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Tuesday 2 March 2010

Mardi 2 mars 2010

Speaker
Honourable Steve Peters

Président
L'honorable Steve Peters

Clerk
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Tuesday 2 March 2010

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Mardi 2 mars 2010

The House met at 0900.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Good morning. Please remain standing for the Lord's Prayer, followed by the Hindu prayer.

Prayers.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

FULL DAY EARLY LEARNING
STATUTE LAW AMENDMENT ACT, 2010

LOI DE 2010 MODIFIANT DES LOIS
EN CE QUI CONCERNE L'APPRENTISSAGE
DES JEUNES ENFANTS À TEMPS PLEIN

Resuming the debate adjourned on March 1, 2010, on the motion for second reading of Bill 242, An Act to amend the Education Act and certain other Acts in relation to early childhood educators, junior kindergarten and kindergarten, extended day programs and certain other matters / *Projet de loi 242, Loi modifiant la Loi sur l'éducation et d'autres lois en ce qui concerne les éducateurs de la petite enfance, la maternelle et le jardin d'enfants, les programmes de jour prolongé et d'autres questions.*

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Further debate?

Mrs. Elizabeth Witmer: I'm very pleased, as the education critic for the PC caucus, to have this opportunity to make some remarks today regarding this bill, the Full Day Early Learning Statute Law Amendment Act, 2010, which has been brought forward by the Minister of Education. This act, Bill 242, is An Act to amend the Education Act and certain other Acts in relation to early childhood educators, junior kindergarten and kindergarten, extended day programs and certain other matters. It was introduced into the House for first reading on February 17, 2010. Of course, now we're doing second reading, and ostensibly this will go to committee and there will be opportunities for public input in order that we can hear first-hand what some of the issues are that the public may have about this bill and how we can continue to make it better.

This bill basically does one thing: It would mandate that all school boards in the province of Ontario—and we have the four different school boards—would offer all-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds, the children in what we call today junior and senior kindergarten, and it would integrate extended-day programs into

schools. This bill would also give authority to school boards in the province of Ontario, and also the responsibility, which is quite different, to set, charge and collect the fees for the before- and after-school programs. We have had, at some schools, daycare programs that have been established, and usually it has been by an independent provider, but this bill would give the boards the authority and the responsibility to set, charge and collect the fees for the before- and after-school programs.

How did this all-day kindergarten come to be? Well, in 2007, after having promised this in the 2003 election, the Liberals did appoint an early learning advisor to develop this all-day kindergarten program. On November 27, 2007, the Premier did appoint Dr. Charles Pascal to recommend the best way to implement an all-day kindergarten program. Dr. Pascal submitted his report in July 2009. He entitled it *With Our Best Future in Mind* and he gave it to the Premier. On October 27, 2009, the government first made the announcement that it was going to be phasing in all-day kindergarten and that it would happen by 2015-16.

We now understand that perhaps those timelines have shifted, because I think the government has recognized, as we do, that they have a huge debt, they have a deficit, and it's becoming increasingly more difficult, as a result of the economic situation that we find ourselves in in the province of Ontario—we do not have the resources to do everything that we would like to do, and unless we see the creation of more private sector jobs and we see more taxes collected from people and businesses in the province of Ontario, it's going to be extremely difficult to do all things for all people. So the timeline will probably be shifting.

So what about this bill? What about this program? I would need to state categorically that I do support the principle of this program. In fact, if you take a look at the Progressive Conservative record over the past years, you will see that our party has long supported and recognized the need for early childhood development. In 1998, our government did commission the *Early Years* report. That study was chaired by Dr. Fraser Mustard, an outstanding individual in his promotion of ensuring that we give children the best start in life, and also by the Honourable Margaret McCain. That *Early Years* report was completed in 1999.

What it did was it emphasized the importance of working with communities to expand the capacity for early childhood development and also for parenting programs. I think it's important to recognize that obviously we need to do much more to support parents in the

province of Ontario to learn what it is to be a parent and how they can best support and interact with their children.

0910

The report stated that a focus on children's early years is crucial to ensure that Ontario enjoys a highly competent and well-educated population capable of participating fully in the new global economy. The study also confirmed that the better the nurturing and the learning experiences in early childhood, the better the outcomes.

As a result of the information that we were able to obtain from the early years report, we did several things. We created Ontario's early years centres; in fact, I would say to you that this has been one of the most successful initiatives related to the early years ever established in the province of Ontario. We created 103 of the 108 early years centres.

I know that in my own community, they have been a blessing for parents, for grandparents who look after their children and for child care providers. They have certainly been centres where parents and those who work with children have been able to see tremendous growth and have been able to nurture and provide excellent learning experiences for children.

I would also say to you that we spent, when we were in office, a record amount on child care. Between 1995 and 2003, our government doubled investments in children's social services to more than \$2.2 billion per year.

