs to help the most vulnerable in our schools. While they'll have to explain that to the families of this province, we'll continue to invest and support the success of the most exceptional kids within our care.

JUSTICE SYSTEM

Mr. John Fraser: My question is to the Premier. We know that the Premier makes sure that wealthy, well-connected friends are taken care of, whether it's the \$8.3-billion backroom deal to carve up the greenbelt; secret, sole-source contracts for Therme and Staples; ministerial zoning orders for land speculators; or, as the Premier said himself, appointments for insiders and friends.

The Premier's latest two insider appointments are to the panel that appoints Ontario's judges. That's not the worst part, folks; it's that the Premier says that their job is to appoint "like-minded" judges. I just need to know: Why does the Premier think it's a good idea to appoint judges who think like him while his office is the subject of an RCMP criminal investigation?

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

To reply, the Attorney General.

Hon. Doug Downey: I guess the Liberals are feeling left out. I actually thought they would keep their heads down on this kind of issue. Their record of appointments is abysmal and irresponsible. The former chair of the exact same committee was a Liberal donor and supporter, along with several other members of the same committee.

Here's the thing: That doesn't bother me. That doesn't bother me at all. What bothers me is the hypocrisy of the other side—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member has to withdraw the unparliamentary comment and conclude.

Hon. Doug Downey: Withdraw.

What bothers me is the inconsistency of the other side in trying to avoid transparency. They're mostly upset because something was said out loud that they want buried.

We were elected—we're not just on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, we're on that side of the House. Our majority sits over there. We have an obligation to the public to make appointments in the interests of the public. We will listen to conservative voices and we will make responsible appointments.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

The supplementary question?

Mr. John Fraser: None of this is a surprise, Speaker. This is the same Premier who wanted to appoint a close personal friend as the commissioner of the OPP.

Ontarians don't need like-minded judges, they need fair-minded judges who apply the law in an unbiased and unpartisan way, Premier. That's the Canadian way. We don't elect judges. We're not the US. Politicians don't get to stack the courts, Premier. This is so Canadians all have trust in the judicial system. What the Premier says he wants to do, just by simply saying it, is eroding trust in the people's courts.

Speaker, through you: Will the Premier do the right thing, rescind these two appointments and stop his interference with the independence of our courts?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): To respond, the Premier.

Hon. Doug Ford: I find it ironic, and I actually have no problem with it. Many years ago, 30 years ago, I met a former Speaker called Chris Stockwell. He said, "Never, ever criticize the opposition for appointing people like-minded."

We have a massive crime wave right now happening in our cities right across Toronto and the GTA. They're kicking doors in, they're putting guns to people's heads and guess what happens, Mr. Speaker? They get out on bail, then they go do it again, then they get out on bail again and then they get out on bail. They've been out on bail eight times.

I guarantee, if I asked the students up there if they're aware their houses are being broken into, their cars are being broken into—they're terrified to stay at home by themselves. They want to go everywhere their parents go, because they're terrified.

I am going to make sure we have like-minded judges—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Stop the clock. The House will come to order.

Start the clock. The next question.

1120

EDUCATION

Ms. Donna Skelly: My question is for the Minister of Education. Our government will always be on the side of parents who want their kids to stay in class. The data is

clear: Children excel when they are in school consistently. Literacy rates have increased across all grade levels and math has either stabilized or improved. We know that the minister is determined to land deals that keep kids learning and ensure that families across our province receive the stability they deserve.

Speaker, through you to the minister: How is our government working to keep children learning and to ensure that Ontario families benefit from a renewed focus on academic achievement?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you to the member from Flamborough–Glanbrook for this question. I'm proud to announce in this House for the first time since we last rose ahead of the holidays that our government has landed deals with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario and the French teachers' union, which represents over a million children having peace and stability in their lives for the next three years.

As our government goes back to the basics of ensuring foundational learning, we can now provide a sense of certainty to families that their children will be in school learning with their educators, with their friends and with the stimulus of extracurriculars, clubs and sports. All of this is important to producing a well-rounded student who graduates with a competitive advantage as we help them ensure they've got the skills to get a good-paying job.

We are committed to stability for families, and we will stand up for children and their families to keep them in school right to June.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary?

Ms. Donna Skelly: Back to the minister: Children across our province are benefiting from our government's unapologetic focus on boosting literacy, STEM and skilled trades. Math achievement is trending upward across all grade levels in both English and French. The evidence is clear: If we want kids to succeed in the long term, we need to start early.

Will the minister outline our government's plan to support our youngest students and strengthen learning on what actually matters to parents and the job market?

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Thank you again to the member for Flamborough–Glanbrook for this important question and her leadership on this file. We recognize stability is key, and, today, because of our government's leadership, three in four students have that certainty, with no strikes on the horizon for the next three years as we go back to basics and really emphasize academic achievement as the foremost priority of our school boards.

Our plan to get back to basics and back on track is working. Ontario is the second in the nation in reading, writing and math; we are in the top 10 in science internationally and top 15 in math globally.

To build on this, we recognize we have to start early, which is why the parliamentary assistants to the Ministers of Education and Health joined me to announce that we are introducing a new kindergarten curriculum that will require mandatory, explicit daily instruction in literacy and in math, supported by the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

We are committed to ensuring kids learn life and job skills that allow them to get a good-paying job, own a home and achieve the dream of this country. We're going to continue to invest and support back to basics in Ontario schools.

FOREST FIREFIGHTING

Mr. Guy Bourgouin: The government recently refused amendments the NDP proposed for Working for Workers Bill 149 that would have properly reclassified wildland forest rangers as firefighters, making them eligible for the same presumptive cancer coverage as all other firefighters. There are many studies showing that people who fight forest fires are exposed to dangerous chemicals, and yet this government denies these workers access to the same support available to structural firefighters.

My question: With wildfire season anticipated to start early this year, will the government finally do the right thing and classify forest rangers as firefighters?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development.

Hon. David Piccini: A short answer to the member opposite: Yes. We look forward, as we've done multiple times in session, to implement Working for Workers legislation, and I appreciate the input from all members of this place.

Speaker, let's not forget that it's this government that has expanded presumptive coverage for thyroid, for pancreatic, and now esophageal cancer. When that party opposite held the balance of power and could have pushed the Liberals to do something about it, they didn't—but Premier Ford and our government are.

I would appreciate the member opposite—he can work like other members in his caucus, work with us and add these expanded coverages, and I look forward to working with him to do just that.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The supplementary question? The member for Thunder Bay–Superior North.

MPP Lise Vaugeois: The government received a joint health and safety committee recommendation pointing to the failure of the ministry to acknowledge well-known and serious health risks to forest firefighters. Forest firefighters are exposed to silicas, benzines, formaldehyde, poison ivy smoke, carbon monoxide and dump fires riddled with carcinogens. And yet, unbelievably, forest firefighters are told that all they need to protect themselves from toxins is a homemade bandana. Does this government seriously believe this is an acceptable standard of worker health and safety?

Hon. David Piccini: I'm very grateful for the heroic work of firefighters. We've worked closely with the OPFFA and so many others. We had members and firefighter families in this place just last week. We're going to continue working with them.

That member is seriously late to everything. This government has taken action—as I said: thyroid, pancreatic, esophageal, so much more. We've reformed WSIB. Quite frankly, when that party held the balance of

power and when that party was, for the one time that they'll ever have, in government in Ontario, WSIB was a mess. We're working with WSIB, working with the heroic front-line responders, and we implemented the Skills Development Fund—things that member has done nothing to support—to expand Indigenous fire training, to support men and women who are serving on the front lines. We'll always have their back, with or without that member.

I hope she'll work with us on this, and I look forward—

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

The next question.

NORTHERN AGRIFOOD INDUSTRY

Mr. Robert Bailey: My question is for the Minister of Northern Development. Speaker, the northern agri-food industry keeps our communities thriving. For 15 years, this critical industry was ignored by the previous Liberal government. Instead of supporting workers in the north, they insulted them by calling northern Ontario a “no man's land.”

Our government recognizes the value of the agriculture and food sector in northern Ontario, as it boosts the local economy and creates great employment opportunities. That's why we need to continue to make targeted investments that will boost local food production and stimulate expansion and diversification in the northern agri-food sector.

Can the minister tell this House what steps this government is taking to ensure that the agri-food sector stays competitive in northern Ontario?

Hon. Greg Rickford: I thank the member from Sarnia–Lambton for his decades of advocacy. He's a great colleague to work with, and I appreciate him very much.

On the heels of the Beef Farmers of Ontario's AGM and the great speech from the Minister of Agriculture, I was there to remind the beef farmers of our unequivocal support for beef farming in northern Ontario. This is a growing agri-food sector. We have lots of examples to draw from. I mentioned the Penokean Hills co-operative, a group comprised of northern producers who sell and market beef products to build a finishing yard at the old Thessalon airport, responding for locally grown food. I also reminded them of an investment for the Rainy River Cattlemen's Association out in my riding of Kenora–Rainy River. To the tune of almost a million dollars, the Premier and I announced an investment for their sales barn, which turns more than \$10 million of beef sales a year out in the beautiful beginning of the Prairies. They were pleased, and they understood that our government stands poised to support agri-food in northern Ontario and its supply chain.

We know that northern Ontario can be the next big frontier for agri-food production in Ontario.

1130

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question?

Mr. Robert Bailey: Thanks to the minister for that great response. It's great to hear that our government is

focusing on supporting the agri-food sector and livestock producers in the north.

Unfortunately, the people of northern Ontario are no strangers to the negative impacts of reckless policies put in place by previous Liberal governments. While the Liberals killed hundreds of thousands of jobs, our government is not only bringing those jobs back, but we're continuing to invest in innovations in the agri-food sector and with livestock producers. By supporting agriculture research and innovation, we can increase the production and consumption of locally grown food in northern Ontario and throughout this province.

Speaker, can the minister again explain what our government is doing to increase food security and to ensure that northern Ontario's agriculture sector continues to thrive?

Hon. Greg Rickford: It isn't just that the previous Liberal government thought that northern Ontario was a no man's land, they made life more expensive, and their federal cousins continue to do that.

On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, our party is ensuring that the right investments are being made to strengthen the supply chain for agri-food production across northern Ontario. I spoke at the Northern Ontario Farm Innovation Alliance to announce thousands of new acres of tile drainage in the Timiskaming and Cochrane districts, as well as in the Manitoulin Island regions. These are essential for creating arable land for livestock and other crop production. It's absolutely essential that they have the tools they need to become a major player in agri-food sector production for the province of Ontario and beyond its borders, but also for the new demand—the new rage, if you will, Mr. Speaker—to have locally grown food that's more affordable and meets the test of food security and food sovereignty locally that everyone in northern Ontario is asking for.

CHILD CARE

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: My question is to the Premier. For months now, we've been warning that the rollout of affordable child care is at a crisis point. The YMCA has been ringing alarm bells at pre-budget hearings across the province, warning of imminent closures in child care centres if this government doesn't step up to provide adequate resources.

Despite countless operators asking for an adjusted funding formula and others pulling out of the program, this government's operating funding to child care programs is lower than it was in 2018.

Will the government commit to immediately implementing a full-cost-recovery model, to ensure parents can access affordable child care in this province?

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

Hon. Stephen Lecce: Mr. Speaker, we are proud as a government, as the Progressive Conservative Party, to have cut child care fees by 50% for working families in

this province, saving anywhere between \$8,000 and \$10,000 per child.

The NDP cannot have it both ways. The NDP is on the record urging this government to sign the first deal available, which would have omitted \$3 billion for those operators, which would have omitted for-profit child care in London and in communities across the province—a third of our operators are for-profit—because of an ideological aversion to a small business, often a woman, who runs a for-profit child care operator.

We are advocating to the federal Liberal government to demand more funding for our operators. Why don't you get on board and support this government, and stand up for all operators and all families in this province?

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

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: We have an unworkable funding model and a workforce crisis in the child care sector. Parents need affordable child care now, and instead of taking action to help, this government cut \$85 million in funding. Ontario could have a decent workforce and fair wages for ECEs and child care workers, and address a staffing shortage in this province with an equal funding partner.

We must ensure families have equitable options for child care. The best way to do that is by instating a full-cost-recovery model. Will the minister finally take action to ensure families can get access to timely child care in this province? Minister, do it for the kids.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order. I'll remind members to make their comments through the Chair.

The Minister of Education.

Hon. Stephen Lecce: For the member's passionate advocacy on this matter, I will remind her and her party and the Liberals that when the Liberal Party was last in power, care rose by over 400%. That was an unacceptable reality for working families. This government got to power, negotiated a materially better deal for the families we represent, and unlike the members opposite who wanted us to oppose for-profit child care, who wanted us to oppose advocating for respecting the way parents raise their kids, we fought for and delivered a better deal and cut fees by 50% and are building 86,000 net new spaces.

We're going to continue to reduce fees, we're going to continue to create spaces and we're going to continue to urge the federal Liberal government to step up with funding to support our operators, support our parents and support our kids, because all families will benefit from affordable child care in this province, Speaker.

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENTS

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: My question is for the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. Environmental assessments are critical to getting infrastructure projects built and repaired quickly while protecting our nature.

Unfortunately, the environmental assessment process was severely neglected under the previous Liberal government. Imagine: People would have to wait until a hydro pole fell down or broke to have it replaced due to excessive red tape. That's unacceptable, Speaker. Our government must continue to eliminate this type of excessive red tape that was left behind by the Liberals and keep getting shovels in the ground faster to meet the needs of people across our great province.

Speaker, can the minister please share how this government is improving the environmental assessment process to save time and resources while securing environmental outcomes?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: Thank you to that member for that question. She's absolutely correct. We simply had a process that allowed decaying hydro poles to collapse without being able to fix them right away. That's, frankly, ridiculous and dangerous, and that's because such things were mired in bureaucracy and red tape under the Liberal government.

We know the opposition is okay to maintain the status quo, which drives up the cost of living and does absolutely nothing for the environment. But this is why we've been working hard under the leadership of this Premier to modernize a more than 50-year-old environmental assessment process. This is in response to calls from municipalities and communities that were frustrated that critical infrastructure projects were being caught up in unnecessary bureaucracy. Through extensive consultations with municipalities and Indigenous communities, our officials were able to identify products with known outcomes and processes so these projects can get done quicker for all Ontarians.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary?

M^{me} Dawn Gallagher Murphy: Thank you to the minister for her response. It is great to see our government bring forward changes that will protect world-class environmental standards while helping get shovels in the ground sooner.

As our population continues to grow, we must ensure we have the transportation network and infrastructure needed to build a better Ontario. It is equally important to complete these projects in an environmentally responsible manner with communities' interests in mind.

Speaker, can the minister please elaborate on how our government is protecting strong environmental oversight and making it faster to build in Ontario?

Hon. Andrea Khanjin: The member is referring to such projects as highways, railways and transmission lines that are going to be subject to streamlined assessments. These will allow us to focus our resources on projects that have a greater potential for environmental impact.

Speaker, construction methods have come a long way in the last 50 years. The way my ministry does environmental assessments has come a long way in 50 years. It's time the process itself was brought up to date as well.

Speaker, it's not only just on this change that we're helping and listening to Ontarians, but it's also part of our initiative to exempt regulations to streamline environ-

mental assessment for Indigenous land claims as well and Indigenous settlements. This regulation will help resolve historic land claims more quickly by providing a single yet robust process for First Nations to settle these important claims.

More recently, our government has also removed the unnecessary yet mandatory 30-day wait period on routine projects. This is one change that will allow municipalities to build roads, bridges and water-treatment facilities faster.

Under the leadership of this Premier and this government, we will make sensible, practical changes that will ensure a strong environment and—

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

The next question.

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PUBLIC HEALTH

Miss Monique Taylor: My question is for the Premier. In 2019, your government made sweeping changes to our public health system without consulting public health. Fast-forward to 2023, and the Auditor General's value-for-money audit shows clearly a lack of funding—a lack of funding which has serious risks to our communities.

Our Hamilton lab completes over 300,000 tests a year—and now Hamilton as well as five other public health labs will be closing their doors.

Premier, your government is once again putting our community at risk. When are you going to respect our local public health units and fund them appropriately?

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

Hon. Sylvia Jones: The member opposite, of course, is talking about a recommendation made by the Auditor General. There has been no decision made by the ministry or Public Health Ontario. But to suggest in any way that we have not been funding our public health partners is a complete fallacy, and the numbers prove it out. We have, since 2020-21, invested over \$100 million for infection prevention and control hubs to support over 5,000 congregate living settings across the province. That's something that, when you were in government and when you were supporting the Liberals, never happened.

We'll continue to support public health because we understand how absolutely critical it is.

At last year's AMO conference, we announced that we would continue to support an increase with public health units across Ontario and support voluntary mergers if they deemed them appropriate for their community.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I must caution the Minister of Health on her choice of wording.

Supplementary question?

Miss Monique Taylor: Sustainable funding and one-time funding are not the same. Our public health units are at risk because of their cuts in our public health.

Speaker, 300,000 tests a year—tests like RSV, C. difficile, HIV; and free testing for people with private

drinking water systems like wells and cisterns; tests for water that might be contaminated with bacteria, West Nile virus, E. coli. Do I need to remind this government of Walkerton? All of these tests are on the chopping block for Hamilton.

Premier, once again, your government is putting our communities at risk. When will you put people's health and safety first and reverse these cuts and closures?

Hon. Sylvia Jones: Oh, Speaker, I think we just experienced, in live time, NDP math.

Since 2018, public health units have had increased funding from the provincial government by 16%—that is separate and apart from all the COVID-related expenses that happened in public health.

With the greatest of respect, facts matter. Look at the estimates, look at the budgets and see the investments we've made—again, 16% since Premier Ford began forming government in 2018.

GOVERNMENT SERVICES FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Public and Business Service Delivery. Our government is committed to advancing reconciliation and listening to Indigenous partners and leaders. Fees for death records of children who attended residential schools in Ontario and for reclaiming traditional names are unjust. We need to reduce the burden for Indigenous communities, organizations and family members who are trying to access records and services. Our government must continue to take meaningful action to ensure supports are available at every step of the journey towards healing for Indigenous communities.

Speaker, through you: Can the minister please tell this House what our government is doing to make it easier and more affordable for Indigenous people in Ontario to access vital government services?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: I thank the excellent member for Carleton for that question.

I am very pleased to confirm that our Progressive Conservative government, as of January 2024, will be permanently waiving fees for changing names for residential school survivors and their families aiming to reclaim traditional names altered by the residential school system. As part of this initiative, fees are also waived for registering a delayed registration of death for children who were enrolled in residential schools. Additionally, this government is permanently eliminating fees for death registration searches, certificates and certified copies of death registrations. These permanent fee waivers are providing ongoing financial relief for impacted Indigenous communities and families during an already difficult time.

Also, under the leadership of our Premier, the Honourable Doug Ford, our Progressive Conservative government will always stand by our First Nations communities by taking meaningful action that ensures support every step of the way toward reconciliation.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Supplementary question?

Ms. Goldie Ghamari: Mr. Speaker, through you: Thank you to the minister for his response. This announcement marks an important step in moving along the path of reconciliation and provides financial relief for Indigenous communities. We know that Indigenous and northern communities face unique challenges in accessing government records and services. It is our government's ongoing responsibility to address their concerns. That's why we must continue to provide support that is flexible and responsive to their needs.

I know we have worked with ServiceOntario over the years to reduce barriers and improve services. Can the minister please explain what initiatives our government has put forward to make services more accessible in remote and Indigenous communities?

Hon. Todd J. McCarthy: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Carleton again for the supplementary question. I am proud to say that Ontario was the first jurisdiction in Canada to explicitly allow for a birth to be registered with a single name or for a person to change one's name to a single name.

These changes build on recent initiatives by my ministry that provide easier access to government services in remote and Indigenous communities. In July 2022, ServiceOntario and the North Shore Tribal Council worked collaboratively to launch the first Indigenous-led ServiceOntario centre at the Serpent River Trading Post in Cutler to deliver photo card, driver's licence, vehicle and health care cards and other services. Then, in October 2022, we launched the first mobile service unit within the Robinson-Huron Treaty area, and then Pickle Lake, November 2023, we restored services at the municipal office there. I was very proud to be there with the member opposite representing that constituency.

NOTICES OF DISSATISFACTION

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 36(a), the member for Ottawa South has given notice of their dissatisfaction with the answer to the question given by the Attorney General regarding judicial appointments. This matter will be debated tomorrow following private members' public business.

Also, pursuant to standing order 36(a), the member for Ottawa West—Nepean has given notice of their dissatisfaction with the answer to their question given by the Minister of Education regarding provincial schools. This matter will be debated Wednesday following private members' public business.

Also, pursuant to standing order 36(a), the member for Toronto Centre has given notice of their dissatisfaction with the answer to their question given by the Attorney General regarding judicial appointments. This matter will be debated Wednesday following private members' public business.

I understand the member for Ottawa South has a point of order.

Mr. John Fraser: Point of order: I just want to address the Attorney General's response and his remarks about the former member from Scarborough–Guildwood. I would just hope, Speaker, that once we've all left here—

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Thank you. It's not a valid point of order.

DEFERRED VOTES

NORTHERN HEALTH TRAVEL GRANT ADVISORY COMMITTEE ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 SUR LE COMITÉ CONSULTATIF DES SUBVENTIONS AUX RÉSIDENTS DU NORD DE L'ONTARIO POUR FRAIS DE TRANSPORT À DES FINS MÉDICALES

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

Bill 13, An Act to enact the Northern Health Travel Grant Advisory Committee Act, 2024 / Projet de loi 13, Loi édictant la Loi de 2024 sur le Comité consultatif des subventions aux résidents du Nord de l'Ontario pour frais de transport à des fins médicales.

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

The division bells rang from 1149 to 1154.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Members will please take their seats.

On February 22, 2024, Mr. Mantha moved second reading of Bill 13, An Act to enact the Northern Health Travel Grant Advisory Committee Act, 2024.

All those in favour, please rise and remain standing until recognized by the Clerk.

Ayes

Armstrong, Teresa J.	Gates, Wayne	Shamji, Adil
Bell, Jessica	Glover, Chris	Shaw, Sandy
Bourgouin, Guy	Hazell, Andrea	Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie)
Bowman, Stephanie	Hsu, Ted	Stiles, Marit
Brady, Bobbi Ann	Kernaghan, Terence	Tabuns, Peter
Burch, Jeff	Mamakwa, Sol	Taylor, Monique
Clancy, Aislinn	Mantha, Michael	Vanthof, John
Collard, Lucille	McCrimmon, Karen	Vaugeois, Lise
Fife, Catherine	Pasma, Chandra	West, Jamie
Fraser, John	Sattler, Peggy	Wong-Tam, Kristyn
French, Jennifer K.	Schreiner, Mike	

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

Nays

Anand, Deepak	Hogarth, Christine	Rickford, Greg
Babikian, Aris	Holland, Kevin	Riddell, Brian
Bailey, Robert	Jones, Sylvia	Romano, Ross
Barnes, Patrice	Jones, Trevor	Sabawy, Sheref
Bethlenfalvy, Peter	Jordan, John	Sandhu, Amarjot

Bresee, Ric	Kanapathi, Logan	Sarkaria, Prabmeet Singh
Byers, Rick	Kerzner, Michael S.	Sarrazin, Stéphane
Calandra, Paul	Khanjin, Andrea	Saunderson, Brian
Cho, Raymond Sung Joon	Kusendova-Bashta, Natalia	Scott, Laurie
Cho, Stan	Leardi, Anthony	Skelly, Donna
Clark, Steve	Lecce, Stephen	Smith, Dave
Coe, Lorne	Lumsden, Neil	Smith, David
Crawford, Stephen	MacLeod, Lisa	Smith, Graydon
Cuzzetto, Rudy	Martin, Robin	Smith, Laura
Dixon, Jess	McCarthy, Todd J.	Smith, Todd
Dowie, Andrew	McGregor, Graham	Surma, Kinga
Downey, Doug	Mulroney, Caroline	Tangri, Nina
Dunlop, Jill	Oosterhoff, Sam	Thanigasalam, Vijay
Fedeli, Victor	Pang, Billy	Thompson, Lisa M.
Ford, Doug	Parsa, Michael	Tibollo, Michael A.
Gallagher Murphy, Dawn	Piccini, David	Triantafilopoulos, Effie J.
Ghamari, Goldie	Pierre, Natalie	Wai, Daisy
Grewal, Hardeep Singh	Pirie, George	Yakubski, John
Hardeman, Ernie	Quinn, Nolan	
Harris, Mike	Rae, Matthew	

The Clerk of the Assembly (Mr. Trevor Day): The ayes are 32; the nays are 73.

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

Second reading negatived.

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

The House recessed from 1158 to 1300.

INTRODUCTION OF GOVERNMENT BILLS

STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY AND STUDENT SUPPORTS ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 POUR RENFORCER LA RESPONSABILISATION ET LES MESURES DE SOUTIEN AUX ÉTUDIANTS

Ms. Dunlop moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 166, An Act to amend the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act / Projet de loi 166, Loi modifiant la Loi sur le ministère de la Formation et des Collèges et Universités.

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 minister care to briefly explain her bill?

Hon. Jill Dunlop: Yes, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The bill amends the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities Act with respect to colleges of applied arts and technology, and publicly assisted universities. The amendments include the following:

(1) Every college and university is required to have a student mental health policy that describes the programs, policies, services and supports available at the college or university in respect of student mental health;

(2) Every college and university is required to have policies and rules to address and combat racism and hate, including, but not limited to, anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; and

(3) The minister is authorized to issue directives in relation to the information to be provided about the costs associated with attending a college or university.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN WEEK ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 SUR LA SEMAINE DES CHRÉTIENS ORTHODOXES

Mr. Rakocevic moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 167, An Act to proclaim Orthodox Christian Week / Projet de loi 167, Loi proclamant la Semaine des chrétiens orthodoxes.

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 to briefly explain his bill.

Mr. Tom Rakocevic: Orthodox Easter Sunday, which commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the most significant and holy day in the Orthodox Christian calendar.

The Orthodox Christian Church has hundreds of millions of followers across the world, mainly situated in Europe, Africa and Asia. Although a minority faith in Ontario, Orthodox Christians have settled here for generations and have established active churches and cultural associations which add to the diverse cultural fabric of our province.

Faith is a central part of many people's culture and identity. Proclaiming Orthodox Christian Week recognizes and celebrates the unique faith, culture, traditions and history of Orthodox Christians in Ontario and across the world.

STORMWATER FLOOD PREVENTION ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 SUR LA PRÉVENTION DES INONDATIONS DUES AUX EAUX PLUVIALES

Mrs. McCrimmon moved first reading of the following bill:

Bill 168, An Act to implement the Low Impact Development Stormwater Management Guidance Manual and to report on stormwater management guidelines periodically / Projet de loi 168, Loi mettant en oeuvre le Manuel d'orientation sur la gestion des eaux pluviales par un aménagement à faible impact et visant la rédaction de rapports périodiques sur les lignes directrices en matière de gestion des eaux pluviales.

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 Kanata–Carleton like to explain her bill?

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: This bill would enact the Stormwater Flood Prevention Act, 2024. It would require the minister to publish a final version of the Low Impact Development Stormwater Management Guidance Manual, which is a document that provides technical and procedural guidance for planning, design and operation of stormwater management practices. The current stormwater design guidelines have not been updated for 15 years.