As well, our government established the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program. As a result, all children in this province are now screened at birth in order to determine if they may be at risk—that might be physical, mental or social. If it's deemed that some of these babies are at risk, they will be supported, first of all, by nurses, and later on by lay people, in order to help and support parents.

For many parents in the province of Ontario and for some of the people who have come to our shores, it's important that these people recognize that it's important to cuddle your baby, read to your children and to play games with them.

I will tell you: As a result of the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program, more children each year have a better start in life. I was disappointed, however, recently, to see that this government of Premier McGuinty has made some reductions in funding for this program, because it has been highly, highly successful. In speaking to public health nurses, I have certainly received that information first-hand, and I certainly hope that we will not see any further reductions.

Another program that has been very, very beneficial has been the preschool speech and language program that we introduced, and 70,000 children with speech and language difficulties received help through that program. Again, it gave those young children the best opportunity to be the best they could be, and I think it again demonstrates that early intervention is extremely important in helping our children, particularly those who have special needs.

The other initiative that we introduced between 1995 and 2003 was the Ontario Breakfast for Learning initiative, because we recognized that many children were coming to school without any breakfast. We all know that if children are to learn and benefit from the environment at school, they obviously need good nutrition. I've certainly had the opportunity to go to schools and be with the children as volunteers make sure that they do receive the nutrition that is necessary to get them off to a good start each day.

Those are some of the programs that our government did put in place, and as I say, much of this is the result of the study that we commissioned, which was done by Dr. Mustard and by the Honourable Margaret McCain.

So now to all-day kindergarten. As I said, I do support this bill in principle. In fact, when I was chair of the school board, I supported the initiative whereby we were constructing daycare centres attached to our new schools. I think for many families today who have two parents working, or a single parent is heading up the family, it's really important that they know that their children are supported throughout the day, that they have that feeling of confidence and security. However, the biggest obstacle that we have with the introduction of this bill at this time is the additional cost of the program at a time when we have a record \$25-billion deficit. And we have absolutely no plan to deal with it.

Premier McGuinty has not made any announcements as to any plans that he has to deal with the debt, which has doubled, or the deficit, which is at \$25 billion. He has not shared with us any plans to ensure that we see an increase in jobs in the province of Ontario. In fact, do you know what? We were able to create an environment when we were in office that saw the private sector create over one million new jobs. What we've seen with this government is, each month, each year, a steady erosion of jobs in Ontario. We're also seeing more and more businesses going into bankruptcy. Again, this government desperately needs to make as a priority the creation of jobs by the private sector. The only place we're seeing job growth is in the public sector, and unfortunately, it's the hard-pressed taxpayer who is going to have to pay for the wages and the benefits of those jobs, when many people are having difficulty today making ends meet, particularly in light of the HST, which is going to burden families and seniors, and have a huge impact on the cost of living in the province of Ontario.

Yesterday, I did a radio talk show where they talked about taking the HST off of the price of gasoline. I know they've done that in British Columbia. Basically, we're opposed to the HST, but certainly this government needs to take a look at the impact and see what else they can do to make it revenue-neutral.

I talked about the fact that we don't have jobs. I guess, if we take a look at the deficit and we take a look at the priorities, one of the priorities has to be that the people who are unemployed be given the opportunity for retraining; and we're seeing that that's simply not happening. We saw the establishment of the Second Career program,

but then it was drastically and arbitrarily ended in one week. And now that it has come back into being, it hardly meets the need of about one tenth of the people who originally applied to it. I'm going to speak to that later as well.

The other priorities: I met last week with the Toronto District School Board, and the chairman said to me that they're desperately in need of special education funding. He told me that they're serving 5,200 more special-needs students with greater complexity. I believe this is probably common to boards throughout the province. We are seeing more and more special-needs students. But they are not receiving the funding that is necessary. According to the TDSB, the funding shortfall is presently equivalent to \$550 per student that is being served. So the cost of this multi-billion dollar program is a concern, certainly for school boards throughout the province of Ontario.

I got an e-mail last month from someone in Ottawa who is concerned about the upcoming provincial budget, is concerned about the funding for school boards and is concerned about the fact that they were hearing rumours that they would have to cut second-language teachers, special education teachers and educational assistants. They are very concerned about the impact that that type of major cut is going to have on the students who come to the schools and are desperately in need of support, whether it's the newcomer to Canada or whether it's, as they say, students with high risk. These are the other priorities that school boards have in the province of Ontario, and those needs are not being addressed.

0920

I think if we take a look at this program, the government has indicated that the plan is to spend \$200 million in 2010 and \$300 million in 2011 to get the program up and running. They've said that when it's fully implemented, by 2015 and 2016, the government's all-day kindergarten program will cost \$1.5 billion a year. However, I would say to you, Madam Speaker, that that is only an estimate, because what this government has failed to do, and always fails to do, is to accurately and completely submit to public scrutiny a plan of action, a plan of implementation, a plan that would identify each year how many more schools will be the beneficiaries of full-day kindergarten and what the cost will be. We haven't seen that—

Mr. John O'Toole: There's no plan.

Mrs. Elizabeth Witmer: —because there is no plan. There is no long-term plan. They're simply saying, "We're going to do it. No matter what the cost, we're going to do it." And, of course, that is going to be a huge challenge for the taxpayers in the province of Ontario, who, as I said before, are already reeling from the about-to-be-introduced HST on July 1 or are reeling because they have lost their job or they have not been allowed entry into the Second Career program. People in this province are feeling quite challenged.

In fact, earlier today I talked to someone in the printing industry. They talked to me about the challenges that they're facing and the fact that their business may soon

go bankrupt. I've recently, in my own community, seen a men's clothing store, a ladies' clothing store and an Office Depot store go under. I heard also from someone about a mechanic in a garage who told me that business there is down. The reality is that people in this province are just hoping that they can recover from the recession that we've all experienced, but it's fragile, and they don't have any additional money for discretionary spending; they have so many fixed costs.

The other thing we know is going to go up is the price of electricity. People in this province have no idea what this government has done when it comes to energy. Over the next three or four or five years, we are going to see that the private sector is going to have more and more difficulty in creating new jobs. We're not even going to be able to attract new business to the province of Ontario because we're not going to have electricity prices that are affordable. There's somebody in my own community recently that has decided they're going to Ohio. It is a much better environment if you want to create jobs and expand your business. So this province right now, I would say to you, regrettably, because of the policies of this government, is in a very, very fragile state.

But let's take a look at another unknown cost of this program. I've said that the government estimates that it will cost \$1.5 billion a year, but we're certainly already seeing that it probably will cost more; that's just for operational costs. But there's another huge cost that they have not spoken about, and that is the cost of the new physical spaces that are going to be needed to accommodate the students in this program. There are many students in this province who are at schools where there's no additional physical capacity; and this government has said absolutely nothing about how they plan to pay for the additional physical spaces. In fact, unfortunately as well, this program is not going to be providing fair access to students in the province of Ontario. It's not necessarily going to be provided first to the students who are most in need of the additional support and nurturing and early learning opportunities. Because if a school doesn't have a physical space, there's not going to be a program. And this government has been totally silent as to what the cost might be. That is going to have a huge impact as to whether or not this program is going to be rolled out by 2015-16; and again, the additional question is, how are we going to pay for it?

Of course, the other issue is, how are parents going to be charged for the before and after programs? What type of programming will be available over the summer, and on PA days? There are many, many unanswered questions. Basically, we've heard, "We're going to do it. We don't know how we're going to do it. We don't know how long it's going to take us to do it. No, I'm sorry, I can't tell you when your school will have full-day learning. I'm sorry if your neighbour who goes to the Catholic school is going to have the program but you're not. You'll need to continue to pay for your child care costs." There are just so many unanswered questions. There's also the issue of unequal, unfair access to the program.

I think that's one thing this government should have done, is to have taken a look at what is it that we're going to do and how are we going to do it, and rolled out a complete and full implementation plan, year by year; have surveyed school boards, asked them what additional space was necessary; and at the same time as they announced the program, have been in the position to also indicate that school board B is going to get this amount of additional money to build this amount of space. I have parents now who are saying, "You know, Elizabeth, I have a one-year-old. My child might never be the beneficiary of this program, I'm going to have to pay the child care expenses and yet," as I said before, "the neighbour next door" whose children maybe go to the public school board, "those children will have access this year."

Nobody has considered who is going to get the program first. It's really all dependent on space. It's not according to need, whether that need is for additional nurturing and early learning, or whether that need is related to the ability to pay for the child care and the necessity of the child care.

This government, as always, just makes an announcement, wants the headlines, and then, afterwards, considers how they're going to pay for it. Well, this is also the province that has gone from first to last in Confederation. We used to be the economic powerhouse; we're now at the bottom. Jobs are simply not being created here. If you don't have job creation, if you don't have businesses wanting to expand, to come into the province—if you don't have those taxes, then you can't pay for educational costs, you can't pay for the health care costs, you can't pay for the social service costs that are so necessary.

Let's take a look. Let's go back to capacity. Currently, I understand, only one third of the schools in this province are able to completely accommodate all-day kindergarten right now. So what are the other two thirds going to do? Where's the plan? What's the cost of the additional space that's going to be required? It's going to be huge when it comes to capital investments. And who's going to pay for it? We've already got a \$25-billion deficit. This is a big issue. Somewhere this government is going to have to find savings, because we can't do everything. Of course, I go back to the whole issue of fairness. How are we going to make sure that all students and all families that need it and are a priority receive the program? There's absolutely no plan. There's no equality or fairness; it's simply going to happen in a very ad hoc manner. Families are not going to be able to plan for their future.