The act also requires the minister to prepare a report 10 years from the day the guidance document is published and every 10 years thereafter reviewing the adequacy of the guidelines and to publish that report.

MOTIONS

HOUSE SITTINGS

Mr. Trevor Jones: I move that, pursuant to standing order 7(c), the House shall continue to meet past the ordinary hour of adjournment until midnight on the following dates: Monday, May 6; Tuesday, May 7; Wednesday, May 8; Thursday, May 9; Monday, May 13; Tuesday, May 14; Wednesday, May 15; Thursday, May 16; Monday, May 27; Tuesday, May 28; Wednesday, May 29; Thursday, May 30; Monday, June 3; Tuesday, June 4; Wednesday, June 5; Thursday, June 6; Monday, June 10; Tuesday, June 11; Wednesday, June 12; and Thursday, June 13, 2024.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Mr. Jones, Chatham-Kent–Leamington, is moving that, pursuant to standing order 7(c), the House shall continue to meet past the ordinary hour of adjournment until midnight on the following dates: Monday, May 6—

Interjection: Dispense.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Dispense? Dispense. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? I heard a no.

All those in favour of the motion will please say “aye.” All those opposed will please say “nay.”

In my opinion, the ayes have it.

Motion agreed to.

PETITIONS

TUITION

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I am proud to present this petition on behalf of the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario calling on the Legislature to fight the fees. It reads:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas since 1980, whilst accounting for inflation, the average domestic undergraduate tuition has increased by 215%, and the average domestic graduate tuition by 247%; and

“Whereas upon graduation, 50% of students will have a median debt of around \$17,500, which takes an average of 9.5 years to repay; and

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“Whereas the average undergraduate tuition for international students has increased by 192% between 2011 and 2021, and in colleges, they pay an average of \$14,306 annually compared to the average domestic fee of \$3,228; and

“Whereas the government of Ontario made changes to OSAP and student financial assistance in 2018 ... resulting in over a \$1-billion cut in assistance to students; and

“Whereas the so-called ‘Student Choice Initiative’ was defeated in the courts, and students need legislation to protect their right to organize and funding for students’ groups;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, support the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario’s call and petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to commit to (1) free and accessible education for all, (2) grants, not loans, and (3) legislate students’ right to organize.”

I fully support the thousands of students who have signed this petition, affix my signature and send it to the table with page Ella.

TAXATION

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I have a petition in front of me: “Time Ontario Provides Relief to Families From Federal Carbon Tax.” It reads:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas beginning November 8, 2023, the federal government announced a three-year exemption on the carbon tax on home heating oil, which is the main heat source in the Maritime provinces;

“Whereas beginning January 1, 2024, the government of Saskatchewan removed the federal carbon tax from home heating (natural gas and electricity), which will result in savings for the majority of Saskatchewan families unfairly left out of the federal government’s three-year pause of carbon tax on home heating oil;

“Whereas the federal government has unfairly discriminated against a host of other provinces like Ontario where the main heat source is natural gas, which is cleaner than heating oil; and

“Whereas carbon tax on natural gas is adding to the cost of living for Ontario families, businesses and farm operations;

“We, the undersigned, petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to follow Saskatchewan’s lead, and remove the carbon tax from natural gas, propane and electric heat for the next three years.”

I fully support this petition and will send it to the table with Pharoah.

TUITION

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It’s my honour to present the following petition on behalf of the thousands of students who have signed this for the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario. It’s entitled, “Fight the Fees.” It reads:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas since 1980, whilst accounting for inflation, the average domestic undergraduate tuition has increased by 215%, and the average domestic graduate tuition by 247%; and

“Whereas upon graduation, 50% of students will have a median debt of around \$17,500, which takes an average of 9.5 years to repay; and

“Whereas the average undergraduate tuition for international students has increased by 192% between 2011 and 2021, and in colleges, they pay an average of \$14,306 annually compared to the average domestic fee of \$3,228; and

“Whereas the government of Ontario made changes to OSAP and student financial assistance in 2018-19, resulting in over a \$1-billion cut in assistance to students; and

“Whereas the so-called Student Choice Initiative was defeated in the courts, and students need legislation to protect their right to organize and funding for students’ groups;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, support the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario’s call and petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to commit to (1) free and accessible education for all, (2) grants, not loans, and (3) legislate students’ right to organize.”

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

ACCESSIBILITY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Mr. Ted Hsu: I have a petition from Kingston and the Islands from Julie Mallette.

“Whereas the shortage and unaffordability of accessible apartments (elevator and barrier-free entrance) in Ontario has resulted in an excess of applicants to housing assistance programs. The only priority group for subsidized rent programs and portable housing benefit programs are those fleeing domestic abuse and sex trafficking, therefore physically disabled residents, living in inaccessible buildings must remain on the same lengthy wait-list as able-bodied individuals. Furthermore, as offers for housing are based on the date of application approval, able-bodied individuals are being offered units in accessible buildings and/or funding before those not physically able to safely access their home. The resulting physical and mental deterioration translates to increased health care costs and social services costs. Secondly, disabled residents wait-listed for subsidized modified apartment units, who accept the portable housing benefit to, at minimum, live with in a building with an elevator,

become ineligible for a modified subsidized apartment, and remain unsafe;

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

“(1) Make physically disabled residents currently residing in inaccessible buildings a priority group for housing assistance programs;

“(2) Allow those who accept the portable housing benefit to move to an accessible entry building, but require a modified apartment, to remain eligible for subsidized rent programs for the modified unit;

“(3) Increase funding to the portable housing benefit program so that low-income, physically disabled residents can have choice in where they live, and reduce the years of wait time;” and finally,

“(4) Increase the number of modified units being built for the physically disabled.”

TUITION

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I’m honoured to rise to present this petition on behalf of thousands of students from the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario. I also would like to thank Sydney Black from University of Guelph.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas since 1980, whilst accounting for inflation, the average domestic undergraduate tuition has increased by 215%, and the average domestic graduate tuition by 247%; and

“Whereas upon graduation, 50% of students will have a median debt of around \$17,500, which takes an average of 9.5 years to repay; and

“Whereas the average undergraduate tuition for international students has increased by 192% between 2011 and 2021, and in colleges, they pay an average of \$14,306 annually compared to the average domestic fee of \$3,228; and

“Whereas the government of Ontario made changes to OSAP and student financial assistance in 2018-19, resulting in over a \$1-billion cut in assistance to students; and

“Whereas the so-called Student Choice Initiative was defeated in the courts, students need legislation to protect their right to organize and funding for students’ groups;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, support the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario’s call and petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to commit to (1) free and accessible education for all, (2) grants, not loans, and (3) legislate students’ right to organize.”

I’m going to affix my name to this and full-heartedly support the 1,000 students that are on these petitions, and I’m going to hand it to page Skye.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Mr. Ted Hsu: This is a petition from Sally Palmer and others.

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Ontario’s social assistance rates are well below Canada’s official Market Basket Measure poverty line and far from adequate to cover the rising costs of food and rent: \$733 for individuals on OW and \$1,308 for ODSP;

“Whereas an open letter to the Premier and two cabinet ministers, signed by over 230 organizations, recommends that social assistance rates be doubled for both Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP);

“Whereas small increases to ODSP have still left these citizens below the poverty line. Both they and those receiving the frozen OW rates are struggling to survive at this time of alarming inflation;

“Whereas the government of Canada recognized in its 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 double social assistance rates for OW and ODSP.”

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TUITION

Ms. Catherine Fife: I want to thank the amazing students from Wilfrid Laurier University for collecting these signatures. This is entitled “Fight the Fees.”

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas since 1980, whilst accounting for inflation, the average domestic undergraduate tuition has increased by 215%, and the average domestic graduate tuition by 247%; and

“Whereas upon graduation, 50% of students will have a median debt of around \$17,500, which takes an average of 9.5 years to repay; and

“Whereas the average undergraduate tuition for international students has increased by 192% between 2011 and 2021, and in colleges, they pay an average of \$14,306 annually compared to the average domestic fee of \$3,228; and

“Whereas the government of Ontario made changes to OSAP and student financial assistance in 2018-19, resulting in over a \$1-billion cut in assistance to students; and

“Whereas the so-called Student Choice Initiative was defeated in the courts, students need legislation to protect their right to organize and funding for students’ groups;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, support the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario’s call and petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to commit to (1) free and accessible education for all, (2) grants, not loans, and (3) legislate students’ right to organize.”

It’s my pleasure to affix my signature, and I will be giving this to page Charles.

LAND USE PLANNING

Ms. Bobbi Ann Brady: I have a petition in front of me:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Haldimand county has requested a minister’s zoning order (MZO) to accelerate the development of a proposed city of 40,000 people on industrially zoned buffer land in the Nanticoke industrial park; and

“Whereas the housing development will grow the population of the Port Dover-Nanticoke area from approximately 7,000 to 47,000 people; and

“Whereas this development will have a significant impact on infrastructure such as roadways; and

“Whereas 40,000 people living in the Nanticoke industrial park buffer zone is a threat to area jobs in steelmaking, oil refining and the related trades;

“We, the undersigned, ask the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to not grant the Haldimand county request for an MZO.”

I fully support this petition, will affix my signature and send it to the table with page Sarah.

TUITION

Ms. Jennifer K. French: I’m pleased to present a petition from the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario. Thousands of students have put their name on this petition to the government and it is:

“To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas since 1980, whilst accounting for inflation, the average domestic undergraduate tuition has increased by 215%, and the average domestic graduate tuition by 247%; and

“Whereas upon graduation, 50% of students will have a median debt of around \$17,500, which takes an average of 9.5 years to repay; and

“Whereas the average undergraduate tuition for international students has increased by 192% between 2011 and 2021, and in colleges, they pay an average of \$14,306 annually compared to the average domestic fee of \$3,228; and

“Whereas the government of Ontario made changes to OSAP and student financial assistance in 2018-19, resulting in over a \$1-billion cut in assistance to students; and

“Whereas the so-called Student Choice Initiative was defeated in the courts. Students need legislation to protect their right to organize and funding for students’ groups;

“Therefore we, the undersigned, support the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario’s call and petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to commit to (1) free and accessible education for all, (2) grants, not loans, and (3) legislate students’ right to organize.”

I stand alongside thousands of students and will affix my signature to this and send it to the table with page Charles.

ENERGY POLICIES

MPP Jamie West: I want to thank Elizabeth Carswell for collecting these signatures for this petition. It is titled “Transform Ontario’s Energy Sector.

“Whereas residents are struggling with energy bill increases and need relief; and

“Whereas natural gas is no longer the cheapest way to heat homes because electric heat pumps are now much more efficient, can provide all heating needs even in cold climates, and result in far lower energy bills compared to gas heating; and

“Whereas natural gas is methane gas, which is a fossil fuel that causes approximately one third of Ontario’s GHG emissions and must be phased out because it is inconsistent with all climate targets, while heat pumps result in the lowest GHG emissions and are consistent with a zero-carbon future; and

“Whereas the natural gas expansion program provides subsidies to bring natural gas to communities across Ontario but currently cannot be redirected by municipalities toward the best option for their residents—heat pumps; and

“Whereas far more residents could achieve far lower energy bills if municipalities were allowed to redirect those subsidies toward heat pumps for their residents, which would also benefit existing natural gas customers by reducing the financial risks they bear in relation to the gas expansion projects; and

“Whereas the government of Ontario is considering requests from Enbridge Gas Inc. to reduce oversight by the Ontario Energy Board over gas expansion and other pipeline projects at a time when the Ontario Energy Board’s technical and financial expertise is critical as the energy transition takes place;

“We, the undersigned, call upon the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to:

“(1) Amend the natural gas expansion program to allow municipalities to redirect funds toward heat pumps, including for ongoing phase 2 projects; and

“(2) Ask the Ontario Energy Board to determine in gas expansion leave-to-construct applications which option would result in the lowest energy bills—directing the subsidy to gas expansion or to heat pump subsidies.”

I support this petition, I’ll affix my signature and provide it to page Mesapé.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

KEEPING ENERGY COSTS DOWN ACT, 2024

LOI DE 2024 VISANT À MAINTENIR LA FACTURE ÉNERGÉTIQUE À UN NIVEAU ABORDABLE

Mr. Todd Smith moved second reading of the following bill:

Bill 165, An Act to amend the Ontario Energy Board Act, 1998 respecting certain Board proceedings and related matters / Projet de loi 165, Loi modifiant la Loi de 1998 sur la Commission de l’énergie de l’Ontario en ce qui concerne certaines instances dont la Commission est saisie et des questions connexes.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): I turn it back to the minister.

Hon. Todd Smith: Good afternoon to all my colleagues in the Legislature here today. It's been a while since I have spoken for an hour in the Legislature. So sit back, relax and enjoy the show for the next 60 minutes.

Second reading of Bill 165, the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act, 2024: If you get one thing today, Madam Speaker, I think it will be how critical this bill is to keeping housing and energy costs down for families. At a time where global and countrywide pressures like inflation and increasing building costs are forcing housing prices up, I think this bill should be a no-brainer for all of the parties in the Legislature who are looking to provide some relief to their constituents.

This new legislation is going to build housing faster, it's going to save money and it's going to protect customer choice, something that we are focused on doing here in the PC government. The way that we're going to protect customer choice is by providing the government with time-limited authority to reverse this OEB decision on natural gas connection costs that would have significantly increased the price of new homes and businesses across our province. We're introducing new requirements as well for the Ontario Energy Board to engage broadly with stakeholders on major energy decisions that impact our constituents, and modernizing the Ontario Energy Board's leave-to-construct process for the first time in more than 20 years.

Each of these changes would cut red tape and ensure new homebuyers and businesses continue to have access to reliable and affordable energy from the source of their choice, and removing red tape, as I mentioned earlier.

Back when I was the red tape minister, we were focused on ensuring that we were cutting red tape across the province by 25% and therefore making it a more efficient jurisdiction to do business in. As a result of the work that was done by me back in 2018-19, by my predecessor, Minister Fedeli, and by Minister Gill, we have reduced a significant amount of red tape—about \$9 billion each and every year on the cost of doing business in Ontario.

The proposals in Bill 165 also represent this government's ongoing commitment to creating an energy system that meets Ontario's growing demand while driving innovation and moving our economy forward. While cutting that red tape, getting our electricity prices under control and creating a jurisdiction for investment, we are seeing energy demand grow. Since day one, we have worked to prioritize the ratepayer, keep those costs down, make the policy environment around energy predictable and the system stable, and give consumers more choice in how they track and control their energy use and their costs.

1330

While that may like seem a common-sense approach to doing business, I can tell you that common sense hasn't always prevailed in Ontario's energy planning space. In fact, it's really easy to remember when the previous Liberal government presided over the fastest-rising hydro prices in North America, when the hydro average bill

tripled—tripled, Madam Speaker—between 2003 and 2018, and families saw their bills increase by more than a thousand dollars per year. I can tell you, at my home in Quinte West, my average bill went from \$220 a month to \$660 a month when the Liberals were in charge of our electricity system.

And there are some members who were over there on the NDP bench right now—none of the Liberals are there because they were all voted out; they have been voted out since. But there are some members of the NDP caucus who were here during that time, and they know how inundated our constituency offices were from people who were absolutely fearful about the costs of electricity in their homes. That's not the case anymore. Those sky-high electricity costs that we were experiencing in Ontario chased 300,000 manufacturing jobs out of our province.

This legislation that has been introduced is just another way that we're delivering on all the work that we've been doing since day one to make energy and housing in this province affordable again. Just think: We have cut the gas tax, again, through June of this year. We're saving families \$312 a year through the Ontario Electricity Rebate. We're investing an additional \$50 million in the Ontario Electricity Support Program, which is delivered by the Ontario Energy Board, to help those who need it most. We have launched the Clean Home Heating Initiative, with incentives of up to \$4,500 per household to roll out electric air-source heat pumps paired with an existing natural gas furnace.

We've scrapped the previous Liberal government's cap-and-trade carbon tax that punished people and businesses. And unlike the current crop of Liberals, the ones that are still here, and their new leader, Bonnie Crombie—who has refused for the past week to come out against the tax, even though we all know that she supports a carbon tax—we have introduced legislation to protect the people of Ontario from any future carbon tax.

We've heard the same old song and dance from the few Liberals who are here. The member from Kanata-Carleton, who is a new member to the Legislature, stood up in this House just before Christmas saying that the people of Ontario were better off because of the crippling federal Liberal carbon tax. Now, she's a former federal Liberal MP, so I guess you can understand why she would say that. But is she bringing that same kind of thinking here to the Ontario Legislature again?

The Liberal energy critic from Kingston, who is here with us today, wants us to go back to the failed Liberal energy policies of the Green Energy Act. He posted in a tweet about three weeks ago that if we had not cancelled all of those Green Energy Act contracts—those 800 contracts that would have driven up the cost of electricity in our province by a billion dollars on top of what we're already experiencing—we'd be better off.

So I think we know what this current crop of Liberals and their brand new leader are thinking when it comes to a carbon tax and the kind of chaos that they would bring to energy costs in the province of Ontario. Again, we can't go back there, Madam Speaker. We have to move forward

with prices that are reliable and affordable, and have a system that's clean and safe.

All of the work that we have done since 2018 has paved the way for us to move boldly forward as a leader in economic growth and reliable, affordable and clean energy. For example, Ontario is quickly becoming a leader in electric vehicles and battery development, with historic investments at Stellantis down in Windsor, to Volkswagen in the St. Thomas-London area, and in eastern Ontario at the brand new Umicore plant, which is going to be opening in Loyalist township.

We're also seeing major investments in green steelmaking in two communities: Sault Ste. Marie in the north and also Hamilton. And while the traditional steelmaking process of using coal and coke is one of the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions in the province, we're working with the federal government and the steel industry to end the use of coal and electrify their operations to support the production of green steel that's going to fuel our growing automotive sector that we are seeing here in the province.

Imagine, Madam Speaker, just what a difference those electric arc furnaces are going to make. I want you to picture driving from Burlington over that Skyway bridge into Hamilton and looking off to the right at the Hamilton waterfront and seeing those massive piles of coal that are sitting there on the waterfront. Once these electric arc furnaces are up and running, there won't be any piles of coal there, and we can look forward to developing a brand new waterfront that has lots of restaurants and bars and economic development and good things happening there.

Interjections.

Hon. Todd Smith: Yes. We're exploring innovative new solutions in our world-class nuclear sector as well, with cutting-edge advancements in medical life-saving isotopes and small modular reactors, or SMRs. In fact, we're making progress on developing the country's first grid-scale SMR at the Darlington new nuclear site. This isn't only a first for Canada, but it's a first for the Western world and G7 countries. As a result, we're attracting major interest from around the world, helping us open new export opportunities for our province in countries like Poland and Estonia and the Czech Republic, and the list goes on and on.

This incredible economic growth, alongside a population that's forecast to increase by millions of people by the end of this decade, means that we need a lot more energy. One of the biggest drivers of that demand is our government's plan to build one and a half million new homes for Ontario's growing population by 2031. Bill 165, if passed, would make the legislative changes needed to help ensure that these homes get built faster and that the families who buy them have affordable choices for home heating.

But before we get too far into that discussion, I think we really need to set the playing field and consider where we are today. If you look broadly at our province's entire energy demand, natural gas currently meets 39% while electricity only meets 21%. If you look at home heating,

natural gas plays an even bigger role. It's the primary heating source for approximately 70% of the people in this province, or about 3.8 million homes. While our government is supporting new options through the Clean Home Heating Initiative that I mentioned earlier, we still need to ensure that we have broad access to all forms of heating, and that includes natural gas.

That's why I was extremely disappointed in an Ontario Energy Board decision that was made just before Christmas in late December that would effectively increase the cost of new homes. In an unusual two-to-one split decision, and this is very unusual at the OEB, the Ontario Energy Board reduced the revenue horizon—that's the period of time that natural gas utilities use to calculate the upfront costs of new gas connections—for new residential and small commercial gas connections from 40 years, which has been in existence for almost 30 years—amortizing the cost from 40 years down to zero years by January 1 of next year.

What this means is that natural gas connection costs, which are normally paid over those five years, would be owed in full upfront, and that would lead to thousands of dollars added to the cost of building new homes. To be frank, the OEB simply strayed out of its jurisdiction, out of its lane when making this decision. It's not only a huge departure from the realities of our energy system, but it's also a huge departure from the historical practice which, as I say, has been in place for nearly 30 years—since 1998.

In fact, according to the OEB's own decision, the cost of a new home would increase by about \$4,400 on average across the province. Yes, that's bad enough, adding \$4,400 to the cost of a new home. But it would cost significantly more, in the tens of thousands of dollars, for farms and residences in rural and northern Ontario that have access to these natural gas pipelines. Think what happens when a residence in rural or northern Ontario can't connect to natural gas. I'm sure there are some members of the NDP and maybe a few in the Liberals who would just tell them to go buy an electric heat pump and hope for the best. As a matter of fact, we just heard the member from Sudbury supporting a petition in the Legislature telling them to do exactly that. But in Ontario, especially in the harsh winters that you can experience here in Canada, in northern Ontario in particular, that may not be a realistic option.

1340

Madam Speaker, I installed a heat pump at my house a number of years ago. I really like it. I don't have access to natural gas where I live because I live out in the boonies in Quinte West. But even during a southern Ontario winter, even during a winter like this one that's been pretty mild compared to other winter seasons, my furnace—my electric furnace—still kicks on on the coldest days of the year to keep my house warm, meaning that the electric open air heat pump can't always heat my home.

So what do you do, Madam Speaker, if the NDP or the Liberals or the Greens had their way? They would have everybody on open air heat pumps, and there would be times during the year where people actually would be freezing in their home because they can't keep their house

warm. If folks in northern and rural Ontario don't have access to natural gas like those in the big cities do, they're often forced to rely on home heating oil or propane, which are more emitting than natural gas is and they're also more expensive.

Now, one argument I've already heard from the opposition is that this additional cost of connecting to natural gas is carried by the developer and it's not—

Ms. Catherine Fife: And passed on to the homeowner.

Hon. Todd Smith:—carried by the homebuyer.

So now you are saying it's passed on to the homebuyer, okay. Because previously, you weren't saying that. But then again, we just had the critic responsible for energy in question period actually concerned about the cost of natural gas for people in Ontario and the critic for labour from northern Ontario just saying that everybody should basically rip out their natural gas and go with an electric heat pump. So they've been spinning over there, and they don't know exactly what their position is.

Speaker, I think it's important that we take a moment before we get into the broader debate to be clear about how ridiculous the argument is that the home builder or the developer is going to carry the upfront cost of this and it's not going to be passed on to the consumer. Let me give you just a few real-world examples of much it could cost to connect a new home, business or development to the natural gas system if you had to pay up front.

In the GTA, connecting a new recreation and wellness centre could see an upfront connection charge of about \$128,000. On a new 39-home subdivision—actually in your riding, the Minister of Labour's riding, in Campbellford—it would cost about \$357,000 up front. That's more than \$9,000 a home. A recent restaurant project in southwestern Ontario would see an upfront charge of about \$18,000. There's even one other example here that I've got: A recent three-building condominium here in the GTA would see an upfront connection charge of approximately \$1,065,000.

This bill, Bill 165, would keep costs down by allowing those costs to be paid off over 40 years, amortized over 40 years, instead of all up front. That's a big win for the taxpayer. It's a big win for the business owner. And, more importantly, it's a real win for the homebuyer—that new homebuyer that's trying to enter the market.

There's only one party in the Legislature that actually cares about keeping the cost of new homes down and that's the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario. Because at a time when Ontario, like the rest of Canada, is already grappling with high interest rates and inflationary pressures along with the impact of terrible federal policies like the carbon tax, we can't in good conscience take any action that would raise prices on the backs of those first-time homebuyers and moms and dads, like me, who want to get their kids out of the house and into their own home and start building their own equity, or those younger moms and dads, unlike me, who are looking for more space for their growing families. Speaker, we definitely can't let it stand in the way when we had well over 200

requests from Ontario municipalities to expand access to natural gas in their communities.

Now, I go to the ROMA, the Rural Ontario Municipal Association, conference every year, and AMO, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, every year. And my very, very capable parliamentary assistant here, Mr. Sarrazin, from eastern Ontario, sits and listens to municipal delegations where they're begging us for natural gas expansion projects in their communities because they want to have this low-cost, reliable, affordable energy in their communities for their constituents and for new homeowners. As a government elected with a mandate to rebuild Ontario's economy and keep costs down for people and businesses and build the homes our growing province needs, we simply can't stand for that cost being borne by those new homeowners. That's why Bill 165 will allow us to reverse the specific part of the OEB decision, protect future homebuyers and keep shovels in the ground at a time where we've got a goal to build 1.5 million homes by 2031.

Speaker, reversing the decision alone isn't enough if we don't address the issues that got us to this place. While the Ontario Energy Board makes hundreds of decisions every year—the OEB is making all kinds of decisions on rate applications every day and, to their credit, almost all of them have been without issue. This one particular issue, though, did raise some concerns about public engagement in the decision-making process. In fact, in the decision itself, one of the commissioners—the dissenting commissioner—noted that the decision on natural gas connection costs was reached without input from key stakeholders, like the people that build homes, like construction companies, like the contractors, like the farmers that were going to be able to access natural gas in their communities, the people and the businesses who actually build the homes, the farmers in this province.

The same commissioner—Commissioner Duff is her name—also noted that this decision, which could have significant impacts on electricity demand, was reached without any input at all from the Independent Electricity System Operator, the IESO. To quote from that dissenting commissioner, “Is the scenario of no-new-gas-connections, replaced by construction of all-electric developments, feasible? For example, would electricity generators, transmitters, distributors and the IESO be able to meet Ontario's energy demands in 2025?” She answers her own question. “I don't know,” she says. The commissioner said, “I don't know,” Madam Speaker.

Let me tell you, as Ontario's Minister of Energy, that was quite a concerning quote to read in the dissenting opinion, especially when our government is focused on a pragmatic approach to supporting the electrification of home heating and transportation and manufacturing, with a focus on keeping energy costs down and energy reliable. The other three parties in the Legislature don't care about keeping the costs of energy down. They're very ideological in their approach to the energy sector and electricity. We're not. We're relying on organizations like the Independent Electricity System Operator to give us the

pragmatic advice that comes from operating the electricity system in Ontario. Every decision that we've made has been a very pragmatic decision. The Clean Home—

Interjection.

Hon. Todd Smith: Somebody doesn't understand the difference between the IESO and the Ontario Energy Board, but if she paid attention longer, maybe she would understand.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Through the Chair. Comments through the Chair, please.

Hon. Todd Smith: The Clean Home Heating Initiative is deploying a perfect example of that pragmatic approach, right? It is a pragmatic approach. Hybrid heating solutions pair electrically powered air-source heat pumps with a conventional natural gas furnace and automatically switch to the least expensive energy source to reduce energy costs and emissions by leveraging Ontario's world-class electricity grid.

1350

That makes a lot of sense, Madam Speaker, this Clean Home Heating Initiative using hybrid heat pumps for customers that are natural gas customers. Because what it's going to do is have that hybrid heat pump that is operating on electricity most of the time, but when the temperature does hit minus 15 or minus 18, or minus 20 sometimes overnight—or even colder up in Kiiwetinoong; it gets very cold up there in northwestern Ontario—then your backup will kick in. In this case, the natural gas furnace will kick in.

This is a very, very pragmatic approach, and the CHHI, our Clean Home Heating Initiative, is operating in a number of municipalities across the province: in Durham, in Barrie, in St. Catharines, in Sault Ste. Marie. It's a program that we've been expanding, and taking a very pragmatic approach. Maintaining access to natural gas also ensures reliable access to heat, as I mentioned, on those coldest days of the year.

Another part of that pragmatic approach was the establishment of the Electrification and Energy Transition Panel. This panel is advising me. It's advising our government on the highest-value short-, medium- and long-term opportunities for the energy sector to help Ontario's economy prepare for electrification and the energy transition. While the OEB was aware that the Electrification and Energy Transition Panel's report was to be released around the time of their decision, the OEB decided to go beyond their role as an energy regulator and make major energy policy decisions without waiting for the government's response stemming from the panel's final report. That's unfortunate, because the panel's recommendations and our government's response will have a significant impact on the sector and Ontario's planning decisions.

We brought in experts for a reason. The panel was chaired by David Collie, the past president and CEO of the Electrical Safety Authority of Ontario. Other panel members were Chief Emerita Emily Whetung of Curve Lake First Nation and Professor Monica Gattinger, director of the Institute for Science, Society and Policy, a

full professor at the school of political studies and founding chair of Positive Energy at the University of Ottawa. David, Monica and Emily conducted extensive engagements with key energy stakeholders and Indigenous partners across four streams from March to July 2023. In the end, more than 200 stakeholders, Indigenous partners and communities, government departments and agencies, and members of the public provided input to that panel.

In the end, all that work resulted in serious and well-thought-out recommendations. For example, a key recommendation of the electricity panel—Ontario's Clean Energy Opportunity is the name of that report—was for the government to issue a natural gas policy statement providing clear direction for the long-term role of natural gas in Ontario, something that we intend to do, because, as laid out in their report, natural gas will continue to play a critical role as a source of energy in the province for at least the short and medium term. That recognizes the fact that any major shift away from this fuel source—which supports more than 70%, as I mentioned, of our home heating needs—would require a significant buildout of our grid that couldn't be accomplished quickly.

Just take Quebec: Quebec uses mostly electric heating. Over the past few years, Ontario has had to step in to supply electricity from our natural gas generating stations on the coldest days of the year to keep the heat on at homes in Quebec and businesses in Quebec. We don't want us to be in the same position, where families have to worry about if the heat will turn on or not. Under our government, we won't be.

Given these important observations, there's no doubt that the OEB decision is out of touch. No one could think that going from a 40-year period to zero years and adding thousands of dollars to the price of a home during a housing crisis is a pragmatic or responsible approach. As a matter of fact, it's a completely irrational approach to go from 40 years to zero. Even one of the OEB commissioners in the decision, in a rare dissenting opinion, recommended only reducing the horizon to 20 years.

Given these concerns, our government saw an opportunity to continue our work, originally started back in our first mandate, to modernize the Ontario Energy Board. In 2019, my predecessor, the member for Kenora–Rainy River, Minister Rickford, took steps to enhance trust and transparency in Ontario's energy sector by restructuring the OEB's governance and operational framework. That was part of the work under the Fixing the Hydro Mess Act.

Today, we're continuing that work and responding to the concerns raised in the December 2023 decision by proposing legislative changes that would ensure major OEB decisions with far-reaching implications on our constituents—like on natural gas connection costs—don't happen again without adequate stakeholder consultation and without all the facts about government policy priorities.

Specifically, the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act requires the Ontario Energy Board to conduct broader

engagement when conducting both natural gas and electricity hearings. If passed, it also gives the government the authority to reintroduce regulations to require the OEB to notify and invite participation or testimony from specific stakeholders or economic sectors. For example, if we know a decision is going to have a major impact on a particular sector—like transit operators, low-income service providers, the construction industry or a particular government agency like the IESO, the Independent Electricity System Operator—we could require the OEB to notify them and invite their participation.

These changes would also provide the government, through the Minister of Energy, with the authority to require a separate hearing, more formally known as a generic hearing, on any matter of public interest that could arise during an OEB proceeding. This would further ensure that Ontarians' voices are heard on matters that will affect their families, businesses and communities.

To further protect customers, we're also proposing to make regulatory changes that would prohibit customers from being required to financially contribute to the construction of certain gas transmission projects. These proposed changes would preserve the historical treatment of natural gas transmission projects under OEB jurisdiction when those projects are specified by government direction. Access to reliable and affordable energy has been critical to landing historic international investments over the past six years, and maintaining the current approach where customers are not required to make upfront payments will ensure Ontario continues to attract critical investments in sectors like the greenhouse sector and the automotive industries in southwestern Ontario.

It wasn't that long ago when I was the energy critic, Madam Speaker—from 2015 to 2018—and I would talk to the folks from the auto sector all the time. As a matter of fact, Sergio Marchionne, who used to be the CEO of Chrysler, said famously that, under Premier Wynne and the previous Liberal government, Ontario was the least competitive jurisdiction, not in Canada—the least competitive jurisdiction in North America and the world to build cars.

I was the Minister of Economic Development in 2018-19 when we were setting about making sure that Ontario was a competitive place and open for business again when I took the call, in the first four months in that role in government, from the CEO of General Motors Global telling us—the Premier was on the call with me—that after 100 years of building cars and trucks in Oshawa, they were going to be shuttering that plant. I remember specifically the words from the CEO at GM. He said, "This is nothing that your government has done. You've inherited an absolute mess. We have full confidence that you're going to fix the situation, make Ontario a competitive place to do business again, and we'll be back." I'm happy to say that we've done exactly that and the trucks are rolling off the line in Oshawa, Ontario, again at that General Motors plant.

All of the amendments that we brought forward would enshrine the good principles that have guided sound

decision-making for these last number of years and protect against uncertainty. They're also going to provide reassurance to communities and to businesses that they can rely on the energy system in Ontario, something they previously couldn't do. Access to reliable, affordable energy is critical to our province's growth, and these changes are going to help ensure that Ontario remains that attractive place for businesses to invest and families to call home.

Bill 165, the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act, doesn't stop there. We also proposed to streamline the leave-to-construct process for small energy projects, making reliable and affordable energy options available to communities, homes and businesses in a more cost-effective and timely manner.

1400

Today, anyone looking to connect a new home to Ontario's natural gas system with a pipeline must obtain a leave-to-construct approval from the OEB if the expected cost of the project will be \$2 million or greater. The OEB reviews the application and grants leave to carry out the project if it's deemed to be in the public interest to do so.

Over the past couple of years, we've heard concerns from mayors, councils and agricultural organizations across the province on this issue. I know my colleague the parliamentary assistant has heard these as well at places like ROMA and AMO. They're concerned that even the smallest projects to connect something like a new home no longer receive the exemption as originally intended.

The changes we're proposing would allow the government to prescribe conditions in regulation to exempt small projects from leave-to-construct while maintaining the crown's obligation related to rights-based consultation with Indigenous communities, ensuring that opportunities remain for their input into proposed new projects.

Specifically, if the bill is passed, the government intends to introduce regulations to streamline the leave-to-construct process by exempting small pipeline projects that cost between \$2 million and \$10 million, provided the crown's duty-to-consult obligations with Indigenous communities, as I mentioned, have been met. These changes would improve the timelines for pipeline construction and expansion by cutting red tape and expediting the installation of natural gas to rural, remote and underserved communities, helping to support a reliable and cost-effective provincial energy supply.

Speaker, I want to stress that both the government of Ontario and the OEB are committed to ensuring that Indigenous communities have a continued opportunity to bring their views forward and inform any decision that may impact their rights or interests. But these are small projects, for the most part. It's like relocating gas lines to support transit projects, or connecting a single home or small business or a new condo building, moving a gas line for municipal waterworks and those types of projects.

Project applicants would continue to contact the Ministry of Energy early in the planning process and provide the ministry with a description of the proposed project, including the need for the project, its terminal

points, characteristics such as the length and diameter of the pipeline and the proposed route. Along with any additional information requested, the Ministry of Energy will assess whether the proposed project triggers the duty to consult. Where it is triggered, the OEB would then determine whether the crown has adequately discharged its duty to consult prior to granting such applications.

I also want to be clear that for all projects, whether there's a leave-to-construct proceeding or not, proponents will continue to require authorizations from Ontario ministries and municipalities, including permits and other approvals relating to technical, safety and environmental requirements needed to support the construction of the pipeline.

To ensure the board meaningfully implements the changes outlined in the legislation, I intend to appoint a new chair for the Ontario Energy Board later this winter or early this spring. They will fill the role formerly held by Mr. Richard Dicerni, who passed away last year, just a few weeks after he stepped down from the position of chair.

Before I continue, I just want to take a moment to recognize the late Mr. Dicerni. Richard was a very, very distinguished public servant, who had served provincially and federally under all political stripes—including here in Ontario as Deputy Minister of Energy—before becoming president of Ontario Power Generation back in 1993. Richard had served Ontario and Canada very well during his 25-year career in public service and most recently as chair of the Ontario Energy Board, supporting them in their transition to the new governance structure, focusing on recruitment and organizational governance. He sadly passed away last summer, August 11, 2023.

On behalf of all of us, I want to express our deepest condolences to his wife, Carole Swan, and his family, including his son Patrick, who continues in his father's footsteps. Patrick serves as an assistant deputy minister and executive officer at Ontario's Ministry of Health.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank our acting chair, Glenn O'Farrell, who stepped up to fulfill this role on an interim basis following the sudden passing of his colleague. Glenn's leadership has been appreciated as well, especially as he continues this work until a new permanent chair is appointed.

When the new chair is appointed, I will expect them to continue the hard work of their predecessors and ensure that the board conducts appropriate consultation in line with the proposed legislative requirements before reaching decisions, and to reinforce the government's priority of supporting affordable, reliable and clean energy for all Ontarians.

Should this legislation be passed, and our new board chair is appointed, the government intends to introduce a natural gas policy statement, as I mentioned earlier, a recommendation of the Electrification and Energy Transition Panel to provide further direction to the Ontario Energy Board. At that point, we would return the issue of natural gas connection costs to the energy board for a new hearing.

I'm pleased to share that our approach has already resulted in early support from across the province. Catherine Swift, president of the Coalition of Concerned Manufacturers and Businesses of Canada, said, "This decision would have the effect of discouraging badly needed new home construction, especially regarding affordable housing. The decision would also discourage developers from using natural gas, one of the most efficient and cost-effective energy sources, in new housing developments." The government's approach "demonstrates a practicality that is sorely needed in many of our energy policy discussions today."

The Ontario Greenhouse Alliance, which represents Canada Flowers and Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers, said, "This legislation will ensure that Ontario's energy transition is practical and inclusive of a broader range of economic and social impact considerations...."

"In the legislation is equally important direction to ensure that future Ontario Energy Board decisions provide opportunity for a broader range of engagement and testimony from sectors and stakeholders that will be impacted by OEB decisions.

"The challenges of agriculture and food production around the world—providing safe, affordable, sustainable and secure agriculture products—means providing more of Ontario's greenhouse products to consumers here at home and around the world.

"I'd like to thank the Ontario government for this legislation and ensuring a fair and managed approach to Ontario's energy transition."

The CEO of the Ontario Real Estate Association, Tim Hudak, said, "The OEB's bad move to upend Ontario's long-standing approach to finance infrastructure like natural gas over time puts new neighbourhoods and desperately needed new homes in jeopardy.

"Ontario's ambitious housing supply goals necessitate new utility connections and infrastructure, including natural gas, to address the rising affordability crisis.

"OREA is in full support of the Ontario government overturning the OEB decision by whatever means necessary, including via legislation, to ensure Ontario can build the homes we need to house our population, both today and in the future."

These are just a few of the examples that you'll hear throughout the debate. But as you hear more, I think you'll hear one central theme emerge, that being that our government is taking a pragmatic approach to the issue of home heating and the role of natural gas in our system more broadly, an approach that advances a reliable system, that advances an affordable system, one that is maintaining and building on Ontario's clean energy advantage. That approach also reflects the work that we're doing as a government to ensure a reliable supply of electricity and that it continues to be available for all Ontarians as demand continues to grow across Ontario.

At the start I mentioned how the incredible economic growth we're experiencing as a province, alongside an ever-increasing move toward electrification for our homes and businesses and vehicles, and the fact that our

population is expected to increase by millions of people by the end of this decade, is impacting our demand for electricity. In fact, for the very first time since 2005—20 years ago—Ontario's electricity demand is rising. That's right: For the first time in 20 years we're experiencing increased electricity demand growth. It's because of all of the reasons that I talked about earlier: the massive investments that are being made in our province and all of the new homes that we're building.

In fact, expert analysis from Ontario's IESO—the Independent Electricity System Operator—shows that electricity demand could more than double by 2050. Think about that for a minute: could double by 2050. That means our entire current supply, which includes all of the nuclear and hydroelectric capacity that we currently have, would need to double to meet the anticipated demand. That represents the biggest build-out of our grid since Sir Adam Beck created our hydroelectric system over a century ago.

That's why we're taking action now, and have been for the last couple of years: to ensure that we have the energy. And we know that we're going to need that energy down the road, so we put these principles in place.

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And while we're already building new projects like the energy storage systems, government and those in the energy sector need to start planning for other major projects immediately so we have new, clean, zero-emissions projects ready to go when we need them.

That's why, last summer, I released Powering Ontario's Growth, laying out our plan to provide families and industries with the reliable, low-cost and clean power that we need to power Ontario's future. It sets out the key steps that we're taking to provide reliable, low-cost, clean power as our economy grows, as we electrify transportation and industry and we build those new homes. Powering Ontario's Growth builds on the key strengths of our system in Ontario: our diverse supply mix, made up of nuclear, hydro, natural gas, and intermittent renewables, and soon, the battery storage facilities that will make our system that much more efficient. It also builds on the significant action that we've already taken to meet demand through the end of the decade with major projects and procurements, and that includes a \$342-million expansion of energy efficiency programs and the largest energy storage procurement in Canada's history. And it builds on Ontario's international leadership in nuclear power and SMRs, on our legacy as the birthplace of the Candu reactor—still the safest, most reliable reactors in the world today—and on our reputation as a world-leading source of life-saving, cancer-fighting medical isotopes.

Nuclear power makes up more than half of our current electricity supply. And as a source of affordable and clean power, nuclear energy is why Ontario is able to maintain one of the cleanest electricity grids not just in Canada or North America, but in the entire world. That's why expanding our province's nuclear fleet is a key component of our plan to meet future demand. Through Powering Ontario's Growth, we've begun the planning and licensing for three additional small modular reactors at the

Darlington new nuclear site to round out the SMR fleet there to four units in all, increasing our supply of clean, non-emitting, reliable baseload power—1.2 gigawatts of new power. That's enough to power 1.2 million new homes.

A Conference Board of Canada study estimates that construction and operation of four SMRs would increase Canada's GDP by almost \$14 billion and sustain, on average, approximately 2,000 jobs per year. And building four units provides more opportunities for Ontario companies to make investments to expand their operations to serve the growing SMR market both domestically and abroad. These companies are in all of our ridings. There are over 220 companies in our nuclear supply chain, all doing amazing world-class work.

By being North America's leader in SMRs, we have the potential to grow the 65,000-person-strong nuclear sector that we have here in Ontario as well as drive economic growth and export opportunities that would allow us to be a potential supplier of products, services and expertise across a global market.

We have had visitors from around the world coming to Darlington, to tour the site. I always say, when I have an opportunity to speak about the SMR program, that the world is watching what's happening at OPG in Darlington. And I could tell you, we've had visitors from all around the world: from Poland, from Estonia, from the Czech Republic, to the United Arab Emirates, to Australia. They're coming from everywhere because we are in the pole position.

We had the governor of Indiana come up, as well, and I told him we were in the pole position. He's looking forward to the Indy 500 that's coming up a little bit later on this spring.

In addition to our SMR expansion, we're working with Bruce Power to begin pre-development work for the province's first large-scale nuclear station build in more than 30 years. As part of that project, Bruce Power will start community consultations and conduct the environmental assessment for federal approval to determine the feasibility of siting up to 4.8 gigawatts—that's 4,800 megawatts—of new nuclear generation on its current site of Bruce C. That's enough generation to power almost five million homes.

Recently, I was at Bruce for the launch of its request-for-information process to evaluate new nuclear technologies that could demonstrate value for ratepayers, stimulate the Ontario economy and be constructed within a timeline that meets Ontario's clean electricity demands. Initiating this early planning will ensure that the province has a reliable, low-cost and clean option ready to power the next major international investment, all the new homes that we're building in the province and those industries and sectors across the province as they grow and electrify.

This new supply will complement the extensive work already going on in the sector, and that includes the significant progress that has been made on refurbishment projects at Darlington and the major component replacements at Bruce. The refurbishments of these Candu

reactors at Darlington and Bruce, which have been on time—actually, ahead of schedule—and on budget, represent the largest clean energy projects in Ontario, securing a steady supply of emissions-free baseload power.

Just last month, I announced that our government is supporting Ontario Power Generation's plan to proceed with the next steps toward refurbishing Pickering Nuclear Generating Station's B units, securing another 2,000-plus megawatts at that site.

Madam Speaker, the world is watching. They're looking to Ontario to leverage our expertise as they make decisions on their own nuclear projects, including their own SMR deployment, to help them achieve energy independence, clean the air and meet their climate goals. That was apparent during my recent nuclear trade mission to France and the United Kingdom, and COP 28 in Dubai. Through meetings and events, I caught up with many of the jurisdictions who are looking to Ontario to inform the development of their own SMR programs, like Estonia, Poland, the UK and many others. In fact, Estonia's Fermi Energia has chosen GE Hitachi's SMR technology, the BWRX-300, for deployment in Estonia, specifically citing the Darlington SMR project as a factor in their selection decision.

It's clear that there is recognition globally that nuclear power is essential to achieving net-zero goals and long-term energy security, particularly in the face of Russian aggression and the unprovoked attack of Ukraine. In Dubai, we saw 22 countries, including Canada, sign an international resolution to triple global nuclear capacity by the year 2050, and I also signed a partnership agreement, along with my colleague the Minister of the Environment, while in Dubai, making Ontario the first subnational jurisdiction in the world to join the Net Zero Nuclear initiative to help the world deploy reliable, affordable, clean nuclear energy, to provide energy security for countries around the world.

With Ontario already well ahead of the curve, with decades of experience with our Candu reactors and years ahead of the world on SMRs, we have an incredible opportunity to export our expertise, our experience and materials from our world-class nuclear supply chain, helping to create even more jobs here at home. And while I know not every party in this Legislature supports our nuclear workers—just a week ago, the energy critic from the NDP and the MPP for University–Rosedale said in a flyer for a town hall meeting that “nuclear is harmful to the environment and human health”—our government will always stand with our nuclear workers, who do so much for our province.

Beyond nuclear energy, Powering Ontario's Growth is also committed to continuing our competitive approach to procuring a diverse set of resources to meet our growing capacity and energy needs, an approach that has already delivered early successes. The IESO's first medium-term request for proposal re-contracted five facilities, representing more than 700 megawatts of capacity, at about a 30% savings compared to the previous government's contracts.

We've also achieved impressive results with the province's recent expedited long-term request for proposals, which kicked off the largest clean energy storage procurement in Canada's history, an achievement for which I was very proud to receive the Friend of Energy Storage Award from the team at Energy Storage Canada. Through this procurement, the IESO has already secured contracts with 15 energy storage facilities, acquiring a total of 880 megawatts of capacity. And Indigenous participation in this procurement was significant, nine of the 15 contracts having at least 50% Indigenous ownership. I'm looking forward to seeing similar success stories with the first long-term RFP, the LT1 procurement, which is currently under way.

Just to keep in mind: This competitive approach is drastically different than the Liberals' Green Energy Act, which awarded handsome, lucrative, way-over-market-price feed-in tariff contracts. You will all recall the 80-cent-per-kilowatt-hour solar contracts that were awarded during the Green Energy Act. Those contracts continued to be signed year after year, after the price of electricity was tripling in Ontario under the Liberals' watch.

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On top of all of these things that we're doing, including bringing a competitive approach to procuring the energy that we need, we're also investing in low-carbon hydrogen projects that will promote sustainability in the sector and contribute to our clean energy economy. We're proceeding, again, with the competitive procurement of non-emitting energy resources to meet demand and support the operation of our grid. We're building out our transmission system to distribute electricity to new areas of the province, all over the province, so that everybody can participate in our growing energy sector. We're increasing energy efficiency programs in the electricity and natural gas sectors.

Just like with home heating, natural gas generation is part of our pragmatic approach to keeping the lights on, an approach reinforced by the Independent Electricity System Operator, whose natural gas phase-out study that I asked them for said, “Natural gas generation plays a crucial role in the reliability of the electricity grid. It provides a range of services that no other resource today can provide on its own, including producing large amounts of power to meet high demand and running for extended periods when other resources are not available.”

In short, while most of the time Ontario can meet its electricity generation needs with nuclear and hydroelectric and biomass and renewables, we need to face reality. Sometimes the sun doesn't shine and the wind doesn't blow, which is why natural gas is needed to meet those peaks and to keep the lights on when demand surges and ensure we don't have to resort to emergency actions like rotating blackouts.

I was in Edmonton about a month ago now, stepped off the plane, and it was minus 42 degrees Celsius. I don't know if you remember how cold it was in Alberta during that weekend. Their system operator, the AESO, was sending out bulletins to the residents of Alberta—kind of

like we do our Amber Alerts here in Ontario—advising the residents in Alberta to conserve their electricity immediately or they were going to experience brownouts and blackouts.

Why did they have to do that? Because the wind fleet that they have did not show up. It was so cold, the wind turbines couldn't turn, so they needed Saskatchewan's natural gas and British Columbia's natural gas to keep the lights on in Alberta and keep their residents warm. Natural gas comes back to save the day again in Alberta.

Ontario's existing natural gas plants are doing the exact same thing right now. They're the insurance policy to keep the lights on. I think, as a matter of fact, down at the Portlands generating station right here on the waterfront in Toronto, when it was built, it was strategically placed there to keep the lights on in downtown Toronto on the hottest and coldest days of the year. We know all too well what can happen if those plants are removed too quickly.

It was last summer when a large crane—not the bird, the piece of mechanical equipment—came into contact with a high-voltage transmission line, disconnecting the Portlands plant down there. The disconnection caused an extensive, hours-long power outage in downtown Toronto that disrupted the lives of millions of families and businesses that work here every day. Imagine if you live on the 50th floor of one of these condo buildings here and the elevators are out, which they were for hours.

The fact is, there is currently in the province no like-for-like replacement for natural gas. That's why the IESO has concluded that natural gas generation is needed to maintain system reliability. In the end, thanks to our early planning, Ontario is well positioned with enough electricity to power growth in the near term. And, as our panel report has pointed out, we've got to be careful to pace the rate of increase in electricity demand with the rate at which new supply can come on stream. That's why our government has done so much to prepare for the latter part of this decade and beyond.

Madam Speaker, as Ontario plans for a prosperous future and an energy system that continues to deliver power that is clean, reliable and affordable for all of its citizens, Bill 165, Keeping Energy Costs Down Act, is critical to our success. It recognizes that we're working in a complex landscape with distinct regions. We are a massive, massive province. We have unique communities and organizations across this massive province that are facing unique challenges, but they're also facing unique opportunities. And the legislative changes that this bill proposes are going to enable us to cut red tape. It's going to enable us to get transit and homes built faster and without additional financial burden on customers. These changes will improve Ontario Energy Board processes, ensuring that the public has more input into OEB decisions, and will ensure those decisions are made with clarity on future government policy priorities to protect ratepayers.

Again, just imagine hearing this case without getting feedback from the Independent Electricity System Operator as to whether or not there's enough electricity

planned or in the system to ensure that we would have the electricity and the energy that we need to keep our residents warm each and every winter, and allow for our air conditioning to turn on in the summer.

Finally, Bill 165 is going to preserve customer energy choices by ensuring that natural gas remains an available and affordable option for all consumers.

Madam Speaker, when our government took office, we made a promise to put people first and make life easier and more affordable for families and businesses while sending a clear message that Ontario is open for business. We've seen the results of the work that we've done. Ontario is open for business. It is a powerhouse in North America. It is the economic engine in our country, once again, after years of Liberal policies that drove hundreds of thousands of jobs to other jurisdictions in North America and elsewhere in the world. The Keeping Energy Costs Down Act is going to allow us to continue to build on that promise, Madam Speaker, and ensure that Ontario is that economic powerhouse.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Questions?

Ms. Catherine Fife: It's interesting listening to the energy minister talk about the past and the history. I will say that when the Liberals were in power, the PCs used to criticize their politicization of the electricity planning and their disregard for evidence and professional independent analysis. And yet here we are, 2024, the first time ever overruling an Ontario Energy Board decision designed to protect homeowners and ratepayers in order to benefit a fossil fuel giant.

Kent Elson, a lawyer from Environmental Defence says that this legislation, and the choice of the title of this bill, is "Orwellian."

"It should be called the keeping Enbridge profits and energy bills high act...."

"The OEB decision would have cut capital costs covered by gas customers by approximately \$600 per customer.... Reversing the decision will certainly raise energy bills."

Why did you not title this bill the pushing energy costs up act in Ontario?

Hon. Todd Smith: Once again, we see the NDP trying to find any way possible they can to oppose a piece of legislation, even one that makes as much sense as this one does, Madam Speaker.

This is necessary in a housing crisis to assuring that we can keep shovels in the ground and build the homes that we're talking about building.

A recent condominium development here in the GTA would see an upfront connection charge of approximately \$290,000. I don't know who the opposite member thinks is going to pay that, but it's going to be the person who buys that condo or lives in that condo—\$290,000. A three-building condo development in Toronto would see an upfront connection charge of approximately \$1,065,000. Who does the NDP think is going to bear the cost of that? It's going to be that homeowner, the new homeowner, and

we have to step in to ensure that we're protecting the homeowners of the province.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Questions?

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you to the minister for his lovely remarks to kick off debate this afternoon. I just want to highlight to my colleagues in this place here that the NDP is again not standing up for young people who don't have a home. They're arguing for the current homeowners. They are not fighting for those who live in their parents' basements or those who may have a child on the way who are looking to move into a bigger place—a townhouse, for example.

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I know the minister alluded to it a bit in his remarks, but, obviously, I represent rural Ontario, and I was wondering if he could elaborate—I know Minister Calandra and myself and the associate minister are looking to keep costs down on homes. How much would this decision by the OEB cost rural Ontario?

Hon. Todd Smith: Well, the OEB, in its own decision, said it was going to cost about \$4,400, but they were looking at a cul-de-sac in the GTHA when they were using that analysis. We know and you know, certainly, being from Perth–Wellington, just how much more it's going to cost to get that extra line out to your home or to the farms that are—boy, they're starving for more natural gas in your community. I hear from them all the time at ROMA and AMO. It's going to cost them tens of thousands of dollars more.