0930

Let's take a look at the implementation plan, the rollout, and what has been happening. Some trustees—although they're hesitant to be critical because they're afraid they won't get their fair share of funding—have indicated some concern about the implementation plan, the rollout of the program. One person was Irene Atkinson, a long-time trustee here in Toronto for Parkdale–High Park, who boldly said, "This is one of the most ill-

conceived and badly thought-out programs the province has ever announced." She has had lots of experience, and she obviously recognizes that there are two thirds of our schools that don't have the capacity. There are many students in the province who would benefit from this program and really need it; they aren't going to be the beneficiaries either.

Another trustee in Grand Erie, Don Werden, said that all-day kindergarten is "a runaway train waiting for a wreck. They"—the ministry—"will blame us when it doesn't work."

This is what happens when the government doesn't have a complete plan of implementation, when people are left asking questions, when people recognize that there are negative consequences to the program's introduction that aren't being addressed. So today, we're in a state where parents and educators continue not to have the necessary details as to how the program will be implemented, what schools are going to be eligible each year and what the total cost and staffing requirements are going to be as well.

There is concern in the province, and these are some of the questions that must be answered. We've heard from parents with concerns. We've heard from trustees. My colleague was telling me he has heard from some teachers, and certainly I have as well, and we've also heard from daycare operators.

It has been previously mentioned that up to 35,000 children in roughly 580 schools are expected to participate in the program this fall. Although the parents have been advised of the schools that will support all-day kindergarten this year, the concern is about the ones in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016. Is it going to go into 2017? Again, I just think that issue of inequity is very serious. Of course, it's not fair that one parent would have access to the program and another one would have to continue to pay child care costs, or maybe the child is going to another school for an indefinite period of time.

Another issue that has arisen is that I think we're seeing some competition among school boards. Again, there's some concern among school boards that funding maybe isn't being allocated equally. I can't speak to that issue; I just know that it has been brought to my attention.

Another serious issue has been the impact that this is going to have on daycare operators. I have heard from many daycare operators in the province of Ontario. Some of them have indicated that they may well have to close, which is certainly going to create hardship for people in the province of Ontario who depended on these daycare centres to look after their children when they were working. But they're saying that they may have to close; they may have to cut staff; they may have to close programs. There are some deliberations now going on, but they're pretty disappointed that there was no consultation before the introduction of the bill. They feel that they have met a need of children and families in this province over many years. They've tried to do what was right, and now, in many respects, they all have no choice but to either

reduce their programming capacity or just close down altogether. It inevitably will probably lead to the loss of some staff.

I think if we take a look at what Dr. Pascal recommended, you'll see that what the government has introduced is not one and the same. I think that's important, and that's part of the reason for the problems when it comes to daycare.

But I want to share with you a little story that was in the Brantford Expositor about a daycare operator. It says:

"Forty years ago, Judy Friel and her business partner, armed with \$400, opened their first child care centre.

"A labour of love, the work, she says, has never been an easy way to earn a living.

"As I look back on the chain of events that has happened, it is a wonder that we survived," said Friel. "There have been so many roadblocks to being an independent operator that the mind boggles."

"Now Friel, and the operators of 34 licensed child care centres in Brantford and Brant county, are more than a little concerned about how the province's plan to offer full-day learning for four- and five-year-olds will affect their businesses....

"There is no way we operators can find the financial resources to continue," said Friel. "The whole child care system will fold unless heavy subsidies are offered. Of course, the for-profit operator will not qualify for this kind of funding."

"Sue Norden," Brantford's "director of child care services, oversees all of the local licensed daycare centres."

Norden said that, regardless, "all operators will face financial hardship as full-day kindergarten rolls out over the next five years...."

Norden said that "four- and five-year-olds represent close to 20% of the total revenue at local child care centres...."

And I think that's something that the government didn't seriously consider. Often, the fees that are paid by the four- and five-year-olds' parents help to subsidize the cost of the younger children, because the cost is higher for younger children. So I think we're going to see in daycare centres an increase in the amount that is going to be asked of parents now that the daycare centres are only going to be providing daycare for children from birth to age three.

These people, such as Judy Friel, who opened a child care centre 40 years ago to support families and children, did it—and it is tough. I would agree with her. It's very tough to make a living as a child care operator. Certainly from my own experience, the people that I know at home do it because they love children and they want to support families. But these small business entrepreneurs are now going to be negatively impacted. They're going to have to make some decisions.

It's unfortunate that the government perhaps did not move forward as Dr. Pascal had recommended. Again, I want to stress that the government did not fully adopt the recommendations of Dr. Pascal. He called for the province to create a continuum of early learning and child

care. All we're seeing here is full-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds. So, again, you have a problem.