That's why we won't let this stand. That's why we're coming back with our natural gas policy, so that the Ontario Energy Board will be able to reconsider government policy and ensure that they're hearing from the proper people, including the Independent Electricity System Operator, home builders, contractors, farmers and those who will be impacted by these additional costs that are heaped onto them as a result of this misguided decision.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I'd like to thank the minister for the introduction.

This bill, Bill 165, reminds me quite a bit of Bill 23. With Bill 23, this government said that removing development charges would automatically trickle down and pass over cost savings to new home buyers. We know they didn't put any metrics in place. They didn't put any guardrails in place. And we see a lot of the same thing here with Bill 165. Apparently, they think that this money is going to go—but really, the effect of this bill is quite something else. In fact, I believe that this bill would properly be entitled keeping Enbridge happy while customers pay more.

This bill allows the government to approve a gas pipeline that the OEB has deemed as not in the public interest. Why would the government force consumers to pay for a project that is not in the public interest?

Hon. Todd Smith: I know the member is from London, and I assume most of the people in London have natural gas, but those just outside London are dying to get natural gas in their communities. They're lobbying my office, at places like ROMA and AMO, every six months, wanting to be a part of the next natural gas expansion program because they understand that we have something special here in Ontario. We have natural gas that's being provided to over 70% of our homes, and there are many, many others who want it, but what they don't want are the tens of thousands of dollars in additional costs to their new home or their condo or apartment or farm, where they're going to move from a more emitting source like propane or home heating fuels—they don't want to bear that cost up front. They want to have what everybody else in this province has, and that's low-cost energy to keep them warm in the wintertime.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question?

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I'm glad that the minister, in his speech, which I thought was very impressive and spoke to a lot of the issues at stake with this legislation—he mentioned farmers. And I think in my community of Niagara West, where I have a massive greenhouse sector, I have a massive amount of traditional agricultural and dozens and dozens of commodity groups—they need access to natural gas to ensure that they're drying their corn, that they're able to heat their greenhouses in the winter, that they're able to provide the food that all of us rely upon. So I'm wondering if he could talk a little bit more about that.

I have already heard about concerns around the cost of connecting to natural gas and the infrastructure costs in some of my communities. If this legislation hadn't been brought forward, how much more in costs would have been passed along to those who want to buy groceries?

Hon. Todd Smith: In short, it would cost a lot. Just one example: A small greenhouse would see an upfront connection charge of approximately \$36,000. That's an upfront cost.

In Niagara, where my colleague is from, a new business customer would see an upfront connection charge of approximately \$53,000. That's \$53,000 more that they would have to pay up front instead of amortizing this over a 40-year period. Anybody who thinks that going from 40 years to zero years is rational is completely irrational—it just is. A recent restaurant project in Niagara would cost approximately \$13,000 more up front. So it's going to have an impact on the residents in Niagara, just as it would right across the province.

We have an opportunity, particularly in our greenhouse sector, to be a world leader. We already are, but we have an opportunity to grow that even more. And providing them with the ability to amortize the cost of pipelines up to 40 years makes a heck of a lot of sense and will increase our GDP dramatically.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question.

Mr. Ted Hsu: My question for the energy minister is—and first of all, I want to say that I'm glad that he's living

in a rural area and doing fine without natural gas at his residence, and that he's not going to have to pay for any stranded infrastructure. But I want to ask him a really particular question, because he quoted one of the commissioners—one of the three, if that's the right term—who wrote a dissenting opinion at the end of the OEB decision and order.

My question to the minister is, would he support the position of that commissioner to reduce the revenue of horizon to 20 years, leaving approximately a third of the cost of the new connections to pay up front and not on the backs of existing households? Would the minister support that?

Hon. Todd Smith: I think the answer to that question is pretty simple. We're going to put out a natural gas policy in the next couple of months which is going to be the basis of how the Ontario Energy Board rules going forward. We're going to let the Ontario Energy Board determine whether it's a 40-year revenue horizon, a 30-year revenue horizon, 20 years. These are all things that will be answered after we put out our natural gas policy, which is something that didn't happen.

The dissenting commissioner's opinion, Allison Duff, was very, very clear as well: that the OEB commissioners didn't hear from the stakeholders that they needed to hear from. They didn't hear from the farmers, they didn't hear from the home builders, they didn't hear from the contractors, and most importantly, they didn't hear from the system operator that manages our electricity grid. So we're going to put this back in the OEB's court once we set our natural gas policy.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Further debate?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Speaker, just to be totally clear, Premier Ford wants to raise your gas bill. That's what this is about. Premier Ford wants you to pay more month after month, year after year. That's what this is about. He has decided to protect higher profits for Enbridge by taking more money out of your pocket and the pockets of millions of others across this province. He's protecting his buddies at Enbridge, and he's sticking you and all the other customers of Enbridge with the bill, and that bill is going to be about \$300 per customer over the next four years.

So if you think you should pay more on your gas bill, you should support the minister. And if you think you shouldn't be stuck with that bill, if you think Enbridge should be the body that actually coughs up the few billion dollars that are going to be necessary, then you should oppose this bill that's been brought forward.

I don't know how to make it any plainer. I don't know how to make it any plainer: He wants to raise your gas bill; he wants you to pay more so that Enbridge makes more money. That is what this is about. He wants to reverse the decision the Ontario Energy Board made in December to protect you from higher gas bills.

Now, it's the job of the Ontario Energy Board, the regulator, to look out for consumer interests when energy companies apply to raise their rates. That's their job. That's their mandate. They are told, "Look out for

consumers. Look out for the public. Make sure they aren't gouged, they aren't ripped off, they aren't pillaged, they aren't silently stolen from. Look after those customers. Whether they're electrical utilities or gas utilities, protect the customers." And that's what they did. They did their job.

And now, the government is horrified that people are going to be protected from higher gas bills. They're horrified that Enbridge will not continue to make the crushingly huge profits that they have been making, and they want to reverse that.

Enbridge is a multi-billion-dollar company. And frankly, there's a bigger Enbridge that runs gas transmission lines across North America and there's the smaller multi-billion-dollar corporation here in Ontario—not exactly on the edge of poverty; companies that have a few bucks available if they wanted to actually help customers. That isn't what we're dealing with here. What we're dealing with here is a company that wants to squeeze every last penny out of you.

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This bill will strip you of protection from Enbridge's attempts to gouge customers across this province. The minister doesn't have to do that. The Premier doesn't have to do that. The Premier could protect you, could protect your family and protect families across this province. He knows that people are having a tough time. We have those debates, those discussions, here in the Legislature all the time. People are pushed hard. They've got rising rents. This government won't protect them from rising rents. They're having a tough time with mortgages. They're having a tough time with grocery bills. You've got major retailers that have been engaged in squeezing people, squeezing their suppliers, squeezing the customers. He knows that people are having a tough time staying afloat, and yet—and yet—today what we're doing is debating a bill that would protect the profits of Enbridge and raise the gas bills that people have to pay. It will take money out of people's pockets. That's the reality.

I have to say this: I'm saying that I'm impressed, and not in a good way, that the minister kept a straight face while he made that speech. That was extraordinary. I am impressed—not in a good way, but I am impressed.

Let's go back a little bit. Just before Christmas, the Ontario Energy Board announced a decision that would make Enbridge Gas responsible for the cost of expanding its gas system and protect almost four million customers from hundreds of millions of dollars in higher heating bills. This is a very important point. Enbridge has investors; it has cash flow. If it wanted to put the money into those new connections and collect from those customers over 40 years, they could do that. They don't have to take the money out of your pocket or your pocket or my pocket. They could do it out of their own cash—no sweat. But, instead, they wanted it to come from the existing gas customers. The Ontario Energy Board, whose job is to protect customers from gouging, whose job is to protect customers from being taken advantage of, said, "No, we're not going to support this increase that's going to cost \$300

per customer over the next four years. We're going to say, "Enbridge, it's yours. It's yours." And the very next day, the minister announced that they—this government—would be taking steps to reverse the decision of the Ontario Energy Board, the regulator that they put in place.

Now, I have to say, for those who are around for a while, I used to refer to the Ontario Energy Board under the Liberals as the glove puppets. You had the Minister of Energy's hand there stuck up an energy board regulator and saying whatever the minister needed to have said. I was astounded that this regulator, this board, actually stood up for customers, stood up for consumers—astounding. They actually did their job. They read their mandate. They listened to the evidence and they said, "Damn, we gotta protect people." Of course, this party that used to attack the OEB for not standing up for customers realizes that, "Boy, if they stand up for customers there are going to be some pretty heavy-duty private interests that are going to be really cranky." So that's why we have this bill before us today.

Now I want to go back a bit further. There's a subsidy that gas customers do not even know they're funding. If you talk to most people, they look at their gas bill and they see "gas" and then they see "distribution," the cost of getting it through the pipes to their house. They don't know that part of those rates is paying the cost of expanding the system. They think, "No, I just want to pay for the pipe that comes to my house. Why do I have to pay for these investments that you're making that you're going to make money off of?" That isn't where their heads are at. I tried this out on my nephew at Christmastime. I said, "Do you know you're subsidizing these new expansions?" He was outraged. He said, "Why? I just want to pay for my gas bill. I just want heat, that's all. They want to expand, they can pay for it."

I have to say, the independent energy regulator decided to put a stop to this subsidy because it raises energy bills for existing gas customers and for new homebuyers. This is not a wonderful gift for them. It sets them up for higher costs in the years to come and it also increases financial risks for the whole of the gas system.

Ending the subsidy would save gas customers over a billion dollars over the next four years in avoided pipeline subsidy costs. That comes to about \$300 per customer. There are about four million customers on the system. Of course, that billion dollars doesn't include the interest and the profit payments that go to Enbridge. So I'm talking the bare minimum, right? I'm just talking the minimum number that was cited by the Ontario Energy Board.

What ending the subsidy would do, aside from protecting existing customers from being gouged, is that it would encourage developers to install electric heat pumps in new homes instead of gas, which would provide cheaper heating and cooling for new homebuyers. And that is based on a variety of studies showing the reality of comparing the cost of capital and operating for gas-centred systems with capital and operating for heat pump systems.

So ending that subsidy would be a win, a win, a win and a win. It would lower energy bills for existing customers—

wildly popular—and lower energy bills for new homeowners because they would be getting a less expensive system. It would lower carbon emissions—and actually, I think that matters. And it would avoid even more costs down the road to convert away from fossil fuel heating in the houses that were built with heat pumps from the start.

But there is a loser in all this. I have to be clear. There is a loser: Enbridge Gas. They would lose a lot of money. Frankly, they can afford it. They're not exactly on the ropes. They're doing well. I would say that if they are not making super gazillions of profits, but just billions in profits, they can probably survive, but many, many tenants and homeowners are having a tough time surviving. So our task, I believe, is to protect those tenants, those homeowners and not protect these multi-billion-dollar, multi-national corporations.

Now, Enbridge is lobbying hard to stop that decision, to overturn that decision, and it has launched two challenges. Its court challenge boldly complains that the decision will mean "Enbridge Gas has no right or ability to invest and earn a return on capital for new customer connections." In other words, it's going to reduce their profits. Actually, I don't think the OEB said you couldn't invest; you just couldn't invest with money provided by your existing customers. If their investors wanted to put money in, hey, there's no barrier to doing that. They could go ahead. Now, there are questions they would ask, and frankly, the consultants who they quote in their submissions to the Ontario Energy Board raised big red flags about the potential for a lack of return in the future on those investments.

Minister Smith is trying to pass this legislation, the bill before us, to overturn that decision. The government of Ontario has decided to stand with Enbridge and its lobbyists, using the argument that change will reduce housing supply and affordability. But developers can just forgo gas and install heat pumps instead. If they have a customer who really wants gas, they can do that, but everyone gets an electrical connection in any event. So why wouldn't you take the opportunity to install an electric heat pump and forgo that extra cost of putting in gas? And even if you didn't want to go there, why do people around this province have to subsidize this? Why do people in Kingston or Ottawa, Hamilton, London, Windsor have to pony up an extra 300 bucks over the next four years to subsidize this multi-billion-dollar corporation?

You don't have to take my word about the fact that this is not going to affect the cost of housing. I'm glad I went to public school in Ontario. It gave me at least one skill: I can read; sometimes I can do math—although people challenge me.

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Ian Mondrow is a partner at the law firm Gowling WLG, practising in the area of energy regulation policy, and he wrote an op-ed that was published in the *Globe and Mail*. He can see that leaving the regulator's decision in place would protect current gas customers and new homeowners. Now, this is not the NDP research department—and, frankly, you should know that that is an excellent

department. I'm just saying that they're not ideologically ours; Gowling is not known as an NDP firm. But I'm going to quote the op-ed from this lawyer who specializes in energy regulation policy:

"While including gas connection costs to developers up front would marginally increase the cost of a new house, an offsetting rate credit recognizing the upfront payment would lower ongoing gas rates, resulting in a wash for homebuyers. The other choice would be to forego gas servicing in favour of electric heat pumps, thus lowering the operating costs of the house—a win for homebuyers." The member from Perth–Wellington was talking about new home buyers. Well, you've got someone who specializes in energy policy saying this would be better for new home buyers. "Either choice would reduce Enbridge capital costs, and potential stranded assets, in the range of \$1 billion over the proposed five-year gas rate plan period, significantly reducing delivery rates and customer risk."

Two associate professors, Brandon Schaufele and Adam Fremeth of the Ivey Business School, wrote a post about this as well: "The government's decision to override the OEB should have virtually no effect on affordable housing in the province."

So if this bill passes, this ain't going to make housing any cheaper. It is not going to be to the advantage of homebuyers. In other words, the government's action will make you pay more and will not help new homebuyers, but it will mean higher rates for your gas bills. The Premier wants you to pay more. The Premier wants to raise your gas bill. Don't get confused. Be very clear and plain about this. The Premier wants you to pay more.

Now, gas is no longer the cheapest heating source. Investing in gas pipelines for heating is financially foolish because they will become obsolete and a massive cost to all current and future customers as we stop burning gas to heat our homes and other buildings. Even the minister was talking about electrification of home heating. He knows it's coming. What that means, over the next few decades, is that fewer and fewer people will be burning gas, and the people who leave the system will not have to carry the burden of the cost of those pipes that are in the ground, but the ones who stay will be stuck with it. There are cheaper alternatives to what's been before us.

The OEB recognized that, like rotary dial phones, like Blockbuster Video, natural gas furnaces are coming to the end of their time—not tomorrow, not in 2025, but over the next 20 years, cheaper alternatives such as home heat pumps are undermining Enbridge's market for home heating. The minister said exactly that. We're going to be electrifying our homes. So the OEB ruled that Enbridge can't spread the cost of hooking up new homes over decades or charge it to current gas customers like you, like the people who are watching this, like the people in this room who actually are still Enbridge customers. They're going to be stuck with this cost. That's what the Premier wants to do. He wants to increase your gas bill. The OEB said that Enbridge or new home developers have to take the risk, not new home buyers or current Enbridge customers. It recognizes that this would likely mean many

more people installing the cheaper heat pumps to provide heating.

It was interesting to me that, again, the minister said he's got a heat pump. He said when it gets really cold, the electric furnace backup in the installation comes on. Fair enough. I've got a heat pump at home. I've never been cold; I'm assuming the backup comes on when it gets really cold. But he didn't say he was freezing in the dark. He said the system worked. If he had been freezing in the dark, believe me, all of you would have heard it. You would have heard the descriptions of the frozen bowl of water for the cat in the kitchen. You would have heard about the need to bundle up the kids and whisk them off to a hotel somewhere. No, he's totally comfortable at home because he's got the backup right there. Most of the time, the heat pump—probably all the time because the newer heat pumps are good down to minus 30—they're totally fine in our climate.

I'm going to go back to Ian Mondrow about the question of how we can actually deal with the issues before us. Because passing legislation to reinstate a subsidy that's completely out of step and risks financial disaster down the road doesn't make sense.

The minister, in his statement, in his speech, said that the decision of the OEB would increase the cost of energy, increase the cost of a new home, and the facts do not support that claim. When you look for those facts, when you round them up, when you put them together and you compare them to the minister's statement, they are not related; they're not distant cousins. There is no blood relation between the facts and the minister's statement. It's just not there.

I'm going to go back to the energy-regulator lawyer from Gowling, Ian Mondrow, who had this to say about the claim by the minister. He writes in a more formal style than me but I think he's quite good: "Early the following day after the release of the OEB decision, Ontario's Minister of Energy released a statement expressing that he was 'extremely disappointed' with the OEB's decision.... The minister asserted that the OEB's determination on this point ... 'could lead to tens of thousands of dollars added to the cost of building new homes, and ... would slow or halt the construction of new homes, including affordable housing.'" Well, good God. That's a scary thought.

The lawyer, Ian Mondrow, goes on: "If those facts were true"—and I like the "if"—"then the minister could well have a legitimate and immediate housing policy concern. The facts as determined in the OEB's decision do not, however, support a 'tens of thousands of dollars' increase in home costs, and it does not appear that the decision will in fact 'slow or halt the construction of new homes.' The conclusions expressed in the minister's statement"—and, frankly, his speech today—"are inconsistent with the facts relied on, and determinations made, by the OEB's three-member expert panel of commissioners as a result of the comprehensive hearing process undertaken."

I want to say a few other things about the area of charges. I'm speaking to you gas customers who are going to get stuck with a higher bill if this legislation passes. One

is that claim that gas heating is the cheapest option. Numerous studies now show that, when you compare the combined costs of equipment and energy, heat pumps provide cheaper heating than gas heating. Just look at putting in a heat pump or putting in a furnace or an air conditioner—those capital costs and then the cost over the lifetime, it's cheaper to go with a heat pump.

In fact—and the minister referenced this in his speech—Enbridge, which keeps spreading the claim about gas being cheaper, is now facing an investigation and hearing at the Competition Bureau for false advertising.

Ms. Catherine Fife: No, you don't say.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: As my colleague expressed, it's shocking, the thought that a multinational corporation that makes huge amounts of money by squeezing cash out of homeowners and tenants might mislead people. I know it's incomprehensible to many here but, in fact, it could well be true.

The National Observer reports, “Enbridge has a new fight on its hands as Competition Bureau Canada officially launches an investigation against the gas giant over allegations the company is misleading customers about the role of gas in the energy transition.

“Specifically, Enbridge has promoted new gas hookups as the cheapest way for Ontarians to heat their homes, while branding natural gas as ‘low carbon’ and ‘clean energy.’”

That's being challenged by the environmental organization Environmental Defence.

The National Observer reports, “‘Enbridge's dishonest marketing is duping people into’” installing new gas hookups and spending thousands of dollars on new gas furnaces and other appliances, “‘falsely claiming it's cheaper than heating with electricity, which is just not true,’ said Environmental Defence program director Keith Brooks in a statement.” It's good that the Competition Bureau has agreed to investigate Enbridge.

“The complaint filed by Environmental Defence, Ontario Clean Air Alliance, the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment and a group of Ontario residents” in September, “accuses Enbridge of falsely claiming gas is the most cost-effective way to heat homes. Enbridge has made this claim online and in communities it has pegged for expansion in an attempt to increase its customer base.”

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Environmental Defence summarized the situation this way: “Enbridge is misleading consumers into connecting to its gas system using false and misleading representations.... Enbridge is telling potential customers that gas is the most cost-effective way to heat their homes and suggesting”—and this I find totally entertaining—“that it is ‘clean energy’ and ‘low carbon.’ None of these representations are true.” That lack of honesty about what's real and not real when it comes to home heating is something that people should keep in mind.

But the other issue—and this is a big one because, as the minister has said, we're moving away from gas heating in our homes: People get caught paying as gas heating

fades away. People are increasingly deciding to save money and protect the climate by switching from gas to electric heat pumps. As this process expands, the cost of the gas grid for those who stay with gas is going to increase, and new gas lines, installed to service new customers, will increasingly not have customers to serve. That was a finding by the Ontario Energy Board.

We've had these transitions before. This is not unique or novel in the world. Most of you have not followed energy history. I am a strange person; I actually look at the history of energy in this province. About 1958 or 1959, the TransCanada pipeline came through to Ontario from Alberta, bringing natural gas. This opened a whole new way to heat homes that was cleaner, more convenient and probably cheaper than coal. From 1960 to 1970, the portion of homes that used coal for home heating went from 30% to 1%. Within a decade, 30% of Ontario homes no longer used what had been a very popular fuel.

So I want to say to people here that you can have a very rapid transition from one technology to another, frankly, probably, with very little in the way of government programs in this case. People looked at, “Hey, we can spend all this money on coal, or we can go with an option that we don't have to shovel, that is more convenient, that is just a flick of a switch on a thermostat in the wall. I'm going to go with gas”—a decade. And I have to tell you, just in that same report I looked at, that 1% at the end? Man, they were spending a fortune, because the whole of the coal delivery infrastructure shrank and became a much more expensive fuel to get. I don't know why those 1% held on, but they did.

We're facing a situation in Ontario where as we move away from gas home heating, something that the minister has said we're doing, people who stay on the gas system, who get sold on to the gas system, are going to be stuck with much higher bills, and the pipes that are put in the ground are going to be paid for by those who can't afford to buy a new heating system, ones whose furnace is eight years old. They've got about a 15-year lifespan. If your furnace is eight years old, you're not going to get rid of it and buy a new furnace. Mostly, people can't. They only buy when they have to, and they will get stuck with those higher bills. That's a risk for homeowners and tenants. That is a problem that people are going to face in the future.

Frankly, continuing the subsidy from the existing consumers—and remember, Premier Ford wants to increase your heating bill. He wants to drive up your gas bill. He wants you to pay more so that he can create deeper problems for you in the years to come. I want—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Sorry to interrupt the member. The side conversations on the government's side are getting very loud. I ask that you keep it quiet or take it outside the chamber.

Please resume.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: There's another reality. A number of you who are gas customers—in fact, almost four million of you who are gas customers—know that around 2022,

the price of gas went up dramatically. Now, what was happening in world events at that time? Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the disruption of the supply of natural gas to Western Europe, and frankly, you had a situation where the world market was setting the price.

We in Ontario pay a much lower price than people do on the world market. But something that you need to know—a few things you need to know. One, about 60% of the gas we use in Ontario comes from the United States. It used to come from western Canada; it's coming from the United States. And in the United States, there are large numbers of liquefied natural gas export terminals that are shipping that gas out. In fact, recently, there was a pause put on a few of those in part because industrial manufacturers in the United States were saying, "These exports are killing us. They are killing us. You need to stop exporting all the gas, because it's changing our cost picture."

Well, in 2022—and I remember this, because (a) I got a bill, and (b) my constituents came to me about it—a big spike in gas prices. If you will remember your gas bill, about half is the cost of getting the gas to your house; that's the pipes in the ground. The other half is the gas, and that other part comes from the price of gas out on the open market.

I want to say to all of you that although it's unpredictable as to whether or not we will see other spikes—and I have to say, wars happen and disruptions of energy supplies happen, and if I knew what the price was going to be, I would be running a side deal in gas futures and making a lot of money, so I won't predict that. But I will predict this: the potential for great volatility. That is a huge problem for people, the inability to be certain what it's going to cost them in the year to come to heat their homes. That is an issue, and to the extent that we stay with gas or expand the use of gas in this province, we expose more and more people to the volatility of those gas prices. That is not a good thing.

I had said at the beginning, and I want to say this again: The OEB didn't say you can't have a gas connection to a new house; it wasn't a ban on gas. If Enbridge wanted to install new gas connections to new homes, they could do it with the capital that's provided by their investors, and they could try and recover it over the next few decades. But I have to say, they understand the volatility of the world; they understand the uncertainty of the world and the potential that within two decades or three decades, you'll have a dramatically smaller market for gas heating in this province—again, I follow the minister's statement talking about electrification of heating—so that it may not be a good investment for those people who are backing Enbridge. No, they want to put the burden on you. They have asked the Premier to put the burden on you, the customers of Enbridge Gas, the multi-billion-dollar risk.

So Premier Ford wants to raise your gas bill. He has decided that higher profits for Enbridge Gas are more important than protecting you. He wants to increase the money that goes to Enbridge, and he wants to take that money out of your pocket. He's protecting his buddies at

Enbridge and sticking you with the bill, and that's about \$300 for each gas customer over the next four years. And that's why we're debating this legislation today, legislation to allow the government to overturn a decision by the energy regulator, the body set up to protect you, the customers, from the actions of utilities that want to squeeze as much money out of you as they can.

Speaker, high price is certainly at the heart of what we're dealing with here—no getting around it. It's an issue that people have very immediately on their minds. They go to the grocery store; they try to buy something electronic; they have to pay higher rents; they're paying their energy bills; they're squeezed.

However, there are other issues here, even if they're not as top of mind as cost of living. The reality is the world is getting hotter. Weather is getting more extreme. It's getting more unpredictable. Those climate changes are affecting the price of food, of insurance and a variety of other things. They are increasing the cost of operating government because they're causing more damage to infrastructure. Drought and higher temperatures are reducing food production in many places, and we see the impact at the grocery store.

It's not just climate change that's affecting us at those grocery stores. There are retailers—big ones—that are taking the opportunity to squeeze as many pennies out of people as they can. But the reality is that as the world gets hotter and our climate more unpredictable, food prices will increase. As insurers face higher claims from catastrophic weather events, they pass the cost on to their customers. I'm sure many of you have seen those higher insurance bills.

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I'll just say there are three jurisdictions right now where the rise in those bills has led to some really dramatic changes: Louisiana, Florida and California. Many insurance companies are leaving those jurisdictions because they can't charge premiums high enough to cover the replacement cost of the houses destroyed in extreme weather or in wildfires. Those places are having to provide a very limited state-sponsored housing insurance, where an awful lot of the risk is left with the homeowner and where those states are not happy that they're having to provide that insurance, because I'm sure it doesn't actually pay for itself.

As we get hotter, as weather becomes more extreme, people are not going to be able to afford the premiums that insurance companies will charge to protect their homes and their property. This is not a distant problem; this is a problem happening today in the southern United States and which will make its way north into Ontario and into Canada. Already in Canada, the insurance bureau has said something like a million homes are facing the potential of losing home insurance because of flood risk.

So we've got a situation where day-to-day life is going to become more and more difficult. In order to stabilize the climate and protect us all from rising food costs and to make sure that things like insurance are affordable, the world is engaged in an effort to reduce carbon emissions

by 50% by 2030. To do that, we have to move away from fossil fuels like gas. That means many things, but one of them is that when we have a chance to reduce future gas burning—from heating, for example—we should take it. We're in a situation now where new homes, if they get a heat pump rather than a furnace and an air conditioner, can actually have lower-cost heating and cooling than if they went down the gas route. The OEB recognized that in its decision.

Happily, this would mean lower costs for homeowners. Let's assume that Ontario actually does build one million new homes over the current decade. Given that so far the targets are not being met, I think there are real questions about that. Let's just say you didn't reach 1.5 million but you reached a million. We have about four million homes in Ontario now. If all new homes were gas-heated, then we would face a very large new source of carbon pollution in Ontario. I don't know how the government would meet its very weak target of a 30% reduction, but we would be making the world hotter and we would be paying for it out of higher gas bills. That's what this legislation means.

Premier Ford wants to raise your gas bill, take more money out of your pocket and make the world hotter, more volatile and more difficult for all of us. That's what we're debating today: the whole question of whether we will protect customers, whether we will let the Premier increase your gas bill or not. He's protecting his buddies at Enbridge Gas and he's sticking us with the bill, and we're talking about \$300 over four years. Anyone who wants to pay an extra 300 bucks to help Enbridge Gas, please put up your hand. I'm sure that when the vote comes there will be a chunk of people in this room who will stand up and say, "Yes, I want to pay more and I want to help Enbridge."

Now I've talked about the direct cost and the, let us say, absence of facts in the arguments made by the government in the minister's presentation, but I also want to talk about the impact of effectively restoring the previous situation where the Ontario Energy Board is just a glove puppet for the Minister of Energy—not a good thing.

It's bad news to change the law so that all future energy decisions or regulations through the Ontario Energy Board will be made in the same way the Premier made his decision about the greenbelt or about Staples or about privatizing health care: out of public sight, by politicians on a massage table or in Vegas or at a wedding party where they're celebrating and drinking wine with lobbyists. Do we want that to be the way decisions are made around energy?

Let's look at how the decision was made by the Ontario Energy Board on protecting people from higher Enbridge rates. Again, I'm going to go back to the excellent article by the energy lawyer Ian Mondrow:

"At 6 p.m. on December 21, the OEB publicly issued a comprehensive decision on an application by" Enbridge "for approval of Ontario gas distribution rates commencing January 1, 2024. The decision is the result of a thorough public hearing process, which involved more than a year of review, thousands of pages of company and

expert evidence, a comprehensive oral hearing and a thorough process for submissions by" Enbridge, "OEB staff, and a number of informed, indeed expert, customer and public interest intervenor representatives. The comprehensive, well-written and fully reasoned decision is 147 pages long...."

So what do we have? We had a public process that people could attend or follow. I followed it for the last year. Thousands of pages of evidence were introduced—I have to say, I didn't read thousands of pages; I read quite a few hundred, but not thousands. Interesting stuff. The consultant for Enbridge—two consultants. One consultant, their economic consultant, talked about the threat of a death spiral for this particular utility, because as the cost of heating by gas went up, more and more people would leave the system, and as more and more people left the system, those who were left behind would pay a higher fee, and more and more people would leave.

So, real risk to the system—how do you manage that? Part of the way you manage it is, you actually focus on repair rather than expansion, so you control your costs. That's something the OEB was very interested in.

Again, you had a public process. You had people who were trained in adjudication and had familiarity with the energy system listening to presentations by those who had expertise with energy, who were hired as consultants to give information. These were not lobbyists who were wining and dining the board. They weren't taking the board out for lunch, getting them drunk up and then sending them back into the room. No. They were trying to present evidence so that, in fact, you could have a rational assessment of the options before us.

What does the Premier want in the place of a public hearing with evidence that could be challenged by numerous intervenors and by adjudicators themselves?

Well, first of all, this bill gives the government power to overturn the key decisions within that OEB order that's under discussion. This gives the government the power to increase your gas bill, to take money out of your pocket and put it into the pockets of Enbridge investors so they get richer. That's what this is about. The government wants to have the power to make Enbridge richer and you poorer. It allows the minister, with the approval of the Lieutenant Governor in Council—that's the cabinet—to direct the Ontario Energy Board that the construction of a new natural gas transmission line is in the public interest.

Normally, the Ontario Energy Board would hold a hearing to determine whether a proposed project is in the public interest—does it actually do what it should do; will it put a financial burden on the other customers; is there a justification for this that allows an investment of the money that's taken out of the ratepayers' pockets?

This provision in the act would oblige the Ontario Energy Board to grant leave to construct without a hearing. In other words, we go to energy decision-making by lobbyists and members of the government's cabinet, or maybe just by the Premier's staff—I'm not sure which; only the RCMP knows for sure who makes these decisions. It means that the ability to actually have

decisions or proposals reviewed in public, with evidence presented, considered, challenged and adjudicated doesn't have to happen anymore. It's just lobbyists bringing home the bacon for their clients, and that bacon is you and me paying more out of our pockets to make Enbridge richer. It allows the minister, with the approval of the cabinet, to overturn any OEB order that either refused to approve a gas transmission line or required the beneficiaries of the expansion to pay upfront capital costs. In other words, if the OEB determines that a gas pipeline project is not in the public interest, then the cabinet can force the OEB to let it proceed anyway.

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At this point, you have to ask: Why do you have a regulator? Because, frankly, they're just scenery. They're a mountain picture painted on a wall. They are of no consequence, because the real decisions will be made by lobbyists, cabinet members and the chiefs of staff who report to the Premier and those ministers.

There are other ways that Bill 165 would allow the Premier to force gas customers to pay costs that the OEB would otherwise not allow. Currently, no one can construct a new gas pipeline in Ontario unless the OEB determines this expenditure is in the public interest and grants leave to construct. This rule seeks to ensure that expenditures are properly scrutinized so gas consumers are not forced to pay for costly, uneconomical projects. So by deciding to allow politicians to make that ultimate call as to whether or not a gas line is in the public interest, instead of an independent regulator, there's a risk—man, sometimes I really understate. This politicizes the energy regulation process. It just says, “Nope.” Thoughtful consideration—may I even say, just businesslike consideration—is out the window; it's who has got the pull, who knows who and who can actually get the decision that you need.

There is an example of a previous government that operated this way: the Liberal government. For those who weren't here when they were in power—

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: Supported by you.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Not us. We used to work with you.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: We would tag-team going after them, yes. We used to go after them. We would go after them in committees, we'd go after them in the House, because we knew they politicized the process. And you guys are following that road—sorry; this government, Speaker, is following that road of politicized energy decisions. The outcome is not good.

So not only does the current government want you to immediately be stuck with a bill for a massive subsidy to Enbridge Gas—and I'm talking \$300 per customer over the next four years—it also wants you to be stuck with the cost of future projects that the OEB, the regulator, might dismiss because they hurt the interests of gas consumers. The process of hearing evidence in public by a board of people with experience and a mandate to protect the public interest is replaced by a process where the best lobbyist, as I said before, brings home the bacon—your bacon—to whatever company wants access to a subsidy from you.

This is not well received in many quarters and, frankly, is contrary to advice that the government has received. I'll go to the advice first, and then I'll go to comments from other quarters.

In its recent report, Ontario's energy transition panel, appointed by this government to look at the transition—frankly, again, to the minister's comment, a transition away from gas home heating to electrification of home heating; the minister made that clear—made a recommendation that is inconsistent with Bill 165. They recommended the OEB “should conduct reviews of cost allocation and recovery policies for natural gas and electricity connections, as well as natural gas infrastructure investment evaluations to protect customers and facilitate development of the clean energy economy.”

Well, this isn't protecting customers. I didn't hear the minister say once that when we change this, it will mean that the rate reduction that the OEB mandated will be maintained. No, no. The rate reduction the OEB maintained is out the window. Customers will not be protected. You can go all around the mulberry bush, you can do the ring-around-the-rosie, you can be the jack in the jack-in-the-box—whatever. It ain't protecting customers. It means higher bills. That's what this legislation delivers. Their own electrification panel recommended the OEB make the kind of decision that the OEB made, and that's the one that this government is working hard to reverse.

Other organizations in the energy field had comments like this: Adam Fremeth and Brandon Schaufele from the Ivey Energy Policy and Management Centre wrote—again, Ivey school is not your left-wing hotbed, right? It ain't. They wrote, “Overriding an independent economic regulator is a big deal. It is not something that should be done lightly. The government's decision explicitly undermines the OEB and threatens credibility of future energy investment in the province.”

Note that: “future energy investment.”

When you have a government that operates in a way that is capricious, that is not open, that is not rules-based but is influence-based, then—it's not true with all investors; maybe some think they can get that influence and get what they want, but a lot will say, “Ehh.” You put money into that province, you don't know if you're going to get it back. You don't know if actually you're going to get a return on your investment. You could be side-swiped by someone else who's got more powerful lobbyists. I think their comment is a good one.

“Moreover, it's not obvious that this move is in Enbridge's long-term interests. Once a precedent to effectively overrule a regulator is established, there's little to stop future governments from using the same tactic to different ends, perhaps against natural gas infrastructure.”

Interesting comment, very interesting comment.

Do you have rules-based, law-based regulation in Ontario, or do you set it up so it's influence- and lobbyist-based? I think that's the choice before us. We know what the government has proposed. Not only do they want you to pay more on your gas bill—320 bucks over the next four years—they are also setting up a situation where you don't

know what the rules are. The rules are whatever the lobbyists and the influencers can make happen.

I'm going to quote Mr. Mondrow again, energy regulation policy expert at Gowling: "Minister Smith would be well advised to consider the wisdom of the energy panel's recommendation and leave the matter of further consideration of new energy connection cost recovery policies with" the Ontario Energy Board. I don't know; he seems to know regulation. He seems to know energy policy. "Leaving this in the hands of the independent regulator would maintain transparency, consistency, public accountability and a thoughtful and reasoned balancing of interests. That, after all, is the reason for an independent energy regulator."

I think that's a pretty good summary. Why do you have a regulator?

The logical last step in this bill, really, is dissolving the Ontario Energy Board, because frankly, you realize they're of no use to you. They're an impediment to you, actually, just dictating what energy policy will be, based on what lobbyists and other influencers want to do. Those lobbyists—Enbridge—want to take money out of your pocket. They want to raise your gas bill.

Adam Fremeth and Brandon Schaufele from the Ivey Energy Policy and Management Centre also noted "the government's decision to override the OEB should have virtually no effect on affordable housing in the province." In other words, they fundamentally disagree with the Minister of Energy in his arguments that he made earlier today.

Now I'll quote an environmental organization. Environmental Defence wrote, "This legislation would be bad for new homeowners"—true enough—"bad for existing gas customers"—yes, because they're going to pay more—"and bad for the environment. The only one that benefits is Enbridge Gas."

Richard Carlson, energy director at Pollution Probe, said, "The OEB was clear, correctly in my opinion, that the energy transition is under way and there's uncertainty about the future of natural gas use in the province."

Also, "As far as I know, the government has never intervened this directly in trying to alter an OEB regulatory decision, and that should be incredibly concerning to everyone."

I think those are all fair comments. You have a government that, in order to look after its friends at Enbridge, is going to rewrite the law to make the regulator irrelevant and make sure that you pay a higher bill. No wonder people are concerned.

I want to take just a few minutes, because I don't have a lot of time left, to comment a bit on the other items that came up in the minister's speech earlier today. The minister said he wants to protect consumer choice. Well, frankly, consumer choice hasn't changed. People can put in gas furnaces if they want. Developers can put in gas furnaces if they want. There are two options. One is that the investors, who receive billions of dollars from their investment in Enbridge, can put in a little more money to pay for those hookups and pay themselves back over 20 or

40 years. If they think that Enbridge Gas will still be in the home heating business in 40 years, they could do that. They could charge money to a new homeowner, if the new homeowner actually wanted that, but I would say if the new homeowner actually looked at the economics of a heat pump versus a gas furnace, they would go with a heat pump because it's a better deal—no getting around it.

1530

To say that he's protecting consumer choice—not the case. Consumer choice isn't being removed. What's being removed is the subsidy paid for by all the other gas customers—just to be clear, \$300 per customer over the next four years. Not a good deal for those who are customers.

This OEB decision would increase costs: I've already gone through the evidence—not the case. In terms of homeowners, the OEB determined it would be a wash, a very minor change one way or the other, and frankly, other commentators have said it wouldn't be of great consequence.

Predictable energy environment: Well, I have to say, I noted earlier about the fact that increasingly we will be integrated into the world market for natural gas. To the extent that we stay with gas, our costs become more and more unpredictable. We don't know what's going to happen. Frankly, to say that it would be predictable doesn't make sense. I think you're far better off setting up a situation in Ontario where people depend on energy generated in Ontario—electricity—rather than depending on gas imported from the United States. Again, about 60% of our gas is from the States, and we are competing with others around the world who might want to buy that gas at a much higher price. If you're talking about predictability, a predictable energy environment, you want to move away from fossil fuels and you want to move away from natural gas.

He talked about a common-sense approach. Well, I think a common-sense approach is that existing gas customers don't get stiffed with a bill—\$300 over the next four years—to make Enbridge richer. Frankly, the common-sense thing to do would be to look at the OEB decision, which was a very reasonable decision based on an awful lot of evidence, and say, "Yep, that makes sense." The best deal for new homeowners is to direct them towards an electric heat pump. The best deal for existing gas consumers is not to charge them more money, not to raise their bills. That would be the common-sense approach.

Let me see. There were some—oh, yes, I just have to note the minister's satisfaction with his own home heat pump: that he didn't freeze in the dark, that it kept him warm through the winter. Hey, that's great.

Interjection.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: No, I thought the point was really good, that he was endorsing it, that it worked and it worked well. I think that's what we need for people across Ontario, something that works well that they can afford.

Interjection.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: There were some things that were just so wild.

He wants to keep heating costs down. Well, look at the evidence. The evidence is that to keep heating costs down, you go to electric heat pumps. The technology is changing rapidly.

One thing that people should be aware of is that in the United States, the Inflation Reduction Act that's in place now is investing heavily in advancing the technology for heat pumps so that heat pumps that already are quite functional at minus 30 will be even more efficient, more effective in the years to come. Places like Norway—Norway, people know about it, near the Arctic Circle—60% of the households have heat pumps. That's how they heat themselves—60%. Finland, pretty close, around 50%. Sweden I don't have the number for, but my guess is it's in that range. They seem to be able to function, and they're up by the Arctic Circle. If you want to be practical about cost, if you want to be practical about a system that gives you a more predictable kind of heat or energy basis or security, go to heat pumps.

He was talking about how this decision would discourage developers from using cost-effective and efficient gas. Well, frankly, it would encourage them to use cost-effective and efficient heat pumps. They're going to put in an electricity line anyway; let's face it. So if you're putting in an electricity line, don't worry about the gas, unless you've got a customer who really wants gas. Then you can offer it to them. It isn't barred by anyone. If Enbridge believes what it says in its filings, in its claims, it's certainly happy to invest in it. They can do that. They don't have to come to us, the other gas customers, to pay for it.

Also, the pragmatic approach of the government to energy: Interestingly, the Electricity Distributors Association and the Royal Bank of Canada, who are not noted, again, as particularly radical organizations, both said that when it came to dealing with the immediate crunch in Ontario for meeting demand, it was far more cost-effective and far faster to invest in conservation and efficiency—both of them—and not just faster and more effective, but substantially cheaper. This government has totally ignored that advice. The Independent Electricity System Operator has said numerous times that energy efficiency is cost-effective. It is a great deal. That minister is ignoring the electricity distributors who, frankly, know a fair amount about electricity in this province, and the Royal Bank of Canada, that has an interest in this matter. His own organization, the IESO, has talked about the value of conservation and efficiency in terms of low cost and the ability to deliver quickly the sorts of reduction in demand so that we don't have any power shortage. So I can't say that his approach is really that pragmatic.

And just briefly about difficulties in both Alberta and Texas for failure of electricity systems in deep cold: In the most recent problem in Alberta, two gas plants went off-line in the middle of that crunch—two gas plants. They couldn't be depended on. And in storm Uri in Texas, when they had those blackouts, again, it was the gas system that couldn't handle the cold. The pumps for the gas systems were frozen. So in both cases we're talking about problems with the gas infrastructure; that was the biggest issue.

I'm going to wrap up, Speaker. Don't forget; this is really plain: The government wants you to pay more on your gas bill. It wants to raise your gas bill. It wants to ensure that Enbridge has higher profits. It wants to take money out of your pocket to the tune of 300 bucks over the next four years. Everything else is just smoke. All the other arguments are strange-looking scenery and don't bear on the guts of it. This government wants to raise your gas bill. That's it.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Questions?

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: I would like to thank my colleague from Toronto—Danforth. He kept coming back to \$300 over the next four years—if we calculate that, that's going to be less than 10 bucks a month—and thinking that this is big money and this is Enbridge, like we are helping Enbridge, while the whole idea behind that bill was to reduce the cost that a new connection would have to pay upfront. I don't know how come he can say there's no significant difference. This is simple math. You're going to pay what you're going to pay in the next 40 years in one lump sum upfront. Now we cannot start talking about the prices of the houses going up because, at the end of the day, it's going to be passed to the end user.

My question is, what do you think about the savings of this lump-sum amount, kick-start initial cost, versus the \$300?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Well, first of all, I have to say I don't think that, as customers, we should be subsidizing Enbridge. If they want to put that money in, I say right now they've got big-pocketed investors; they can put the money in, and they can recover over the next 40 years. It doesn't have to be the gas customers. It can be the investors that own Enbridge.

The OEB didn't say, "No. You can't put your money in and supply people with that 40-year loan." Go ahead—no sweat. But you can't take it from the existing gas customers. They are tapped out. So I say to you right now, your government should go to Enbridge and say, "Look, you've got big pockets. You put the money out. You try and collect it over 40 years." Because 25 or 30 years from now, that system will have shrunk dramatically, and whoever is left holding the bag is going to have very big expenses, and I think Enbridge knows that.

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The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I would like to thank MPP Peter Tabuns for this hour. We learned so much from you. And it is very simple: This government wants you to pay more so that Enbridge and developers don't have to. It's really simple. They can spin themselves in knots. When it comes right down to it, they want you to pay, not Enbridge.

And let's be clear: Enbridge operates as a regulated monopoly. It's a regulated monopoly. And how is it regulated? By the OEB. So it is shocking to see this government undermine its own regulatory body, but I shouldn't be shocked because we see political interference from this government when it comes to appointing judges.

They want like-minded judges. Now we heard from this minister that they're going to appoint a new chair of the board for the OEB—I imagine also a like-minded sock puppet.

It was good to see Enbridge throw off their socks, but we have a government that's cutting them off at the knees. Do you find it shocking, the level of political interference coming from this government?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Well, it shouldn't be shocking—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: It is.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Frankly, it is. Sorry, it's not surprising, but it is shocking. I'm quite taken aback by the comments of the Premier around the appointment of judges. I thought you appointed judges based on their ability to understand the law and to administer the law, and if you don't do that, then the credibility of those judges is dramatically undermined.

What's happening with this is that the government has decided that they do not want an energy board that actually regulates based on rules, regulations and evidence. They want energy decisions made based on lobbyists and influencers who get to cabinet ministers and the Premier. That's the basis of what's going on.

I do find that shocking because I thought after our experience with the Liberals and them playing around with the energy board that this government, even if I disagree with them, might have more interest in a regulator that actually functions—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Thank you.

I'm moving on to the next question.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I listened intently to the member from Davenport, the opposition critic. I have to say, I'm not sure what kind of dream world the members opposite are living in, but to try to say that in rural communities like mine in Niagara West, it's going to cost \$300 to pay upfront for the cost of bearing the natural gas infrastructure, and to say they can simply all get heat pumps—again, we've gone through this. We've heard from the Minister of Energy about those days when he's at a lower temperature, he needs his natural gas to kick in, he needs to see the assistance from other areas. And I know in my riding, that's the exact same thing.

So the member opposite, does he genuinely not understand the meaning of cost avoidance? He kept going on about this \$300 and how little it's going to cost the people of Ontario to do this. So we understand he's in favour of forcing this on the hard-working, first-time homebuyers of Ontario. How much is it going to cost communities in my riding if the NDP had their way and they forced this down their throats?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: That may be one of the stranger questions I've gotten in the House. Clearly, you didn't listen to the minister because he said, "I have a heat pump because there's no natural gas servicing me." So he doesn't depend on natural gas when it gets cold. His heating unit has an electric-resistance backup, just as mine does. So when it gets too cold for the heat pump, he uses electric heating. So he doesn't use gas at all.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Order. Order. Please make all of the questions and responses through the Chair.

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Well, from my understanding, the minister lives in rural Ontario and seems to be able to do quite well with his heat pump. Frankly, in Niagara—and I can be corrected by those from Niagara—it's a bit warmer than it is in Barrie or in Sudbury.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question?

Mr. Joel Harden: I want to thank the member for Toronto–Danforth, not Davenport, for that great presentation. I also just want to note, you mentioned that the minister enjoys the benefits of a heat pump for a home that is not serviced by gas.

I was surprised—because I've read the 147-page report that you referenced in your remarks—when the minister said that the Independent Electricity System Operator was not consulted, was not involved, because if you refer to page 5 of the report, what the OEB says is that, in fact, the IESO was one of the people who contributed to the years' worth of research, the over 10,000 pages of evidence that the OEB came to a decision.

I guess I'm asking the member to reflect upon the conflicting position of the minister. Is he the minister for energy or is he the minister for Enbridge?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: He's the minister for Enbridge. I don't have to spend a lot of time thinking about that one—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Can you say that again?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Yes. Sorry. Some people may not have heard.

He's clearly the minister for Enbridge—there's no two ways about it—just as the Liberals were the ministers for TransCanada Energy. They were the ministers for whatever power producers wanted to build a gas plant. That's who they were the ministers for. Yes, this is the minister for Enbridge. He's looking out for Enbridge. He's not looking out for you. He wants you to pay more. He wants you to have a higher gas bill. That's the reality.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question.

Mr. Ted Hsu: I want to thank the honourable member for a wonderful and very informative speech.

I think it's great that we have just highlighted in the back-and-forth here what a great poster boy our energy minister is for heat pumps. I think everybody in Ontario should know that our energy minister has a heat pump, has electric backup and he's doing quite well, and I guess because he spoke about it here today, he wants all of Ontario to know that. I want to thank everybody for bringing that out in the debate today.

I'll pose to the honourable energy critic for the NDP the same question that I posed to the minister. I think he'll know what I'm about to ask.

One of the dissenting commissioners, the only one who voted against the OEB decision, suggested that the revenue horizon should be 20 years, which would mean

that the upfront payment would be about one third of the cost of a natural gas installation. Would he support that?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: I very much appreciate the question, and I'm glad that you asked the minister that. I was a bit taken aback by his response.

No, I don't support the 20-year time horizon. I think, increasingly, it's going to be unpredictable how long those lines will actually be functional. I think to be fair to gas consumers around the province who will have to pay more to subsidize this, they shouldn't be the ones who take the risk that there will not be repayment.

As I noted earlier, coal use in this province for residential heating collapsed within a decade. Frankly, as we see improvements in other technologies and if heat pumps see substantial advances in the next few years, I can see mass abandonment of the Enbridge gas heating system. That would mean that in 20 years, it may not be there as an investment that you can collect on; it may simply be gone.

So zero seems the appropriate risk level—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Thank you very much. Further debate?

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: As the parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Energy as well as the MPP for Glengarry–Prescott–Russell, it's my privilege to echo Minister Smith's remarks on the importance of the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act and what it means for Ontario families and businesses across the province.

In particular, I'd like to start with the changes to the leave-to-construct process that are proposed in today's legislation, which are critical for Ontario's municipalities—and this is especially true for rural communities like the one I represent.

As it currently stands, anyone looking to build a new home or business and connect it to a reliable, affordable natural gas supply in Ontario must get a leave-to-construct approval from the Ontario Energy Board if the expected costs of the pipeline project will be \$2 million or above. However, this existing exemption, which has been in place for more than 20 years, is causing major delays for cities and towns all over the province.

Minister Smith and I have heard many concerns from municipal leaders in every corner of the province who want to make sure that new housing is built and who want to get their constituents off more expensive and emitting forms of energy like home heating oil. And they put forward a clear ask. It was pretty clear, specifically in support of raising the current leave-to-construct cost threshold.

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I had the pleasure of attending the Rural Ontario Municipal Association—ROMA—conference last month, where I was able to hear the frustration first-hand from many municipal leaders. During this conference, I met with the South Central Ontario Region Economic Development Corp. They are a non-profit corporation owned by the counties of Brant, Elgin, Middlesex, Norfolk and Oxford and represent just under one million residents in the southwestern region of Ontario. This group of

municipalities' message was clear: that they support our government's direction in modernizing the leave-to-construct process and recognize that the \$2-million cost threshold established in regulation in 2003 is outdated and does not reflect the current costs associated with infrastructure projects today. The steps we're proposing here today will update this threshold and support our government's objective of building 1.5 million homes across Ontario, helping to expand transit, cutting red tape, and lowering the cost of access to our affordable, reliable and resilient natural gas system.

I also had the pleasure of meeting with the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus during last month's ROMA conference. The Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus is the voice for 103 rural municipalities representing approximately 800,000 constituents. The Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus region spans over 50,000 square kilometres; for a reference point, that's about the size of the province of Nova Scotia. They continue to see significant growth throughout this region, which brings with it increased pressure to develop the gas pipeline network.

Under the current leave-to-construct threshold, municipalities represented by the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus are seeing significant delays in getting natural gas to development sites. It's just a fact that gas pipeline project costs in Ontario have significantly increased due to higher labour and material costs over the past 20 years, just like they have across Canada, and \$2 million is no longer a meaningful threshold. Ontario is constantly growing and we need to ensure that every sector in this great province stays modern to ensure that we continue to keep shovels in the ground and create jobs.

Meredith Staveley-Watson, who is the manager of government relations and policy of the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus, reached out to the Minister of Energy's office directly to highlight the importance of modernizing the leave-to-construct threshold. Madam Staveley-Watson states, "Modernizing these outdated regulations would reduce delays and costs for economic development initiatives including new industries seeking to locate in Ontario and create jobs ... transit projects, community expansion projects, housing developments, connections for low carbon fuel blending (e.g. renewable natural gas, hydrogen) as well as residential and business customer connections."

While the opposition may wish to ignore the fact that Ontario's economy is growing, our government understands how important this modernization is to Ontario families and businesses. To help modernize Ontario even further, if passed, the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act would allow for the development of regulations to exempt small pipeline projects that cost between \$2 million and \$10 million from leave-to-construct.

The Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus also highlights this point of increasing the cost threshold to \$10 million as it would closer align Ontario with other Canadian jurisdictions, like British Columbia, where the thresholds are \$15 million for electricity and \$20 million for natural gas. Ontario cannot stay in the past and we need to modernize so we don't get left in the dust.

I was also honoured to meet with the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus, who also expressed their support for this threshold increase. The Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus is a non-profit organization representing 15 municipalities, 300 communities, 250,000 businesses and 1.5 million constituents across rural western Ontario. The Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus aims to enhance the prosperity and overall well-being of rural and small urban communities across the region, which have seen significant growth in the past decade, once again bringing additional pressure to build out the gas pipeline network.

Much like the previous organizations I mentioned, the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus recognizes that Ontario's outdated regulations are causing the current leave-to-construct threshold to apply far more broadly than intended when it was established more than two decades ago. In fact, the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus have told us that rural western Ontario could lose out on significant opportunities for economic development in their region due in part to the current threshold which was never updated by the previous government.

While the opposition may wish to lose jobs and economic opportunities, our government understands that these lost economic opportunities are simply unacceptable. This is why Ontario needs to act now to modernize the Ontario Energy Board's leave-to-construct process in order to bring reliable and affordable energy options to communities, homes and businesses in a more cost-effective and timely manner. We simply cannot lose any more jobs and economic opportunities in Ontario. These leave-to-construct changes proposed in today's act will help to promote and protect economic development and job creation opportunities, especially in rural municipalities across the province.