The other issue that I've heard about is that some parents are telling me that if the school offers full-day and they only want their child to go to half-day, that's not going to be an option for them. I think we need to remember that kindergarten is not mandatory in the province of Ontario. You don't have to send your child, and some people choose not to. Sometimes they keep them at home and care for them themselves. Sometimes they prefer to leave them with family. But I think we need to recognize that if you make a decision that you don't want your child to go to full-day, you should have that opportunity and be able to have the half-day option.

0940

Having said that, I can tell you that, personally, I went to full-day kindergarten from age three on.

Mr. Jeff Leal: Look how well you turned out, Elizabeth.

Mrs. Elizabeth Witmer: That's right. But I was living in Holland, so that was a very different story. Again, I say people need to have a choice. Do you want full-day, do you want half-day, or do you prefer that your child not go to kindergarten? Obviously, that's a decision that you need to make, and I would hope that parents would continue to have that freedom of choice.

I want to go back to the economic situation in the province of Ontario. Again, I want to stress that I do support all-day kindergarten in principle, but I am concerned about the other needs of our educational system. I've made reference to English as a second language. I've made reference to the special education needs. Regrettably, the number of children in our schools requiring special education support appears to be increasing, as we've heard from the Toronto school board. Some tough choices will need to be made.

I'm also concerned about the fact that our unemployed Ontarians need to be given access to retraining and to education. Before this government took office, there were 1,072,800 manufacturing jobs in Ontario. Today there are only 793,800. This represents a staggering loss of 279,000 net manufacturing jobs, and that's significant.

In my own community, people think that because we're high tech, we must have been spared, but last month Waterloo region's jobless rate did jump to 9.9% while the jobless rate nationally fell. We have a high jobless rate, but we've got Windsor with 12.8%, St. Catharines and Niagara with 11.2%, Oshawa with 10.4% and Sudbury with 10.4% as well.

We have a problem. We know that unemployment will ease as we move forward into the future, but as I've said before, it has been fragile. We certainly hope that this government, in its throne speech next week on Monday, comes out with a real plan as to how we can create the environment that is going to allow the private sector the confidence to create new jobs. I believe that has to be the government's first priority. We can only afford programs like this full-day program if we see new job creation, if

we see Ontario again moving up and becoming the economic powerhouse in Canada.

Ontario needs to focus on retraining and retooling its workforce. I attended a speech delivered by Dr. Rick Miner at the Canadian Club on February 3. According to Dr. Miner: "Ontario is on the verge of an unemployment crisis that could be far more destructive than the 2009 recession ... (And that) if current trends continue, hundreds of thousands of people will lack the necessary skills to find any work." That's why I believe it's so important that the government provide those who are unemployed—many of them with no grade 12 education, many of them lacking basic literacy and math skills—the opportunity to get those skills, then go into the retraining programs, go into the colleges, go to the universities. We need people with skills.

Dr. Miner indicates that if we don't take action, more than 700,000 people in Ontario will be unemployed by 2021. Why? They don't have the education. They don't have the basic skills. That is also going to mean that there are more than 1.1 million Ontarians who will be unemployed in just 11 years, and they will have no prospect whatsoever of finding work. In the meantime, we're going to have 1.3 million jobs where we don't have people with the skills and the training to fill the jobs. So we have a huge challenge in the province of Ontario.

We need to be providing more funding in order to make sure that our people in this province who are currently unemployed, graduating from grade 12, can access post-secondary education and training. This government needs to make sure that we put the money aside for apprenticeship training as well.

So while I agree with all-day kindergarten in principle, and although I have always supported early childhood development throughout my entire career, I am concerned about the students who are not going to have the skills they need to be able to access post-secondary education and training.

There's also growing evidence that many students lack the literacy and math skills that they currently need for post-secondary education. Some 44% of Canadian adults today don't have the literacy and numeracy skills they need, according to Statistics Canada and OECD. Roughly 30% of Canadian students aged 15 have a low level of proficiency in science or were just starting to demonstrate the competencies that would enable them to participate actively in life situations related to science and technology. We know that many students today are going into our universities—indeed, we did a survey of all the universities in the province of Ontario—and are coming ill-prepared or unprepared. The post-secondary institutions are having to give them upgrading courses in literacy, and are also having to provide them with math programs, numeracy programs, in order that they can become involved in the program of their choice at university for which they are not prepared when they get there. We're going to have to address that problem.

We need to make sure that our elementary and secondary school curricula are such that these students

leave our schools at the end of grade 12 with the literacy and numeracy skills and that we not be asking our universities in particular to provide make-up during the summer or an introductory course in the fall in order that that student is qualified.

The other thing I would say to you is that it's quite a shock to a student who has received a high grade as they exit secondary school to find out that they're not prepared for that math program once they do get to university, or they don't have the literacy skills, so we've got to do a better job.