When meeting with the united counties of Leeds and Grenville, Mr. Speaker, they discussed how their municipalities are facing delays and problems in ensuring natural gas expansion into commercial and industrial parks, as well as some residential areas. There are significant economic development implications to these delays and, of course, we know the only real solution is to improve the necessary infrastructure.

Like many rural communities, economic development in eastern Ontario and the united counties of Leeds and Grenville has been historically driven by a competitive tax structure, the availability of serviced land and an educated workforce. We know that today's economic development efforts, however, require a more comprehensive and collaborative strategy, particularly in our post-pandemic era. That's why our government is focused on supporting a broader regional network of infrastructure to reflect and support the reality of business, industry supply chains and trade. This is true in all rural communities across Ontario, like the united counties of Leeds and Grenville, who are constantly in competition with larger urban markets for commercial and industrial business.

Mr. Speaker, I hope it is well known that natural gas in Ontario is more affordable than any other sources of energy, such as oil and propane. Expanding natural gas

makes the cost of living more affordable for all constituents but significantly for rural residents, especially those in northern Ontario where even high-efficiency heat pumps may not be an option on the coldest days of the year.

Not only is natural gas more affordable, expanding natural gas will also increase economic development and job opportunities within communities. Currently, natural gas plays an important role in meeting Ontario's energy needs in that it's currently the primary heating source for 70% of homes in the province.

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The legislation our government is introducing today will make it easier to develop and connect to natural gas pipeline projects, which is not only essential for heating, but also contributes to overall energy efficiency and improving the quality of life for residents.

Ontario's natural gas expansion initiative has made it more affordable to bring natural gas to underserved rural communities. Specifically, the township of Huron-Kinloss expressed that the expansion has provided residential and commercial ratepayers in that municipality with a choice in how they meet their energy needs in an affordable manner. The clerk from Huron-Kinloss states, "The township has benefitted from natural gas expansion initiatives of the province, making it affordable to bring natural gas to underserved rural areas. This has provided residential and commercial ratepayers with choices in how they meet their energy needs in an affordable manner, and helps to provide heat sources during even the worst winter storms."

I would like to thank the township of Huron-Kinloss for their support for these types of initiatives to continue in a sustainable manner that makes it affordable to all citizens. This is why I urge all members to vote for the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act as natural gas is needed across Ontario, specifically for our rural constituents who rely on this affordable energy. Our government understands that it's more challenging for rural customers to transition to natural gas, as it currently stands. That's why Ontario is focused on bringing regulations forward that allow equal opportunity to natural gas supply that is built in a sustainable manner.

And it truly spans across the map. Another community that expressed natural gas as their top concern is the township of Warwick. As a municipality that currently has only some portions serviced, their local government often hears from residents and businesses expressing their interest in having access to both natural gas and three-phase hydro. Like many small rural communities, power and service availability are key drivers of economic development. Without these services, they simply can't compete with other communities who offer these amenities.

I also met with the municipality of Red Lake, which is a northwestern Ontario municipality, not far from the Manitoba-Ontario border. This small community is poised for significant economic growth over the next decade as a result of several nearby mining projects. However, they do not currently have the capacity to provide the needed

natural gas and electrical power service to support these projects or support the additional housing and services that will be required for the influx of workers and new residents that will be coming to their community.

Similar natural gas concerns were brought forward in my meeting with the township of Conmee, where natural gas is unavailable, as well as in the municipality of Oliver Paipoonge, where other energy sources like wood, electricity and propane are very expensive for heating and where residents are experiencing issues with insurance companies becoming increasingly reluctant to insure properties that use wood for heating.

Finally, I wish to talk about my riding, Glengarry–Prescott–Russell. My constituency office hears every day from my constituents how important affordability is, specifically how important affordability and reliability are when it comes to energy.

I was so honoured to hear from the township of East Hawkesbury, which, for those who don't know, is one of the last communities before you hit the province of Quebec. Mayor Kirby expressed the need for the threshold change. He states:

“That these outdated regulations are causing the leave-to-construct to apply far more broadly than intended when it was established over 20 years ago. Due to increased regulatory and cost pressures, as well as inflation, virtually all gas pipeline projects are now greater than \$2 million, rendering the threshold meaningless. That roughly 0.5 kilometres of pipe in urban settings now often exceeds the \$2-million threshold. That modernizing these outdated regulations would reduce delays and costs for economic development initiatives including community expansion projects, housing developments, connections for low-carbon fuel blending (e.g. renewable natural gas, hydrogen) as well as residential and business customer connections. That based on OEB's performance standards, this proposal would save approximately 507 months of regulatory process in addition to the time needed to undertake Indigenous consultation and environmental review and prepare an application to the OEB.”

I have barely touched on every community that has expressed the need for keeping energy costs down. Similar concerns were also shared during meetings Minister Smith and I had with municipal leaders during last year's Association of Municipalities of Ontario, AMO, conference.

Our government knows that the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act is a step in the right direction to preserve customer energy choices, by ensuring that natural gas remains an available and affordable option for customers. Our government understands that supporting new projects in municipalities is critical to helping not just communities to grow, succeed, and thrive, but Ontario's economy will prosper as well.

As we plan for a prosperous future, we must ensure we have an energy system that can deliver reliable and affordable power to all Ontarians, including those in small rural communities such as the ones I have talked about today. I urge the members of the House to think of every

Ontarian across this great province and support the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Questions?

M. Guy Bourgouin: Je veux te donner un break de l'anglais. Je vais te poser une question en français.

On a l'organisme de réglementation, le conseil d'énergie—en d'autres mots, l'« energy board »—qui nous dit qu'il faut commencer à s'éloigner du gaz naturel. Votre gouvernement préfère donner encore plus d'argent à Enbridge. En d'autres mots, ça va nous coûter encore plus cher, les personnes qui sont sur le gaz. On sait qu'il faut s'éloigner de ça.

Pourquoi, à la place, vous ne dites pas à Enbridge : « Vous voulez les avoir? Payez pour vous rendre là. »? Pourquoi est-ce que c'est encore les contribuables qui—il faut qu'ils payent encore plus? Aussi, ce que vous pouvez faire comme gouvernement, vu qu'il faut s'éloigner de ça, parce qu'on n'a rien qu'à voir ce qui se passe avec nos hivers et nos feux et tout ce qui se passe avec l'environnement—pourquoi ne peut-on pas mettre des incitatifs aux « heat pumps »? Pourquoi pas donner un incitatif pour commencer à faire le transfert vers les énergies vertes? Ça, ce serait un plan qui respectait l'organisme de réglementation. Pourquoi votre gouvernement aime mieux donner de l'argent et encore enrichir les proches—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Thank you.

M. Stéphane Sarrazin: Merci à mon collègue de—en tout cas, Mushkegowuk—

M. Guy Bourgouin: Mushkegowuk—James Bay.

M. Stéphane Sarrazin: —James Bay, merci. Merci. J'ai toujours de la misère avec ce nom-là.

Juste pour dire que notre gouvernement, premièrement, a été élu grâce à notre plan d'amener de l'électricité abordable et fiable en Ontario. Puis, toutes sources d'énergie—c'est une de nos priorités. Je dois dire que votre gouvernement, qui est contre l'expansion de gaz naturel—je me demande des fois si vous vivez dans la même province que nous, parce que toutes les municipalités de vos circonscriptions sont venues à notre gouvernement pour demander plus de gaz naturel. Aussi, comment est-ce que votre gouvernement a voté contre l'énergie nucléaire, qui représente présentement environ 75 % aujourd'hui? On se parle, là : l'énergie nucléaire, c'est 50 % de l'électricité produite en Ontario en temps réel maintenant—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Thank you. Next question.

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Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you to my colleague for his remarks this afternoon. I know we both represent rural ridings in different parts of Ontario, obviously, and obviously natural gas expansion is key to the success of our local municipalities, agriculture producers and families. I was wondering if he could elaborate on why it is important the government bring this piece of legislation forward to ensure that those expansions can continue.

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: Thank you to my colleague for this question. Of course, like me, he knows how important it is, because we had every municipality coming to us for delegations. We hear from all across Ontario the need to increase the natural gas in Ontario.

We've seen these projects now these days. I know a lot of farmers in my riding who want to have natural gas for their grain dryers. Now they're asking for a price to bring natural gas, and it costs like \$2 million to do one kilometre in a concession. We have the same policies or rules from 20 years ago, so I think it's time to revise that and make it easier for people to have access to natural gas in the province of Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Next question?

M. Ted Hsu: Mon honorable collègue a parlé des collectivités rurales et nordiques. J'aimerais bien qu'il confirme si j'ai bien compris la décision de la Commission de l'énergie de l'Ontario en ce qui concerne la tarification d'Enbridge Gas. Je pense que cette décision ne s'applique pas au programme pour l'expansion de l'accès au gaz naturel. C'est-à-dire, cette décision ne s'applique pas aux programmes qui s'agissent de l'accès au gaz naturel dans les collectivités rurales et nordiques. Est-ce que mon collègue peut le confirmer?

M. Stéphane Sarrazin: Oui, merci beaucoup pour cette question, au membre de l'opposition. Je dois dire que, ce que nous on trouve important en tant que gouvernement, c'est que l'OEB aurait dû consulter des organismes de tous les différents secteurs, ce qui n'a pas été fait. Donc ils n'ont pas consulté avec les développeurs. Ils n'ont pas consulté avec l'IESO. Je pense que c'est pour cette raison-là que nous, on croit que ça n'a pas été bien fait, le processus, donc on croit qu'on doit aller de l'avant à rectifier ça. Parce que nous, on l'entend à chaque jour, ce que les Ontariens nous disent. La plupart des gens de l'Ontario veulent du gaz naturel. C'est un besoin—70 % des résidences présentement ont le gaz naturel, puis on doit continuer à fournir le gaz naturel à beaucoup de municipalités rurales dans l'Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Next question?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: To the member across, thank you very much for your presentation.

The Enbridge Gas plans were reviewed by the Ontario Energy Board. It was a plan that looked at what was going to be happening over the next five years. The board then argued that the company's proposal would lead to an overbuilt and underutilized gas system. They wanted to move the company forward to ensure that they were going to meet the needs of the future by moving away from fossil fuel towards renewable energy.

Minister, what in this bill actually does that for the homeowners and the future taxpayers of Ontario? How do we protect them from undue and unnecessary costs that this bill will actually bring upon them because we're still using outdated technology?

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: Thank you for the question. When we came in power, this ministry here, I think we've

never been doing that great as a province when it comes to energy. I've been in the energy sector for a long time, and I can tell you, I'm so proud of what we're doing with energy right now as a government. Our main priority is to have affordable, reliable and clean energy, and I think we're on that path. We presented the Powering Ontario's Growth plan, and I'm inviting you to go through the plan. You will see what we want to do on a long-term process with nuclear.

Of course, we all know that a couple of months ago, your party voted against increasing our nuclear fleet in Ontario. But I think we've got a great plan and we're sticking to it, and I think Ontarians are pretty happy with what we're doing when it comes to energy in this province.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Questions?

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank my colleague for his excellent comments, echoing the minister's comments that we have a pragmatic approach here in Ontario. I would like the member to speak a bit about the difference between gas as a heating source as opposed to an electricity source. It makes up less than 8% of our electrical grid, yet we know that it makes up almost two thirds of our heating requirements across the province.

I'm wondering if the member could please speak to the ongoing role that natural gas is going to play in this province moving forward.

Mr. Stéphane Sarrazin: Thank you to my colleague for the question. Like I was saying, this is all part of our Powering Ontario's Growth plan when it comes to energy. Of course, he's from a riding where we're going to be investing in nuclear power, and it's going to bring a lot of people, a lot of workers, into that region. We're going to have to get natural gas there, even though there's electricity.

When we heard the minister talk about his heat pump—I also have a heat pump at home, but some of these days when the temperature in the afternoon goes from minus 5 to minus 25, that heat pump just won't do the job. You need the electric backup or you need a natural gas backup, especially in rural municipalities when sometimes the grid is not that reliable because you're really in a rural region and we've got power outages. You can live with a generator and natural gas, but you won't be able to do that with a heat pump.

That's the reason why we think it's important to have natural gas be part of our plan to bring affordable, reliable and clean energy to Ontario. That's the reason why we see companies coming back to Ontario manufacturing.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): There's not enough time for another question.

Further debate?

Mr. Joel Harden: It's a pleasure to rise today to speak to this bill, the protecting profits for Enbridge act. I'm beginning on a note of humour because we're getting to that point in the afternoon where it can become difficult to listen to debate, particularly debate that doesn't make a lot of sense.

I heard it from the parliamentary assistant just now, who's my neighbour in eastern Ontario from a riding I love and grew up in, that the member himself, like the minister, enjoys the use of a heat pump. My question is, if it isn't not great for the member and the minister, what is stopping the province from giving that option to every single apartment building, every single home, every single business, every single farm in the province of Ontario?

Let me tell you something, Speaker: I am a proud New Democrat, and one of the founders of the New Democratic Party, one of the modern exemplars of the values I'm very proud to stand behind here in this part of the House, was J.S. Woodsworth. What Woodsworth used to say at the House of Commons is, "What we desire for ourselves, we desire for all." We're not happy when we're doing okay, because we're aware of the fact that we all do well when we all do well. We all do well when everybody is given an opportunity to be their best self.

What this bill does brazenly—and I've had occasion in the last six years to see a lot of brazen pieces of legislation—is say, "I don't care about evidence. I don't care about independent regulators. I don't care about what the rest of the world is doing in the energy sector. I am going to listen to Enbridge's consultants, Enbridge's lobbyists and the chief of staff to the minister" who, as I understand, used to be a lobbyist for Enbridge. "I'm going to listen to that advice and not the advice that could make Ontario a cleaner, greener, more prosperous place for generations to come."

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You know, Speaker, when I hear the disconnect from reality over there, it makes me think of the great playwright Bertolt Brecht, who wrote a reflection on authoritarianism—authoritarian logic like I'm hearing over there. He once wrote in a poem called *The Answer*:

... that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?

That's what we're dealing with here. It's not the first time we've seen this government say "meh" in the face of evidence. There's a big graveyard of former regulators and people entrusted to give advice to this particular government. What about the Ontario child advocate? What about the Ontario Environmental Commissioner? What about the French Language Services Commissioner? What the former member from Lambton–Kent–Middlesex; what about Mr. McNaughton? Do they listen to anybody over there when controversy broaches itself in their caucus, or are they only interested in what Enbridge is trying to tell the province of Ontario in this moment? And that is that the monopoly they have, the agreement they have signed with the province of Ontario and the profits they generate from it matter more than making the energy transition which is right in front of us.

I'll be charitable to the government too, because there are elements of the province that can see it that work for this government, and they're doing it. I'm thinking about the IESO, the Independent Electricity Systems Operator, which I've heard both the parliamentary assistant and the minister say were not involved in the OEB decision. Incorrect. Page 5 of the 147-page report says very clearly the IESO deputed. Their evidence was gathered toward it. Their opinion was not the one accepted by two thirds of the OEB. So, we can make up our own arguments, but we can't make up our own facts, all right? The fact of the matter is, the IESO deputed to this process. The advice they gave the OEB was not persuasive.

But the question here, Speaker, is this: When the OEB, which is an independent body of this Legislature, gives a 147-page decision and tells us, as legislators in this place, that we are at risk if we give Enbridge the right to bill ratepayers \$300, that we will be designing, in their words, "an overbuilt, underutilized gas system"—now, that is not to say that this is a system that can change overnight. When I hear members opposite saying that, they're technically correct. But that's not the debate we're having. That's not the debate we're having.

The debate we're having is, what is the future? The 1.5 million homes I hear the members opposite talking about all the time. Well, let's do a thought experiment. One expert who did actually contribute to the OEB's study said that if we decided to build those 1.5 million new homes and we decided to heat them with methane gas, that would result in over 100 megatons of carbon pollution over the lifetime of that new infrastructure. Just for reference, Speaker, that is two thirds of Ontario's total emissions every year. It's the equivalent of driving 22 million cars. Ontario at the moment has just over nine million cars.

So if the government wants to please Enbridge and allow them to increase the gas bills of Ontarians to fund their infrastructure plans, which are not borne out by evidence, that has a consequence. In my community right now, people in Ottawa Centre are faced with the—I mean, you have to laugh, Speaker, because you don't want to cry all the time. But we in Ottawa are really proud of our festival called Winterlude. We're proud of the great canal skateway that we have, biggest in the world. Well, it was biggest in the world. It didn't open at all last year. Didn't open at all last year; we've had five days of skating this year. And who is one of the principal sponsors of Winterlude back home? Enbridge.

Many of us have asked the National Capital Commission, "Why are we doing this? Why are we working with a company that is pressuring this government, that is pressuring other governments to embrace forms of electrical generation that are counterproductive to our climate goals?"

Mr. Brian Saunderson: It's not electrical generation; it's heating.

Mr. Joel Harden: I hear the member opposite talk about heating. Well, if you look at gas-fired electrical, if you look at heating, we are talking about effectively the same thing. Methane emissions are 80 times the potency

of normal CO₂. It is difficult to dissipate from the atmosphere. At some point, you have to reckon with the evidence. Maybe read the 147-page report, instead of just criticizing it.

The point of the matter is this: If we give Enbridge what it wants—if we allow the baby to cry and scream, and we give the baby whatever it wants; if we work for Enbridge, and not for the people of Ontario—and if we say to the people of Ontario, who many people in this House have said are struggling and hurting, “The 300 bucks is on you and not the company whose parent organization made \$46 billion in aggregate sales last year,” who do we work for? Who do we work for? What do the seats in this House matter? Because the real decisions, as people have said in this debate already—the member for Toronto–Danforth said it already—are not made in this chamber. They’re made in the antechambers. They’re made in the hallways when the chief of staff for the Minister of Energy, who used to work for Enbridge, gives that gentleman advice.

So I’ve got to tell you, Speaker: It’s hard for me to sit and listen to this, because I want to believe that we want to drive an evidence-based approach to policy in this province. I want to believe that we want to actually make every single person better off by the decisions we make here, and that, frankly, is not what Enbridge is asking us to do.

Enbridge just wrote the city of Hamilton a letter—I’m sure my colleagues from Hamilton will be talking about that this afternoon—claiming that they receive no public subsidy, claiming that they get no beneficial arrangement like electricity and that those of us who are scrutinizing this bill are not representing the facts. So let me say this, Speaker: When you sign a contract with the province of Ontario to have a monopoly on the transmission of gas in this province and the Ontario Energy Board signs off on your return-on-investment target—which is 10%; 10% is what Enbridge is allowed to shoot for every single year—you have the support of the province, you have the backing of the province and you have, as the member from Glengarry–Prescott–Russell said, 70% of homes heated by gas at your disposal that you can raise rates on, provided the OEB lets you do it.

But this time they didn’t. This time they didn’t. After a year of listening to experts that included home builders, owners of rental properties, environmental organizations and subject matter experts, they came to the decision that was delivered on December 21, 2023. There were 10,000 pages of evidence, and a day later, the Minister of Energy stands up and says, “Well, this is the wrong decision. I’m reversing it.” I wonder how much research went into that. Was it a year of deputations, pouring over documents and science, or was it a couple of phone calls from a lobbyist that influenced that situation?

Particularly, it’s so frustrating hearing in debate today that the minister himself enjoys the benefit of this technology in his own home. Give me a break. If it’s good enough for you, it’s good enough for all the people we work for. That should be the goal of the province of Ontario.

I want to salute, actually, while I’m here, the IESO, for their work in trying to follow upon the example of the province of Prince Edward Island. In Prince Edward Island, if your household income is \$72,000 or less and if the value of your home is \$320,000 or less, the province of Prince Edward Island will buy you a heat pump, because they’re trying to encourage people to get off of very expensive home heating fuel.

We’ve heard a lot of that in our country. The Prime Minister, who I’ll talk about in a moment, got into some hot water over the heating carve-out and created a huge debate in the country. But the province of Prince Edward Island actually did something about it. They did something about it. They actually helped homeowners get access to the technology that the minister enjoys, that the parliamentary assistant enjoys, to help them defray their costs.

And I want to think that is a very fascinating thing, Speaker, because guess what political party is in power in Prince Edward Island? It’s the Conservative Party. And guess who the next most powerful presence is in the province of Prince Edward Island? Let me give credit where it’s due: It’s the Green Party. And maybe, just maybe, there were some discussions in that august House that led to evidence-based decisions.

1630

The IESO is starting to do the same thing. Right now, through its program entitled the Energy Affordability Program, they are announcing to the province of Ontario that you can apply to have access to a heat pump. If the number of people in the home is one or less, we’re talking about \$67,000 a year; two or less, \$95,000 a year. They’re starting to roll out this technology.

But, Speaker and members of this House, has anybody seen an advertisement about this? Have you seen an ad about this program anywhere in the province of Ontario? Because I understand that if you go to the Los Angeles airport, you’ll see ads promoting how wonderful this government is, but I haven’t seen a single ad promoting this terrific program; this very reasoned, smart public policy program that would give renters and homeowners relief from their energy costs—not a single ad. Why? I think it’s because Enbridge is driving the energy policy at the moment.

I hope members of this caucus show up to their next meeting and ask the Premier and the advisers, “Why aren’t we promoting the energy assistance program? Why aren’t we getting heat pumps into buildings?” It would be interesting to see if we see new ads in a couple of weeks; I’m not going to hold my breath, Speaker.

I know this from the target set by our local officials in the city of Ottawa: They have said that if Ottawa wants to move seriously on its climate emissions for the heating of buildings, we should set a goal of 20,000 conversions a year moving to heat pumps or geothermal heating/cooling systems. Right now, we’re at 600, so we need a huge ramp-up of capacity in the very occupations so many of us in this building talk about all the time, because we love them: the skilled trades. We need those folks dispatched to not

only retrofit existing buildings, but when new buildings are built, that we build them with the right tech that will make sure that we have clean air.

Some 45% of my city's emissions come from buildings, so we have set that target, and we're nowhere near meeting that target. We need a province that will do in Ontario what is being done in PEI, what is being encouraged elsewhere. Other provincial grids are very different. British Columbia's grid is 88% hydro, 4% gas; Manitoba's grid, 97% hydro, less than 1% gas. Here in Ontario, it's 27% gas, and likely to increase, given what I'm hearing from the members opposite, as we refurbish the nuclear stock.

Is that actually the plan? I ask that question not only from an environmental perspective; I ask that question from the perspective of the women and men responsible for maintaining Enbridge's pipeline infrastructure. Do you know that there's no requirement right now, under existing regulations, for Enbridge to disclose any compromises in its pipeline infrastructure, underground or above ground? Nothing compels them to report to the province that there are leaks in the system. I think that should be a massive concern.

Do you know who raised that with me, Speaker? Not environmental groups; Unifor, the union whose members work for Enbridge, maintain the pipeline infrastructure and have told me directly they have significant concerns about the lack of money Enbridge puts into maintaining the existing pipeline. It's their members who breathe in the gas, it's their members who are directly exposed, so they have an interest in doing what I think is climate work: maintaining the integrity of the gas pipeline systems that we have, instead of telling Enbridge, "Yes, you can soak ratepayers more. You can soak them more to build more pipeline."

Because that is how Enbridge makes money. Under their arrangement with the province of Ontario, with the monopoly they have, they don't make money if gas costs more or if there's a higher volume of gas in the pipe. Enbridge makes money when there is more pipeline built. But this House needs to make sure that the pipeline that is built works well and functions and doesn't make people sick. But if we get all of these pieces right, Speaker—if we promote the programs the province of Ontario already has operating; if we follow the example of even other Conservative governments, like Prince Edward Island—we could be part of a global energy paradigm revolution that's going on.

The member for Toronto–Danforth talked about Finland. We could also talk about Poland, which of all the EU countries has gone through the biggest transformation in embracing heat pumps. And why? So they can get out of the clasp of Gazprom and Russia. They want energy independence. It makes a lot of sense.

I look at the EU as a whole as a model for the rest of us. In the last year alone, there were three million heat pump units installed in the EU—three million. That has reduced over four billion cubic metres of natural gas. That is eight million tons of CO₂, which is equivalent to the yearly emissions of Greece as a country. That is progress.

But that's not what we're debating in this place. We're not debating progress. We're debating whether or not we want to do Enbridge a favour. We're debating whether or not we want to make sure that they can keep soaking ratepayers, and nobody in this House says otherwise. We're debating whether or not we can overturn an independent body whose job it is to give this province, and this government in particular, advice on the right decisions.

I get that the Minister of Energy does not like Mr. Patrick Moran and the decision that he mediated as chair in the recent OEB decision. We're all entitled to our opinions. But as I've said already, we are not entitled to our own facts. The facts are leading us in one direction: warmer weather, more forest fires.

I hear from the latest information I get from the province of Alberta that wildfire season has actually already started to begin in parts of Alberta. I haven't seen my family in interior BC in a long time; we have plans to see them. My wife and I were wondering over the weekend as we got ready, are we even going to go? Is the air going to be choked with smoke, as friends from up north will say?

What is the legacy we're leaving for our children in handing Enbridge a gift with this legislation? It's not a very progressive one. There have been Progressive Conservative governments in this province that have built hospitals, that have built schools, that have built positive things that have helped people. I think about the legacy of William Davis. But all this bill does is overturn independent advice and do a solid to Enbridge. I actually think not only being bad legislation, it's a terrible stain on the record of the Conservative Party too, given that other Conservative governments in our very country are taking a different direction.

There is still time for this bill to be pulled from the House. There is still time for the government to declare actual action on climate emissions. There is still time to do what the federal government frankly isn't doing. I haven't had a chance to talk enough about them; maybe I will in questions. The federal government introduced legislation called the greener homes act. They had to cancel it a year early because of how popular the program was. They created a Hunger Games in Canada for people wanting to make their farms, their businesses, their homes more efficient. A \$2.6-million program on a budget of \$497 billion—woefully inadequate.

The province of Ontario can do better. We must do better. We have to follow the evidence. We have to stand by the facts. The facts in this case say we have to say no to Enbridge.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Questions?

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I appreciate the member's comments about following facts and evidence, so I'd like to introduce some evidence that was submitted by our Auditor General in May of last year. We've reduced our greenhouse gas emissions from 2005 by 27%. We're 90% to our target. We're leading the country. When we green

our steel production and we get our small modular nuclear reactors online, we'll be at about 35%. That's a fact.

I'm impressed that you read the decision, but I'm wondering if you read E.B.O. 188, which is the policy which dictates how the regulator is to decide rate changes. And 2.2 says, "Specific parameters of the common elements include the following:

"(a) a 10-year customer attachment horizon;

"(b) a customer revenue horizon of 40 years from the in-service date of the initial mains."

Will you admit that this is a departure from the status quo, that our gas bills today incorporate a 40-year window, and that the regulator has departed from that practice, contrary—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Thank you. Response?

Mr. Joel Harden: What I'd say to the member opposite is the main reason he can cite that first figure is because Ontario as a province decided to phase out coal in our electrical system. It had absolutely nothing to do with the actions of this particular government—absolutely nothing.

Now, the innovations in the private sector he talks about in steel, those are real as well. But again, that has nothing to do with these guys. These guys have a job; their job is to set targets and to encourage us to assemble the facts to get there. They can't just wait and wait for the market to solve problems. They can't just hope that previous decisions will make their current numbers look good. They need to stand with the policy and the resources that we have in the province of Ontario and give people a way to make their homes cleaner, their cars cleaner and their businesses cleaner; and they're failing.

1640

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I want to thank very much the member for Ottawa Centre for that. I really want to focus on the part of this bill that is so egregious. I mean, the title of this bill is—

Miss Monique Taylor: Keeping Energy Costs Down Act.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Keeping Energy Costs Down Act. But my question is for who? Who are they keeping these costs down for? It's Enbridge.

The very fact that, as you have stated, Enbridge is a for-profit multi-billion-dollar corporation. Their CEO makes, what, \$19 million a year. This government would have us believe that Enbridge has the interest of average people at heart. It's unbelievable. So the very fact that this regulated monopoly, this huge corporation, that has no interest and no plan for helping us with climate change—the only thing that protects us from them is a regulator, and this government has kneecapped the regulator. I find that unbelievable.

Could you speak to this political interference that this government has embarked on when it comes to this and judicial appointments in the province of Ontario?

Mr. Joel Harden: I think the only way I can answer my friend from Hamilton is to say that this is a case of

regulatory capture. I mean, it's not only here in the province of Ontario. This Greener Homes Grant I was talking about before: The federal government embarked upon this piddling \$2.6-million experiment. Guess who was the co-sponsor of this initiative, who you have to work with to get that into your home? Enbridge. Enbridge helps vet the applications for the Greener Homes Grant. What sense does that make?

Yes, we have to work with Enbridge, because they are the agents for those ratepayers, but there has to be a regulator. It's a private company. It has a private interest. Some 90% of the situations in our city where people replace their home heating and cooling situation are when they break down in the wintertime. What do we think the rep says at the door? "Welcome to your new gas heat pump." We need something that's independent, that gives people good choices that are affordable; and this government is not doing that.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question?

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you to the member from Ottawa Centre for his remarks this afternoon. He mentioned, who do we work for? Speaker, in this place, we're members—the member opposite believes that we're legislators, which we are. It's a legislative assembly. They're harping on the fact that, as a Legislature, we're taking a policy decision to correct a mistake—very weird line of thought. But we're legislators, everyone. So we can legislate, great, wow—so ironic.

But my question—he's referring to the report. I appreciate he read the report. My question is—and I'm going to quote—do you support this finding? "I do not support a zero-year revenue horizon for assessing the economics of small volume gas expansion customers. I do not find the evidentiary record supports this conclusion." This is from Commissioner Duff, in the report you're quoting.

When will you allow natural gas expansion to places that don't have it, to get it?

Mr. Joel Harden: Yes, I did read the dissenting opinion. Bill 32, which this government introduced a few years ago, promised to do what the member talked about. It promised to bring gas to Indigenous communities and northern communities. Did we see any action on that, member from Mushkegowuk–James Bay? No, they've been singing this song for a while.

The fact of the matter is that the profitable places for Enbridge to expand to are the ones near major urban centres: the plans they have for Windsor; the plans, I'm sure, they have for suburbs around Toronto and Ottawa. That's who they care about. We're not surprised by the fact that Enbridge's priorities line up for their bottom line.

Where we do get surprised and a little uppity is when we start making decisions in this House for a company that made \$46 billion last year, whose CEO makes \$19 million a year, while people are starving and having a hard time feeding their kids. We should be standing up for them, not for Enbridge. This bill is a disgrace for the province of Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Next question?

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you to the member from Ottawa Centre for his debate today. It's definitely interesting being in the House, listening to members opposite talk about this bill, creating a mistake that was made. And yet, we have seen several bills, hours and weeks, frankly: 72 hours in legislative time, 19 days in the Legislature—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: So far.

Miss Monique Taylor: I mean, so far—of this government's wasted time on bills they have put forward and had to retract. You'd think that the members opposite would be more concerned about the Legislature making these rules regarding gas plants and gas transportation, when they slammed the Liberals quite clearly.

I would be interested on hearing the member's take on why he believes the government is so forceful on this when they blame the Liberals for doing the exact same thing.

Mr. Joel Harden: Well, we've heard people blame their invisible friend for the last six years. The price of a home, as these guys have been in power since 2018, has doubled. Average rent in my city of Ottawa is now \$2,000 a month. Everything has gotten more expensive since these folks have been in power.

The good news is that it's not too late for us to chart a different course. We could actually promote some of the programs we already have, which I talked about. We could tell Enbridge, "No, you're not going to get your handout. We're not going to sign up on your corporate welfare. We're actually going to make sure that when we give assistance, it is to the hard-working people of Ontario who make this province the great place that it is." That isn't Enbridge. Enbridge has a contract with the province of Ontario that they're required to fulfill. It's not even clear to me that they are fulfilling it, when I hear about issues of compromises in the pipeline, people getting sick in communities around pipelines where there are leaks. The fact that I haven't heard anything from this government about those health and safety concerns bothers me.

We are going to pass this specific bill to make Enbridge richer. I think it's wrong.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Next question?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I would like to give the member the few minutes remaining to talk about those Enbridge workers and the very fact that they're not being listened to and they're not being represented by this government.

I would like to also bring in the fact that this province has something like 40,000 abandoned oil and gas wells across this province that are a significant source of methane, that blow up in communities—we're talking about some communities in the southwest that are represented by PCs, and here they are, not learning the lessons of that. They're continuing to put infrastructure in the ground that has already shown itself to be risky and that they have absolutely no interest in regulating.

Can you talk a little bit about the risk to people that this expanded infrastructure poses—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Thank you. Response?

Mr. Joel Harden: It's significant. There are lawsuits all over the United States from communities that are taking Enbridge to court.

We don't require Enbridge to tell us if there are any problems in the pipelines. And by doing that, we're not protecting the workers responsible for maintaining those pipelines; we're not protecting the community around the pipelines. Those pipelines aren't going to go anywhere. We need them to be safe.

I'll end on a positive note. The people of Ontario, who work hard, deserve nice things. They deserve a heat pump in their building and home. They deserve access to good public transit. They deserve the opportunity to have clean air, clean water and healthy communities. But this bill does a favour for Enbridge, and it doesn't do a favour for them.

We should rewrite the bill. We should make sure Enbridge pays for its mistakes. End of story.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Further debate?

Mr. Ted Hsu: I'd like to start by echoing the energy minister, who paid homage and thanked the late Richard Dicteri, the past chair of the Ontario Energy Board, whom I first encountered as a federal deputy minister for industry.

Mr. Dicteri worked under Premiers Bob Rae, Mike Harris, Dalton McGuinty, and then he got recruited by Alberta Premier Jim Prentice and was asked to stay on by Alberta Premier Rachel Notley to serve as the head of the Alberta public service.

Former Premier Rae remembered him as someone who "served all parties with equal integrity and thoughtfulness, and believed strongly in the need for a strong, non-partisan public service." I want to emphasize this because the OEB's mandate includes protecting consumers and making decisions independently of the government of the day.

From the OEB website: "The chair of the board of directors is accountable ... for ensuring the independence of decision-making by commissioners and others that carry out the OEB's adjudication work."

The energy minister has promised to appoint a replacement for Mr. Dicteri this spring—someone who he says will implement the changes in Bill 165 and who will make sure that the OEB will "reinforce the government's priority," which the government will outline in a new natural gas policy statement. I trust that the honourable energy minister will choose an independent OEB chair, differently from some of the things that we've heard the Attorney General and the Premier say about how they want to appoint Conservative-friendly judges.

1650

That gets to my first concern about this bill, Madam Speaker: Regulating our energy system and deciding what eventually gets charged to consumers can get pretty

technical. The OEB decision and order on December 21 which triggered Bill 165 was 147 pages long. That's a really good reason for separating all of this from politics. In politics, partisan decisions get made based on whatever the average voter has time to listen to, and if the devil is in the details, partisan politics isn't the best tool for sorting it all out.

Now, an important part of the mandate of the OEB is to protect consumers and do it through independent adjudication. With this bill, the government of the day can intervene; the bill creates another path, a political path, to try to get decisions to go your way. Donations and access to ministers will now matter. And we all know that when things get out of control—our honourable colleagues from the government side know well that when things get out of control, you end up with things like the RCMP criminal investigation, like this government is dealing with now.

I want to talk now about regulated utilities. Just by way of introduction, a regulated utility is allowed to make a fair return on their investments, and they can do it off of what they charge their customers for gas. Because they can do that, we have to protect consumers not only from unfair gas charges, but from unnecessary investments, which they will have to pay for because the utility gets to make a return on it. Making thoughtful judgments about things like what a utility is allowed to spend money on and recover the cost from consumers, and what's a fair profit, are why the OEB was created in the first place.

As I said earlier, this bill allows the government of the day to intervene, to call new hearings on any matter and to specify through regulation which persons of interest may provide submissions to such hearings. This is how the minister is going to be able to influence individual decisions of the OEB, and lobbying the minister will now become part of the process of deciding what we do or don't do to protect consumers.

The government of the day is also going to be deciding, according to this bill and the regulations, what's called the revenue horizon. So if some developer wants to put in a new subdivision and maybe wants to put in gas, the utility—whether it's my own Utilities Kingston or Enbridge—has to calculate what it's all going to cost and what the number of years of revenue is going to be, to be able to cover that cost. The developer is going to promise a certain number of natural gas customers, and if that calculation is all going to work out, we have to make sure that the new consumers are going to actually stay with natural gas.

We know that that is not going to be the case. The OEB is saying we should be expecting that people over the next 10, 20 or 30 years—potentially very quickly—are going to get off natural gas, because technology is constantly improving, because there's climate change pushing us to try to do something to help our kids and grandkids, whom we love dearly.

The problem that the OEB is anticipating—they're trying to protect consumers, because if infrastructure is not being paid for, doesn't get paid for by gas consumers because there are less and less of them, the costs go to all

the other existing customers; all the other households have to pay more. Currently, what happens is the cost of the new gas connection is spread out over 40 years of gas bills of existing customers. Probably most people in this chamber right now will pay for new gas infrastructure, and because we're expected to pay for it over 40 years, it turns out that there's no need for an upfront payment to make up the difference between what gas customers will pay for and what it actually costs. And remember, it's Enbridge, or the utility, who will always have the right to recover the cost of natural gas infrastructure, plus interest and plus a fair profit.

What this government is risking by overturning the OEB decision is not protecting homeowners, because all of us have to pay if there's infrastructure left over that's not being used. This is why it's not just a pay-it-forward system. That's why something different is happening here. Because our economy has to switch from using fossil fuels to using electricity over the coming decades, we're going to have to do that, and that's what's different about now.

The whole trigger of Bill 165 was a decision of the OEB to say that because more and more people are going to switch to heat pumps, and I'm really happy to know—if somebody is worried about whether heat pumps work, just ask the energy minister himself, who told us today that he has got a great heat pump system with an electric backup. He has no natural gas connection, and he's fine, so he's a great poster boy for heat pumps. That is why I think the OEB is justified in thinking that the transition could happen very fast to heat pumps.

The OEB also said there's what they call a split incentive program, so if the developer doesn't have to pay any money up front for a natural gas connection, which is what's happening right now, they end up installing natural gas every time. What that means is that one technology for energy is favoured over all others. One technology is getting a subsidy, a subsidy which all of us pay for—except for the Minister of Energy, who doesn't have to pay for that subsidy, because he's not on natural gas. So the Ontario Energy Board is trying to protect consumers.

Now, the government has said—when the OEB thought about this for about a year, they had thousands of pages of testimony. They thought about it for a year. They had a lot of people providing input. They argued over should this, what they call, revenue horizon, the time over which we spread out the cost of new natural gas infrastructure on our gas bills—there was a discussion over whether it should be something shorter than 40 years. But the government, if you go look at the Environmental Registry of Ontario, has said that it wants to “initially restore the revenue horizon at 40 years,” which only makes sense if you think that in 30 or 40 years—let's see, that's 2055 or 2060—everybody is still going to be on natural gas. That just doesn't make sense.

There were some discussions that maybe the time horizon should be shorter. Maybe it should be 20 years or 15 years, in which case one third or one half of the cost of a new natural gas installation would have to be paid up front. These are all different compromises that the OEB

was looking at, but the government doesn't seem to be interested. It wants to put the revenue horizon right back at 40 years.

Now, to be fair, the government does admit that the OEB in the future may change this time horizon when the government lets it. So what happens if the OEB changes that time horizon from 40 years down to something more reasonable like 20 or 15, assuming Bill 165 goes through? Well, then everybody will have to pay back the costs of gas infrastructure faster, and all the household monthly bills are going to go up. And so, what the OEB is saying is that we'd better give the option to pay up front so that the burden of paying for this infrastructure doesn't go on all the other ratepayers.

Let me end by saying that there are things that the government could do to avoid subverting the independence of the OEB and to do something positive, rather than just kind of going backwards, driving backwards, as we often see them do.

Did the government look at supporting what they call a negative rate rider? That's where, if somebody pays for their natural gas connection up front, they get a discount on their gas bill, because they already paid for the connection infrastructure and they shouldn't have to pay for other people's connections.

1700

Did the government look at allowing the cost of cold-weather heat pumps or a borehole for ground-source heat pumps, something which is inexpensive when you're building new? Did they look at putting that cost spread over many decades on a property tax bill or an electricity bill? Did they look at ensuring that consumers don't have to pay an exit fee if they decide to stop using natural gas? These are all alternatives that this government could have been considering instead of just going backwards to what we had before, because backwards is not working.

Here's my final point. It's a bit of advice for this government. The last time the government of Ontario had a long-term energy plan was in 2017, the previous Liberal government. Now, the government has siloed initiatives going this way on electricity, that way on natural gas, another way on housing and environmental policy, and nowhere on climate change. Through Bill 165, the government wants to be able to give directives to the OEB to hold what are called generic hearings and to bring in all sorts of stakeholders, really different stakeholders that the government wants to bring in.

Why is the government backed into this corner? It's because the Conservatives ditched the idea of a whole-of-government long-term energy plan where housing policy and industrial policy and transportation policy and electricity policy and climate change policy are all considered together and planned together. The government has not updated the long-term energy plan that our province had in 2017. It has not had a whole-of-government energy plan. It hasn't done the hard work of putting the pieces of the puzzle together and planning for the future. Madam Speaker, this is at the core of why this government will fail the kids and grandkids we love.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Questions?

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: Thank you very much to the member of the opposition who talked to many aspects of saving money for the end users and how the changes—and I don't know. He said that the bill is trying to revert or restore the exact situation which was before the decision of OEB, so it's not like introducing something new. It's exactly trying to keep things as they were. If they want to put infrastructure, we have to put the investment and a return will be in 40 years.

Talking about savings—we can talk about savings. We can talk about scrapping the cap-and-trade carbon. We can speak about introducing the one-bill Ontario Electricity Rebate. So there are savings that we have been trying to do in energy, but this is about the infrastructure and the 40 years instead having to pay.

Mr. Ted Hsu: Thank you for the question. I was wondering also what the government really wanted to do, and the answer is in the Environmental Registry of Ontario notes. It says there that the government wants to first go right back to the 40-year revenue horizon, which means that natural gas infrastructure is completely free to the developer but is paid for by us, the ratepayers, the homeowners. They're going back. Now, they've added a whole bunch of things so that they can interfere with how the OEB operates, make it redo hearings, make it hold extra, what they call, generic hearings.

But in the Environmental Registry, it says, "We first want to go back to that 40 years." In fact, every one of the people, including Enbridge, wanted to shorten that 40 years to a shorter time.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Question?

Mr. Wayne Gates: It's always a pleasure to rise. We heard today from my colleagues that spoke about Enbridge and the fact that they make billions and billions of dollars in profit. We heard that their CEO is making millions and millions of dollars in compensation. I listen to my colleagues on that side of the House talk about affordability. We know that living in this province, whether it's rents, groceries, gas prices, food banks—I did a member's statement this morning on food banks. It's the highest level ever. There are encampments, even in Niagara, which my colleague across the road knows.

But the one thing that's interesting here, when I listen to my Liberal friend, is they talk about affordability. So I'm going to ask you a question. On Bill 165, I think we've pretty well got our positions straight. So my question to the Liberals: Bill 165 I think is a mistake for the reasons I just said, but what about your party when you decided to privatize Hydro One at the expense of affordability in the province of Ontario?

Mr. Ted Hsu: Oh my goodness, that's going way back, way back. Listen, what we're talking about in affordability today is about natural gas. The way that impacts affordability is that if we build infrastructure that is not used—forget about money. Just looking at Ontario, all this work is being done to put in things and it doesn't get used,

and we still have to pay for it. That's the way our system works.

So what we're saying is, let's give developers a rational economic choice. They have to feel a little bit that there is a cost that has to be recovered. So that's why we should be protecting, we should be allowing the Ontario Energy Board to be an independent adjudicator to protect consumers.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Next question.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Last election, I recall the Ontario Federation of Agriculture laid out their priorities for farmers in the province of Ontario. One of the priorities that I've heard about from members of the agricultural community and farmers in Niagara West had been the expansion of access to natural gas infrastructure.

This afternoon, it has seemed as though there's a real antagonism from the opposition benches towards natural gas. I had thought there was a bit of a consensus around the support for the agricultural community's request in that regard, but now I'm not so sure. I'm wondering if the member opposite can clarify: Is the Liberal Party of Ontario opposed to investing in the expansion of our natural gas network in Ontario?

Mr. Ted Hsu: Listen, it just has to be rational. There's going to be a role for natural gas. There are hard-to-replace uses for fossil fuels, for propane and natural gas. Some of that is in agriculture, especially when it comes to drying and heating for livestock in the winter. Those are a couple of really hard things to replace.

We also need natural gas for the next few years at peak times to make sure that the electricity is reliable when supply and demand fluctuate. It's not like we're getting rid of natural gas tomorrow. I think if the member is suggesting that, he is wrong. There is a place.

When a developer builds a new subdivision and decides whether to put natural gas in, we want it to be a rational decision, where the cost is—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Response?

Mr. Ted Hsu: —and not subsidized by everybody else so that an irrational decision is made.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Next question.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: What we see with this government is unprecedented political interference. We see a government that's run by insiders and lobbyists. We see a government that's working on the side of huge corporations like Staples, like Walmart, and now Enbridge.

Can you speak to the fact that this government overwrote their own regulatory body, despite overwhelming evidence in favour of Enbridge, which will now be able to pass on these subsidies to individual Ontarians? How is this government interfering in all of these jurisdictions and claiming that they're for the people when who they're really for are large corporations and big, big monopolies like Enbridge?

Mr. Ted Hsu: You know, Enbridge certainly provides natural gas for most of the province but there are other

providers. For example, my provider is Utilities Kingston because I live in the centre of Kingston now.

For me, what's important is that the OEB is trying to protect consumers. This principle should apply not just to Enbridge but to all other natural gas distributors as well. So for me, what's important is the principle. I'm not out to get anybody. What I want is this principle that if you decide to build natural gas infrastructure, you should make a rational decision based on how long it's expected to be used. And if you're not going to recover the cost of that natural gas infrastructure from the gas bills paid by the customers, then you need to have some fraction of that cost paid up front. That has to be a clear payment so that a rational economic decision is made.

1710

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Final question?

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you to my colleague across the way for his remarks. Building off of the member from Niagara West's question, I know there is some confusion amongst the Liberal Party members, especially their leader, around answering tough questions. So yes or no to the member opposite: Do you support natural gas expansion in rural Ontario? Yes or no?

Mr. Ted Hsu: This bill doesn't apply to the Natural Gas Expansion Program—so yeah.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Quick question?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I just want to focus on the fact that what we are focusing on and what the government seems to be ignoring is that we know, and the people of Ontario will soon know, that this is a bill that will keep Enbridge happy. This is a bill that will make customers pay and will make Enbridge continue to operate in the way that they have that is actually costing people money in a time when we have a substantial affordability crisis. So why would this government put forward a bill that is going to cost people and going to benefit Enbridge, particularly in the midst of an affordability crisis?

Mr. Ted Hsu: I think that this government is not thinking carefully about protecting consumers, protecting all the households that collectively have to pay for all of the natural gas infrastructure that we put in. The important thing is if we put in infrastructure and we use it, that's great. If you're building a greenhouse and you're going to use that natural gas connection, especially if you're replacing some of those coal-burning greenhouses like we did in the past—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Thank you. Further debate?

Ms. Jess Dixon: I'm speaking today on the second reading of Bill 165, the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act, 2024. I believe the changes proposed by this act will aid in both protecting the interests of Ontario energy consumers and getting housing and energy infrastructure built faster. It will also play a role in ensuring that Ontarians and Ontario businesses will be able to access reliable and affordable energy now and into the future.

I am one of the two parliamentary assistants to the Minister of Energy. Over the past year and a half, I've been quite proud of what I consider our pragmatic and particularly technology-agnostic approach to energy policy. This government has built an electricity system in Ontario that I think gives customers choice and the opportunity to manage their energy use. We also, as has been stated multiple times, have one of the cleanest grids in the world.

We've shown our commitment to growing our clean energy advantage through early planning measures like requesting a Pathways to Decarbonization report from Ontario's Independent Electricity System Operator. This report resulted in the government's Powering Ontario's Growth plan, which was released in July 2022. We also created the Electrification and Energy Transition Panel in 2021, which has provided critical recommendations to support the province's first integrated energy plan.

Ultimately, our clean grid has become a clear competitive advantage in world markets. Countries and industries around the world are seeing the need to reduce emissions. Many consumers appreciate seeing a focus on clean energy. As Minister Smith described, Ontario is quickly becoming a leader in electric vehicle and battery manufacturing as well as green steelmaking, as demonstrated by the major investments made in our province by companies like Stellantis and Volkswagen.

I remember being particularly struck by an anecdote that I think Minister Fedeli gave us about the Volkswagen decision to relocate to St. Thomas. At the time, they had been looking at several other American jurisdictions which, from a price perspective, may have made more sense than St. Thomas. However, those jurisdictions were operating on coal, and Volkswagen felt that it would be somewhat hypocritical to produce electric vehicle batteries on a coal-based system, which ultimately led to St. Thomas in Ontario being chosen.

In Ontario, we're doing what we can to support electrification through the province. To go briefly into an anecdote before I get into it more, lowering emissions is very important to many people in Waterloo region. Just last month, I was at an announcement regarding a sort of tripartite, federal-provincial-municipal funding grant to Grand River Transit. Thanks in part to that funding, about \$5 million of which came from the province, Grand River Transit is getting 11 fully electric 40-foot buses and new charging units.

I was there for the unveiling of the first new hybrid bus in its new vinyl wrap design, which introduced me to several amateur transit enthusiasts, which I had heard rumour of, but I'd never had the pleasure of meeting any in person. I ended up sitting next to a young man who I believe was named Gordon, who regaled me for a solid 10 minutes with stats about the efficiency and benefits of the new electric buses, which I was very grateful for because, as is usual—with the exception, frankly, of this—I hadn't actually prepared any notes on what I was going to say at this announcement. I more or less got up and just parroted what Gordon had told me, which worked out wonderfully. So there is no doubt that there are a lot of people who are

excited by these new electrified transit options, and that Grand River announcement was a great example of three levels of government coming together in support of something.

Ontario's population is, as we have commented on regularly, growing at an incredible rate, with us expecting to see millions more people just by the end of this decade. With growth comes demand. Now, for the first time since 2005, Ontario's electricity demand is rising. The IESO's most recent analysis indicates that electricity demand in the province could more than double by 2050. If demand doubles, as we expect it to, then of course, so must supply.

It's absolutely imperative that we start now if we're going to build the homes and the infrastructure to support the Ontario of the near future and provide the power that we'll need to thrive. That said, Speaker, this rapidly expanding growth and associated calls on energy bring forth many thoughts and opinions from Ontarians. We need to make sure that all voices are heard, which brings me to my main point.

Last December, the Ontario Energy Board made a decision to bring the 40-year revenue horizon, which had been set back in 1998, down to a zero-revenue horizon, to take effect, by this point, in less than a year. This is a decision that, regardless of what one feels about it, will have a huge impact on families and businesses.

It appears that the OEB made the decision in the absence of some vital evidence from a number of major players and stakeholders that have a significant and important understanding of this sector. The decision was also made without consulting with IESO about a significant point, which is the impact that this decision would have on the province's electricity grid, particularly the impact it would have given that this decision would essentially require a massive and sudden increase in electrification demands, which would have a huge impact on the province's grid. That was not covered.

Herein lies the central purpose of the Keeping Energy Costs Down Act. It's making some changes to the Ontario Energy Board's regulatory processes to make sure that this kind of oversight doesn't happen again.

I am a lawyer, but I was a criminal prosecutor and therefore I have, at best, only a nodding acquaintance with the complex law surrounding regulatory bodies such as the OEB. Although, that said, having sat here this afternoon, I was initially feeling somewhat hesitant about getting up and speaking on something that I have so little authority on, but I now feel completely comfortable, after having listened to several of the past speakers, to speak loudly and proudly about something that I don't necessarily have any specific expertise on, because it appears to not be a prerequisite. Essentially, I don't require any special knowledge to look at this decision and see what I would call a very concerning dissenting opinion.

So, Speaker, please bear with me as I, again, read out this quote from the dissent—it's authored by Commissioner Allison Duff—as it's lengthy but relevant. Commissioner Duff wrote, "I do not support a zero-year revenue horizon for assessing the economics of small

volume gas expansion customers. I do not find the evidentiary record supports this conclusion. The CIAC comparison table filed by Enbridge Gas did not even consider zero within the range of revenue horizon options. Zero is not a horizon. It is fundamentally inconsistent with the intent of E.B.O. 188 by requiring 100% of connection costs upfront as a payment, rather than a contribution in aid of construction. There was no mention of zero in E.B.O. 188—yet a 20 to 30 year revenue horizon was considered. To me, the risk of unintended consequences to Enbridge Gas, its customers and other stakeholders increases given the magnitude of this ... change.”

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Commissioner Duff continues: “The rationale provided in the majority decision to support zero is predicated on understanding the considerations and circumstances facing developers.” However, “this rationale is conjecture as no developers intervened or filed evidence in this proceeding. In contrast, a recent OEB proceeding regarding a proposed housing development in Whitby included intervenor evidence, oral testimony and submission by the affected developer group, enabling the OEB to render a decision based on the evidence.

“A zero-year revenue horizon implies an indifference as to whether these developers decide to connect, or not connect, any gas expansion customers. Is the scenario of no-new-gas-connections, replaced by construction of all-electric developments, feasible? For example, would electricity generators, transmitters, distributors and the IESO be able to meet Ontario’s energy demands in 2025?” She concludes that by writing, “I don’t know.”

Speaker, regardless of where one stands in the discussion around energy, every person in this chamber should be worried when one of the three presiding commissioners says that she was not presented with the necessary evidence to reach any decision, let alone such a drastic change as this, going from a 40-year revenue horizon down to a zero-year revenue horizon in less than a year.

Frankly, it’s not just me reading a dissenting decision and commenting as an armchair expert. Other experts themselves are concerned. I’ll point here to a column written by Aleck Dadson, the former chief operating officer of OEB, and Ed Waitzer, the former chair of the Ontario Securities Commission, who described their frustration with the Ontario Energy Board’s decision.