But I want to talk about the Second Career program. This was a program that was advertised. I just have to tell you that I think my office has dealt with probably several hundred people who had high hopes when they lost their jobs, in the manufacturing sector in particular. I've indicated to you that in the region of Waterloo we have some of the same high statistics as we do elsewhere in Ontario, and probably Canada. But these people thought they could enter the Second Career program. They went through about eight months of applying, trying to find a job that they had to be able to demonstrate was going to be in need in the future. Many of these people were at the end of receiving their unemployment insurance. They were people with families. They thought that last September they were going to get into Conestoga College in my community, in particular, and they thought that they were going to be given the financial resources to support them. At the last moment, they were told that the program was oversubscribed and there was no money.

I have never seen such pain, such hurt, such devastation, such depression, as with the people who either physically visited my office or wrote me, e-mailed me, called me. In fact, I would say to you that I have never seen the two women in my office who deal with constituents in the state that they were in. They worked beyond the regular hours. They tried to follow through on each and every case and see if there wasn't some way we could help those people get into the program. Really, it was unbelievable.

0950

In fact, some of the comments that we heard from people—it was despair. One person was on the verge of suicide. Some people realized that with the UI, the unemployment insurance, running out, they were going to have to go on welfare, and you know what it means to go on welfare. You basically have to get rid of anything and everything that you own. These people were going to find it really difficult to continue to pay the mortgage on their houses and support their families.

We had the program. We had people with high hopes. They thought they could retrain for a second career. Then, as I say, the program was oversubscribed, and there was no more money left.

In September, the government said that they would probably introduce it again, but what did they do? They changed the rules. When the program was finally reintroduced in December, people who qualified under the old rules no longer qualified. They were no longer eligible

for financial, educational and training support. We have the devastation all over again. We have the shock.

Again, their hopes had been raised. They had been told in September, “We’re going to reintroduce the program,” but they weren’t told that the criteria was going to change. You know what? We have to be honest with these people. We need to be better able to determine how many people are going to require retraining and post-secondary education, and we need to provide the funding because these are the men and the women who support the children in the province of Ontario.

I urge this government: This has to be a priority for you. I hope that, in your throne speech next week, you will have programs that are going to support the unemployed. I hope that those who qualified under the original rules will still be grandfathered because, really, to have raised their hopes and dashed them is very, very unfair.

These are some of the other priorities that this government needs to deal with. But I want to end with a few questions. I want to ask the government: How will you pay the operational costs of this program? How will you pay for the additional physical spaces that are going to be required in two thirds of our schools? When will you actually roll out a plan of implementation so that we can see what schools in what communities will qualify each and every year? How will you ensure that the students who most need the program because of circumstances are eligible and provided for? It’s much like the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children program where you take a look at students, you identify those who are most at risk, and then you provide them with the support necessary.

Also, how is this government going to explain to families who aren’t going to have access to the program this year or next year, or the year thereafter, that they’re going to have to continue to pay for child care but their neighbours and their friends will not? There is no equity. There is no fairness. That’s a huge issue.

I suspect that this issue will actually grow, and I believe that people are going to see that there probably wasn’t enough thought given to how this would be rolled out into providing access to those who need it the most and in a way that it would be perceived to be fair.

I want to conclude my remarks at this time. I again want to just mention that I do support this program in principle. I look forward to committee, and I think that as a result of having committee, hopefully we’ll hear from the public and there will be some good recommendations that come forward. Hopefully, at the end of the day, this program will be the best that it can be for the students and the parents in this province.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Peter Tabuns: Without a doubt, members of the NDP support the idea of full-day kindergarten, the idea of expanding and extending the daycare system in this province, the education system. But we are very troubled, very worried by what we are hearing increasingly from the daycare sector, that daycare centres that have financial stability and sustainability when they’re providing

care for four-year-olds and five-year-olds, for whom there was only half-day daycare—those daycare centres are finding that their economics are coming unglued, that they don’t have the base with which to provide the care for two- and three-year-olds and infants, that their economics have been profoundly shaken. I think that this government has to look at the simple reality of what’s going on in the daycare sector and say, “We can’t essentially sacrifice daycare for toddlers in order to fund full-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds.” We need to have that full-day kindergarten, but we also need the full funding for child care right through the age groups, from birth on until full-time education, after-school and preschool programs, so that our children get the full advantage of education, from the very beginnings of life, in a quality way and continuously in their experience through school.

So I’d say to the government, look again at the Pascal report, look at his recommendations to bring in a full range of child care from zero up, and don’t make the mistake of reallocating dollars from daycare centres that need it now to pay for this new program. Put the dollars in that are necessary to make sure that this program functions well, in a high-quality way, but don’t rob the smaller children to make sure that this program can function.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Bas Balkissoon: I welcome this opportunity to provide a few comments on Bill 242, full-day learning in our school system. Research data to this date has clearly pointed out that children who get an early start in the education system perform better in our education system and have a greater possibility of being very successful in life. I believe our government is doing the right thing by investing in early learning for our children. I think it’s good for the parents and I think it will be good for Ontario as time goes on.