Mr. Dadson and Mr. Waitzer stated as follows: “In our view, adjudicators should focus on deciding specific matters in a transparent, fair and non-partisan manner. They should do so by applying a legal and regulatory framework to findings based on evidence and arguments presented in an adversarial process. And they should avoid trying to resolve complex policy issues, in which any decision will affect unrepresented stakeholders and other areas of concern. In short, adjudicative panels shouldn’t stray.”

The Keeping Energy Costs Down Act is proposing legislative changes that will ensure major OEB decisions with far-reaching applications, like this one, don’t happen again without adequate stakeholder consultation.

I’m going to change course for a minute here to talk briefly about regulatory agencies such as the OEB and to have a bit of background. Again, I go back to my feeling of inferiority about speaking about this, because it’s not my area of competence. However, what I have heard this afternoon has indicated that there’s a terrifying dearth of understanding about what regulatory agencies actually are present in this House.

Regulatory agencies are critical to the operation of modern society. Because of their importance, it’s essential that they be subject to effective governance. Essentially, regulatory agencies take very, very specific areas of practice that the courts, the government, the Legislature don’t have the time or expertise to delve into in order to establish their individual application in individual cases. So it becomes delegated. Essentially, every regulatory agency is exercising powers that were delegated to them by Legislatures, which is necessary in the complex specialized economy that we operate on. Ultimately, when you are delegating power from a Legislature to a regulatory body, the delegation entails carrying out the objectives of the legislation that was enacted, but frankly that also entails carrying out the government policies that inform the legislation. That’s what makes a regulatory body, particularly a government regulatory body, significantly different than, say, a court. A court is a judicial decision-maker, whereas a regulatory agency is a quasi-judicial decision-maker, but only in limited circumstances.

So given that regulatory agencies are tasked to some extent with carrying out government policies informing their enacting legislation, they’re not independent of the government, and they never will be. At the same time, however, I will say that being able to properly exercise that type of delegated authority does require a certain amount of independence, because you need to have that in order to operate as a quasi-judicial decision-maker, which requires them to have, as I said, that measure of independence. However, the truth is regulatory agencies are not courts. They are subject to oversight to varying degrees and in different ways, by the Legislature, by the government and by the courts. In other words, they’re subject to three sources of external governance already.

The OEB itself, specifically, was created by a statute, the Ontario Energy Board Act, 1998. It’s an independent regulator. If you go into the act, you will see that the stated purpose of the OEB is to serve the public interest. What’s interesting is we don’t have a very clear definition of the public interest, but frankly, that’s not uncommon in this type of legislation. At the same time, however, the OEB is required both in its governing legislation and also by the accepted practices of governance to be responsive to provincial government policy. That’s not an oversight or a problem; that’s literally how it was created and how it functions.

In doing what its primary purpose is, which—let’s be clear: The objective of the OEB is predominantly related to determining the prices to be paid for the transmission and distribution of gas and electricity in the public interest. So when the OEB is exercising this primary goal, which is

approving these rates, it's ultimately required to balance competing interests: residential consumers, large and small business, the government and utility shareholders. The key here that, again, this discussion so far has missed is that the OEB does not serve the interests of just one group, and to understand the OEB as some sort of consumer protection agency is a completely incorrect understanding of how it functions as a regulatory agency.

The OEB's role and their purpose, as I said, is to balance interests, and those interests often compete, which is how we end up in the public interest, which is a grand final assessment of what is best for the general public, understanding that the general public, once you divide it, in itself has a number of competing interests. The thing is there's no way that the OEB can appropriately balance competing interests in a situation such as the one we heard, where a decision was made without appropriate input or information from a number of industry experts and stakeholders in this area. So it was this nature of the decision, which, frankly—what it shows is not necessarily some sort of over-dominance on one position by the OEB but perhaps a failure of policy to make it clearer that the OEB as an institution needs to focus more on that type of public consultation and stakeholder recipient opinions than it currently does.

What we are proposing is that the OEB would have to conduct more public engagement to ensure that any impacted individuals and organizations have the opportunity to participate, because, as happened here, it's clear that OEB hearings, while discrete events apply to individual cases, have the potential to tread into matters that have a significant public interest for a number of people. But the thing here as well is that you have to understand what is happening with this decision. When you're looking at judicial review of a regulatory agency, what happens is that a court would take issue with how it essentially exercised its power, as versus the nature of the decision, which is why it requires government involvement in this case. So what the government is doing is not inserting its own decision in place of the OEB's decision but remitting the decision that the OEB made back to the OEB with additional policy considerations that the government wishes the OEB to consider, which is entirely within the rights and power of the government—any government, regardless of political stripe—based on how the OEB functions, how any regulatory agency functions. So this is a completely appropriate way of doing it in order to hand that back.

But ultimately, we've talked about the OEB decision's impact on a number of areas, and I think the one that I want to focus on more remains the housing, because the practical impact of this is to make the cost of gas connection something that has to be paid up front, as versus amortized over the current 40-year time period. So in the world of this decision, builders would be required to pay the entire cost at the time of the gas application and then bear that cost up until the point that the house sells, which substantially increases the total costs. We're looking at between \$4,500 to \$6,000 per residential unit.

So for a large subdivision, we're driving that, theoretically, up into the millions. And that burden then transfers quickly to homebuyers as they pay up in the form of those higher prices for new houses.

1730

What I have not heard here today is that home builders and residential construction professionals in Ontario have a long and, I would say, well-illustrated track record of supporting and incorporating climate change initiatives. Homes are ever more energy-efficient and the industry itself has followed and employed hybrid heating technologies. The key here, though, is this: Realistic timelines must be respected because we have seen what happens when ideology overrules reality. In fact, we've lived it. Ontario suffered under it. We won the 2018 election because of it, and we won't be subjecting Ontarians to that again.

In the circumstances we face currently, which is an affordability crisis and a housing supply shortage, we simply must still support the pipeline infrastructure required to deliver low-carbon fuels such as natural gas, which is a readily available, reliable and competitively priced energy source. Doing so is absolutely crucial to maintaining affordability in the immediate and near future.

I also note there are a number of other spinoff issues that I haven't heard mentioned. If we're talking about natural gas hookups, we're not just talking about heating, we're talking about water heaters. We're talking about gas dryers. Essentially, what the opposition would have us do—or, rather, have the OEB do—is immediately cut off the access to natural gas hookups. Because, yes, we can't possibly put that type of financial burden on builders right now when we're already struggling to make housing affordable.

You then also force your consumer into suddenly having to make a million different decisions about how they're going to heat their home, how they're going to heat their water, how they're going to do their laundry—all, again, to support a purely ideological narrative.

Ultimately, I feel very strongly that this is the right course of action. It puts us in the realm of realism versus ideology, and I certainly will be voting in favour.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoche): Questions?

Mr. Joel Harden: I have to say to my friend opposite, I don't think she's giving herself enough credit. What I heard in the 20 minutes was that she didn't feel like she was in a position confident enough to render an informed opinion, but because of other opinions she's heard, she was going to do so anyway.

This is someone who is a member of the King's Counsel—a nice honorific created by this government. This is a former crown prosecutor. In fact, we may need a lot more crown prosecutors because the person sitting and leading this government may be on an RCMP perp walk before long. We may be needing your expertise. But the fact of the matter remains, I didn't hear a shred of evidence in that presentation—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Point of order, Speaker.

Mr. Joel Harden: —that the government didn't have evidence to put before it—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Thank you.

The member from Niagara West on a point of order.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: The member opposite attempted to prejudge not just the results of an investigation, but hearings or anything. The level at which that's defaming the character of a member of this House is unacceptable.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): I'm going to defer to the Clerks for some advice.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): I'm going to urge the member to seek some caution in his language.

Mr. Joel Harden: I know the member opposite changes a lot of diapers, but I don't have to change his today. My point is, this member got up here and said the government—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Order.

Again, I'm going to ask the member from Ottawa Centre to please watch out for his language.

Mr. Joel Harden: Certainly, Speaker.

The building owners and manufacturers' association, Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, the Federation of Rental-housing Providers of Ontario—these are all, if I'm not mistaken, people involved in the development and property-owning industries. They all deputed to this OEB hearing. The member had alleged that the OEB didn't hear them. Can she clarify for this House that she's mistaken and perhaps didn't read the 140-page decision before coming into this House?

Ms. Jess Dixon: I was beginning to think that I would have nothing to actually answer to, as I hadn't heard a question in most of that. I just heard a lot of "gotcha" politics from somebody very challenging to respect.

But anyway, I did not say that. I said that other multiple stakeholders were not consulted, such as the home builders' association. Attempting to catch me out, as the member is doing, by specifically listing a number of intervenors? I said nothing about that and, frankly, you inaccurately representing my words—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Comments through the Chair.

Ms. Jess Dixon: —and, frankly, calling into question my authority as a lawyer by challenging my King's Counsel is completely inappropriate.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question?

Mr. Brian Saunderson: I want to thank my colleague for her comments and her very accurate description of the OEB and the regulatory framework—the governing legislation. The OEB is governed by seven separate acts, including the Ontario Energy Board Act, 1998. And I want to thank her for her comments on the regulatory regime.

But my question for my colleague is, from 1960 to today, when we look at setting rates, we factor in the cost of the supply—the capital costs involved and the supply

and delivery of the goods, which in this case is natural gas. I'm wondering if my friend could comment on the impacts of taking a 40-year horizon and bringing it to zero.

Ms. Jess Dixon: As I indicated, that takes all of those costs that could be spread out over years and condenses it into one immediate payment.

Another thing that we really didn't hear talked about today is the fact that this is not new. This concept that this is somehow going to be a massive boon or injection of money into Enbridge coffers is absolutely absurd. It's been happening at least since 1998, when EBO 188 was first settled, and allows the fact that many of us rely on natural gas hookups to spread those costs over in a way that makes it accessible for all consumers—and, frankly, a very, very typical aspect of how communities spend money.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question?

MPP Kristyn Wong-Tam: To the member across, thank you very much for your presentation. The OEB ruling could, in fact, make building new homes more affordable because it means you would have to build only one type of energy infrastructure—the electricity—and not require a very expensive and obsolete second one. And it will be obsolete at some point as we move towards a climate-neutral economy.

Reversing the OEB ruling could result in building methane gas infrastructure that will take about 40 years to pay for—infrastructure that will be delivering fossil fuels into the year 2064, Speaker, 14 years beyond the time when the world has agreed to achieve net-zero fossil fuel consumption; infrastructure that will be made obsolete by the ongoing energy transition.

To the member across: What in this bill will actually meet the needs of the citizens of Ontario tomorrow, because this bill is being passed and pushed forward today, but we need to plan for the climate emergency?

Ms. Jess Dixon: It essentially depends on what emergency you are going to prioritize. In this situation, I'm going to prioritize the needs of Ontarians. The way that this operates is, as I said, there are a number of consequences that could come from reducing this horizon down to zero. We could have a massive slowdown in developer developments. We could have escalated cost on new-build homes. We could have the fact that, all of a sudden, nobody is able to actually operate their water heaters or their dryers when you put this massive burden on industry to catch up.

Ultimately what we would be doing is gambling their financial future on the OEB's frankly overall focus on federal policy as versus even provincial policy—and it's a provincial agency, not a federal agency. So I disagree with you. I believe that this bill is essentially doing what the OEB should have done, which is, as I've said, act in the public interest and balance competing interests.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Next question?

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you to the member from Kitchener South–Hespeler for her remarks this afternoon. I appreciate her taking us through how the OEB was set

up—the acts, as the member for Simcoe–Grey mentioned, as well, that oversee the OEB. It’s been mentioned many times now how this would literally stop homes from being built—literally.

Interjections.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Oh, you laugh. I wait for you to go to committee and hear from home builders about how this would literally stop homes from going in the ground, from people getting the keys to their new homes for their families because they can’t get the hookups because the home builder has gone out of business because they couldn’t afford to float the \$2 million, which is what this, if we don’t correct it, would be.

1740

Can the member please elaborate on how this will help Kitchener South–Hespeler continue to get homes built in her community?

Ms. Jess Dixon: Speaker, I live in a riding that is largely suburban. Essentially, industrial and suburban is where I live. It’s also one of the main growth areas for all of Waterloo region. These homes are being connected to natural gas. Nothing about this prevents anybody from wanting to install a heat pump later or accessing any of the grants that may be available, but ultimately, like I said, this is about prioritizing the public interest and balancing those competing interests.

In this case, we are in an affordability crisis. The number one thing is people saying, “I can’t afford a house.” I wouldn’t be able to buy my own house if I was trying to buy it today. So the number one thing we have to do is get these built and make it so that people can pay for them. If you added \$6,000 to the price of my home when I was buying it, I couldn’t have afforded it, because I didn’t have \$6,000 to spare.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): A quick question.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Let’s be clear: Ontario has a carbon tax that you imposed. What people want to know is, what are you going to do with the revenues that this government is collecting? You collect a carbon tax. You didn’t hold a referendum, if I recall. This government is going to collect billions—billions—on your carbon tax.

So while you talk about the concerns of people needing to be able to afford housing in this province, which are very legitimate concerns, my question to you is, why are you hiding the fact that you have a carbon tax? Why are you hiding those revenues? And how are you going to spend them to make life more affordable for the people of Ontario?

Ms. Jess Dixon: Speaker, I genuinely do not understand the member’s question. We don’t have a consumer carbon tax. I think our record has been fairly clear on being anti-carbon tax. We’re not particularly fans over here of purely performative politics in the energy industry.

When we’re talking about affordability, I will reiterate what I said last time: This is about getting houses built, getting people into them and figuring the rest of it out as we go, because right now, we’ve got families, young people, that can’t even afford to put a roof over their heads.

That is going to be my predominant concern as a member of provincial Parliament and as an MPP for Waterloo region and Kitchener South–Hespeler.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Further debate?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Well, hasn’t this been an interesting afternoon to watch this government twist themselves in knots to try and defend the indefensible? This is a government that is using the hammer, as they have before, to overrule an independent body’s decision that protects Ontarians. This government has no shame when it comes to bringing in the sledgehammer, not to protect the people of Ontario, but to protect their insiders and vested interests.

I have to say, listening to the member just speaking now: Trying to discredit the Ontario Energy Board to justify your kneecapping of their decision; to try and say that the process that the OEB went through was substandard; to, in fact, present statements about their year-long process and about the many, many people, the over 30 or 35 expert witnesses, that came to this decision; to watch this government do anything to twist themselves in circles so hard that they’ll fly up—you know, something—is unbelievable.

But I shouldn’t be shocked, because this is just the government’s MO. This is the government that will spend millions and millions—hundreds of millions—on ad campaigns, and the cringe of those ad campaigns for all of us is unbearable. So let me give you a bit of your own medicine: What if I told you there was a place where the government took the side of a for-profit, huge corporation and forced the costs on individual residents? What if I told you that place is Ontario? And what if I told you this bill before us, called “Keeping Energy Costs Down,” is evidence—exhibit A—that that’s what’s happening here? This bill is entitled “Keeping Energy Costs Down,” but my question is, keeping energy costs down for who? Because these do not keep energy cost down for ratepayers in the province of Ontario. It just jacks them up.

Who is this government working for? We see time and time again where this government stands, whose side they stand on, and it’s not on the side of individuals in this province; it’s certainly not on the side of young people, who have such anxiety about our future, given the impending climate crisis.

We’ve seen a government that certainly didn’t take the side of families who lost loved ones in long-term-care homes. Whose side did this government take? They took the side of the for-profit corporations, the operators, and made sure that they continued to make profits on our seniors, despite an abysmal track record in those for-profit long-term-care homes. In fact, they went to great lengths to inoculate these long-term-care homes from any consequences for their mistreatment of our loved ones.

Has this government taken the side of people who can’t afford groceries? We keep talking about food insecurity. The government says “food insecurity.” Do you know what that means? People can’t afford to eat. That’s what that means. In this province, they can’t afford to eat. They

can't afford to feed their kids. Did the government take their side? Did they stand on the side of families struggling to feed themselves and their kids? No. Whose side did they stand on? The side of Galen Weston and Loblaws, the corporation that has seen billions in profits, rising profits, during this time, and that also was given a nice, sweet deal by this government so that Shoppers Drug Mart could administer vaccines. And what have they got now? Shoppers Drug Mart gets insider access.

Miss Monique Taylor: Prescriptions.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Prescriptions.

Didn't this government also give Loblaws cash money for fridges and freezers? So this government didn't stand on the side of consumers. This government stood on the side of Galen Weston and that huge corporation.

Did this government stand on the side of people all across this province who didn't want to see the greenbelt grabbed from their province? Did it stand on the side of environmentalists? Did it stand on the side of farmers losing prime farmland to the tune of 320 acres a day? Did this government stand on the side of democratically elected municipalities that said, "We don't need your urban boundary expansion. We can make our housing targets within the existing urban boundaries"—which is happening. No. Who did they stand on the side of?

Miss Monique Taylor: Donors.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Donors, and developers—to the tune of about \$8.5 billion.

This is an unprecedented situation, where a government is under an RCMP criminal investigation, so it would be interesting see what side they stand on that—whether they're found guilty or not.

I'd like to see a government that finally takes the side of individuals.

Let's talk about the Eglinton Crosstown. This government has people living in that community—how long is it? Eight years?

Mr. Joel Harden: It's 12 years.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: It's 12 years. Pardon me.

It's still not operational. Small businesses have lost their businesses. They've been suffering for this long. And who does this government take the side of?

Mr. Joel Harden: Metrolinx.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Metrolinx, and the CEO, Phil Verster, who earns—how much?

Mr. Joel Harden: It's \$1 million a year.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: It's \$1 million a year. A million-dollar man—that's whose side you're on.

How about ServiceOntario? The minister is here today. I would like to ask the minister: Did you take the side of small business owners who have been operating for years and years in our community? Did you take the side of people who wanted to see access to ServiceOntario in their communities? No. You took the side of Staples and Walmart. Not only did you take the side of Staples and Walmart, but you made sure that they were well-compensated for that.

And now who is this government taking the side of? This government is taking the side of Enbridge. And who

is Enbridge? Enbridge, essentially, is a regulated energy monopoly operating in our province. The only thing that protects us from that monopoly is the OEB, which this government has spent hours and hours here discrediting. That's the only thing that protects us from the monopoly of Enbridge. And what is Enbridge? Let's just talk a little about Enbridge, how the CEO of Enbridge makes—how much? Some \$19 million a year: That's how much the CEO of Enbridge makes. How much profit did Enbridge make?

1750

Interjection.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: So \$46 million.

Mr. Joel Harden: Sorry, billion.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Billion. Okay, billion. This is a huge corporation, huge corporation, and that's who this government is taking the side of. Let's make no mistake: This government wants you to pay more to keep Enbridge happy. This government wants you to pay more. They want your bills to go up so that Enbridge and the corporate lobbyists that advocate for them are happy. It is simple.

Despite what this government says and all of the talk they talk about a delegated authority and a regulator, despite all of that, I have seen this government hide behind a delegated authority time and time again. How about the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority, delegated authority? What did the government do during COVID when people were dying in retirement homes? What did the government do? What's her riding, the member who was speaking earlier about regulatory—

Mr. Joel Harden: Kitchener South—Hespeler.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Kitchener South—Hespeler. What did that delegated authority do, the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority, during people dying in long-term care and retirement homes? What did they do? And what did this government do? They hid. They hid while people died from COVID in retirement homes and long-term-care homes.

So delegated authorities: There are two sides of that coin. This government has hidden behind delegated authorities many, many times, and in this instance, they're throwing the delegated authority regulator under the bus.

Miss Monique Taylor: It's not answering to their whim.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Yes.

Miss Monique Taylor: To the whim of the chief of staff to the ministry.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Exactly. So let's go there. This also should not be surprising given this government's bent for any kind of political interference that suits their fancy.

I just want to say that the people of Ontario are going to understand with this debate that you want their bills to go up and that you actually continue to have absolutely no climate plan, none whatsoever. This is a government that has no climate plan and neither does Enbridge. Birds of a feather, I guess.

But the city of Hamilton and many other cities across Ontario understand what is happening here, and they have taken the time from their democratically elected councils

to move motions. I'm just going to talk about the city of Hamilton, whose motion was moved by Councillor Craig Cassar and seconded by Councillor Maureen Wilson. Essentially, they moved a motion which says they support the decision of the Ontario Energy Board to end the gas pipeline subsidy. Out of that, I will just excerpt a few of the pieces from this motion. It says:

"Whereas, natural gas is methane gas, which is a fossil fuel that causes approximately one third of Ontario's GHG emissions, and must be phased out...;

"Whereas, the ... OEB decided to end a subsidy for methane gas pipelines to be built in new construction developments, effective 2025, finding that that this would lower energy bills for existing gas customers and improve affordability for new homebuyers"—so the OEB decision said it would lower energy bills and improve home affordability, just the exact opposite of what the government is saying. And that, finally:

"Therefore, be it resolved:

"That the city of Hamilton expresses the support for the decision of the Ontario Energy Board to end the gas pipeline subsidy and requests that the Ontario government allow the decision to stand."

And they sent this resolution to the president of AMO. The Premier received this; the minister of—what did we call him—the minister of Enbridge, but actually, the Minister of Energy, Todd Smith; the Minister of Finance and so forth. So this government has received this, but no sooner did this government—my colleague wants to see that letter—but no sooner, can I say, did this motion pass—unanimously, I might say—at city council, and guess what? Enbridge wrote to the city council. It's amazing, isn't it?

I imagine, by the time I leave the chamber here and get back to my desk, I will have a call or a letter from Enbridge, because Enbridge is using a team of lobbyists to influence people, municipalities. They want to convince the province to overturn the OEB legislation, which we actually see happening now, despite the fact that the OEB came to an evidence-based decision after quite a long consultation. Again, it was made in the interests of the people of Ontario, not in the interests of for-profit corporations.

I'll just say in passing, and people can put two and two together, but these two things exist in the same space, which is the Minister of Energy, who is—what is the word I want to say?—advocating, working for Enbridge against the interests of average consumers. His chief of staff is a former lobbyist for Enbridge—so, coincidence, possibly? I think not, but you be the judge. The Minister of Energy, who is siding with Enbridge over you as ratepayers and over you when your gas bills are skyrocketing—that minister's chief of staff is a former lobbyist for Enbridge.

What is it my dad used to say? Well, I won't even say it. But it's really impossible to take this as a credible bill and as a decision that's made in the interests of the people of Ontario, when we see that the lobbyists are all over the place and we see that they're the minister's own chief of

staff. How in any way is that seen as impartial or credible? It's not. This does not pass the sniff test, and you know it.

I would suggest that the way you've been spinning yourselves to try and justify this decision—particularly, I must say, the King's Counsel members—is really shameful. It's a discredit to your profession, to your training. Clearly, in the province of Ontario, the legal community is not happy with you guys at all, and I don't blame them.

This brings me to another part of this government's ongoing way they conduct business. Do they take the side of average Ontarians that can't afford lobbyists, that don't have shareholders, that don't make large political donations? No, they do not. They take their direction from donors, from insiders, from big corporate interests, from lobbyists, from staffers who are right in the minister's office. That's who they take their marching orders from.

For the people at home, be clear: You're just going to pay more. They want you to pay the costs of Enbridge's infrastructure. They want you to pay for a hookup infrastructure that belongs to Enbridge so that Enbridge can then charge you not only for the hookup but charge you for their product. It makes absolutely no sense. They charge, charge, charge and charge again.

Then, this government will stand and stare you right in the face, full-face look at you and say, "Oh, we're doing this to protect you because we have such a huge track record of protecting the average people in the province of Ontario. Trust us. We're really on your side. Oh, who's that behind us? No, those aren't lobbyists. Those are not political donors."

Mr. Joel Harden: "Pay no attention."

Ms. Sandy Shaw: "Pay no attention to the donors behind the curtain. We're listening to you."

People don't buy it, don't believe it. That needs to be perfectly clear. People are on to this government. They know they don't work for them. They know who this government works for.

But really, the member for Toronto–Danforth, in his excellent hour lead on this, said some of the government's actions are shocking but not surprising. I agree—not surprising because fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me. Or when somebody tells you who they are the first time, believe them. That's what we have here.

This government's penchant for interference, for putting their thumb on the scale of justice to tip it in their favour or in the favour of their friends, is unparalleled. This government started by wanting to invoke the "notwithstanding" clause to cut the number of Toronto seats in half because the Premier was in a pique. His feelings were still hurt, so he wanted to punish Toronto. No—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): I'm sorry to interrupt the member, but it is now 6 p.m.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): The House will stand adjourned until tomorrow, 9 a.m., February 27, 2024.

The House adjourned at 1800.

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Skelly, Donna (PC)	Flamborough—Glanbrook	Deputy Speaker / Vice-Présidente Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Présidente du Comité plénier de l'Assemblée législative
Smith, Dave (PC)	Peterborough—Kawartha	
Smith, David (PC)	Scarborough Centre / Scarborough-Centre	
Smith, Hon. / L'hon. Graydon (PC)	Parry Sound—Muskoka	Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry / Ministre des Richesses naturelles et des Forêts
Smith, Laura (PC)	Thornhill	
Smith, Hon. / L'hon. Todd (PC)	Bay of Quinte / Baie de Quinte	Minister of Energy / Ministre de l'Énergie
Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie) (NDP)	St. Catharines	
Stiles, Marit (NDP)	Davenport	Leader, Official Opposition / Chef de l'opposition officielle Leader, New Democratic Party of Ontario / Chef du Nouveau Parti démocratique de l'Ontario
Surma, Hon. / L'hon. Kinga (PC)	Etobicoke Centre / Etobicoke-Centre	Minister of Infrastructure / Ministre de l'Infrastructure
Tabuns, Peter (NDP)	Toronto—Danforth	
Tangri, Hon. / L'hon. Nina (PC)	Mississauga—Streetsville	Associate Minister of Small Business / Ministre associée déléguée aux Petites Entreprises
Taylor, Monique (NDP)	Hamilton Mountain / Hamilton-Mountain	
Thanigasalam, Hon. / L'hon Vijay (PC)	Scarborough—Rouge Park	Associate Minister of Transportation / Ministre associé des Transports
Thompson, Hon. / L'hon. Lisa M. (PC)	Huron—Bruce	Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs / Ministre de l'Agriculture, de l'Alimentation et des Affaires rurales
Tibollo, Hon. / L'hon. Michael A. (PC)	Vaughan—Woodbridge	Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions / Ministre associé délégué au dossier de la Santé mentale et de la Lutte contre les dépendances
Triantafilopoulos, Effie J. (PC)	Oakville North—Burlington / Oakville-Nord—Burlington	
Vanthof, John (NDP)	Timiskaming—Cochrane	Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire de l'opposition officielle

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
Vaugois, Lise (NDP)	Thunder Bay—Superior North / Thunder Bay—Supérieur-Nord	
Wai, Daisy (PC)	Richmond Hill	
West, Jamie (NDP)	Sudbury	
Williams, Hon. / L'hon. Charmaine A. (PC)	Brampton Centre / Brampton-Centre	Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity / Ministre associée des Perspectives sociales et économiques pour les femmes
Wong-Tam, Kristyn (NDP)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	
Yakabuski, John (PC)	Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke	
Vacant	Lambton—Kent—Middlesex	
Vacant	Milton	