In my own riding of Scarborough–Rouge River, I’m getting several schools, and I’ve got to tell you, with the people that I represent, which is the working class—where many moms and dads have to go to work on a daily basis to provide for the family—many kids in my community cannot take full advantage of the programs that exist today, an example being the early childhood centres that were built a couple of years ago with provincial and federal funding. That is because mom and dad are not home to take them to the program and the program requires parents’ participation.

This program will definitely meet the needs of my community because it provides access to everyone. That is an important thing in a community such that I represent, because it’ll give the children an early start and it’ll give them a chance to succeed in life. And somewhere down the road, some future government—maybe not this government—will probably realize the real fruits of this investment that the government of Ontario is taking today.

It takes leadership to make decisions like this, and I think our government is doing the right thing.

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The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Jim Wilson: As usual, my colleague from Kitchener–Waterloo did an excellent job of explaining that, no doubt, this program will be popular and is popular with many parents and families, but we simply can't afford it at this time. We need to concentrate on getting jobs in this province and not spending \$1.3 billion or \$1.5 billion or maybe even much more than that on a brand new program that, in my 20 years, I never had an e-mail about, I never had a letter about and no one ever asked me for it. They never expected the state would look after their little babies.

The daycare operators in my riding aren't very happy. I have a memo to me from yesterday from Joy Parks. She's my constituency assistant in Collingwood. Gail Ardiel, owner of two daycares in my area, dropped into my office in Collingwood to advise us of additional problems with full-day kindergarten. I'll just read the memo:

"Locally, Stayner's Clearview Meadows Elementary School has been chosen as a full-day kindergarten site. Gail owns a daycare in Stayner. This new full-day program will result in losing her four- and five-year-old children to the school system. Also, Gail currently runs the before/after school program for the area and now with the full-day kindergarten, she'll lose that income too. She has approached the elementary school to ask if she could do the before/after school program" for them, "but they refused, saying they would staff it themselves.

"Because Gail has a licensed daycare,"—she actually has two—"and some of her spaces are subsidized, she was hopeful that the ... full-day kindergarten program would open up new subsidized child care spaces." That isn't the case. "The county of Simcoe currently has a freeze on child care subsidies, and because they're over budget (the province has not increased the funding), no new spaces will open.

"So, this full-day kindergarten will result in Gail possibly having to close her doors because of lack of children. Plus, the county won't be able to assist other families in the area with child care subsidies."

As has been mentioned by my honourable colleague, you really messed this one up for daycare operators across the province.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Peter Shurman: I'd just like to add my voice to comments with reference to the dialogue on Bill 242 and the comments made by my colleague from Kitchener–Waterloo. This is an interesting bill, in the sense that if you look at it and isolate the issue from cost concerns—what the province should be doing versus what the province can be doing—it sounds like a pretty good idea. Who wouldn't want to provide these kinds of services to younger children? Obviously, the report that the bill is based upon recommended doing just that. Mr. Pascal is an educator of some repute. Interestingly, however, the

recommendation of that report was not to put teachers in charge on an all-day basis and incur even larger costs on the basis of doing that.

However, that's what the government has chosen to do in a time where we can ill afford the program, much less those additional costs. That's the thing that, I think, we have to focus upon. If you take a look at the fact that we're about to receive a new provincial budget in the middle of what we'd like to charitably describe as a post-recessionary period, when we're not really out of the woods yet and we're looking at an estimated debt of \$25 billion this year, another \$20 billion next year and more the year after that, with a total debt of \$200 billion, what are we doing looking at new programs?

I've heard from people all over the province about this particular issue. As I started out saying, on the face of it, it's a great issue; timing—very wrong. I liken it to a family that has a particular amount of income coming in, and they have to decide at a given point, probably around January, whether or not they're going to get that Caribbean vacation. But if they have X dollars and that Caribbean vacation is going to cost Y more, it has to wait for next year. I fear that this decision is being made absent that thought.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): The member from Kitchener–Waterloo has up to two minutes to respond.

Mrs. Elizabeth Witmer: I thank the members from Scarborough–Rouge River, Toronto–Danforth, Simcoe–Grey and Thornhill. I think that, overwhelmingly, the principle of the proposal for full-day kindergarten is well received, but we're also increasingly hearing concerns. There's a lot of uncertainty about the impact and the fact that the government didn't bother to get it right.

The government didn't bother to do the consultations with the people in the province of Ontario, whether it was the daycare operators who now are seeing their livelihood threatened, and as a result some families throughout the province may see an erosion of daycare spaces because, as my colleague pointed out, the municipalities aren't putting in any more money, so it could well have an impact on the younger children. But the government didn't bother to take a look at that impact.

As well, we have parents throughout the province who are faced with some uncertainty and are feeling that access to the program is unequal in that there isn't a plan of implementation.

I pointed out that there are about two thirds of the schools in the province that don't have the physical space. The government hasn't spoken to how they're going to provide the space.

It's great to make an announcement, but when you do make an announcement, make sure you know what your total cost is. Make sure you know what it's going to cost each year. Make sure you know how it's going to be implemented. Make sure you provide some certainty to parents throughout the province as to when and where they can expect the program to be available. And, at the end of the day, make sure that at this point in time in the history of this province you can afford it.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Further debate.

Mr. Paul Miller: I'll be splitting what time is left with the member from Nickel Belt.

Our major concern is not the "what" but the "how" and the "how long." We want this done right the first time. Boards like the Toronto District School Board have already expressed concerns about whether or not the funding being provided by the government is adequate. The government's five-year rollout of the program will be uneven and not equitable. A five-year rollout period is quite a long time and will leave thousands of children out of the program. If this government runs true to form, five years will become 10 years.

The loss of four- and five-year-olds will have a significant impact on daycares. The overhead for four- and five-year-olds is much lower than for younger children. This will increase daycare costs and result in closures or increased fees for the parents of younger children still in the daycare system.

We also have concerns that some boards will provide full-day service to a school that has not received funding in order to remain competitive if the other board in the community offers full-day in its schools. This happened in Sudbury. This competition between schools in the same area could prove to be a significant problem for boards. Also, if a school sets up full-day learning without government funding, where is the money coming from? What other programs will have to be cut?

Some of the provisions that are taking place: The McGuinty government has announced the funding for full-day kindergarten. The goal is to provide 35,000 students by 2010, 50,000 students by 2011 and full implementation by 2015—over 200,000 students. The cost will be \$200 million in the first year and \$300 million in the second year, rising to \$1.5 billion annually in 2015-16—quite a challenge for a government that has a \$25-billion deficit.

The government claims that 25% of schools already have the class space for full-day kindergarten; our numbers are closer to 35%. There will be one certified teacher and one ECE, early child care worker, in each class.

The class size is going up, not down like the government claims, to an average of 26 students from 20. A lot of the early education teachers and teachers have their hands full with 20 as it is, and some of them need extra for kids who need extra care. They're having problems servicing them now.

Before- and after-school care will be provided on a needs basis for a fee depending on the available space. I guess we're on competition level again.

Stakeholder positions: The teacher federations support the announcement. CUPE supports the announcement as the first step in a long-term process:

"The best way to keep our eyes on the prize is to involve all concerned parties in the implementation of this new program. That means parents, schools, school- and community-based child care agencies, ECEs and teachers and the unions that represent them. Particularly,

the province must take care not to disrupt existing child care programs as we go through the transition to an integrated, seamless day"—Sid Ryan, the new head of the largest Canadian labour—sorry.

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M^{me} France Gélinas: The Canadian Labour Congress.

Mr. Paul Miller: The Canadian Labour Congress.

CUPE now has concerns about the disruption of existing programs.

The McGuinty government continues to make highly publicized announcements that are long on media and short on substance. We totally support the concept of all-day learning, but we expressed many concerns when the government rolled out this program, and this piece of legislation does little—I repeat, little—to alleviate our concerns and the concerns of parents and care providers around our province.

The announcement commits a fixed sum of money to the creation of full-day kindergarten classes in Ontario. The actual mechanisms to make it happen are not specified. There has been a serious lack of attention to the actual implementation of this program.

We've waited a long time for this, and many families will wait another five years. The weight will put many children behind, assuming that it will be rolled out fully in five years, which I doubt.

Will the funding for the initial rollout be distributed equitably across the province or will it go where there is space? Will the programs approved in the first few years be needs-based or just space-based?

We are concerned that the class size of 26 is an average and are concerned that the class sizes may become too large, like many of our current grade 4 to grade 8 classes where there is no cap. An average of 26 means that many classes will be higher. Even with two adults, there are practical problems caused by having 30 four-year-olds in one space. You have to consider snacks, nap time, washroom accompaniment etc.

Parents expect this to be all-day learning, not all-day babysitting. From an instructional point of view, the large numbers will limit learning. Many parents will discover that their children did more learning in the daycare they were in before this program existed.

My wife was a kindergarten teacher—she's retired—and she used to tell me that around 1:30 in the afternoon the little ones were asking for mommy, they were tired, they wanted to go home and their attention span was zero. So I don't know how they're going to deal with that to keep the kids active and not tire them out. Are they going to have extra naps? I don't know what they're going to do, but they certainly haven't addressed this problem.

Speaking from experience, all-day kindergarten is a long day for a four- or five-year-old. It used to be a long day for me even in high school; I wanted to get out of there myself. I'm not quite sure how they're—

Hon. John Gerretsen: That explains a lot.

Mr. Paul Miller: I did get out occasionally.

Interjection: You're still suffering.

Mr. Paul Miller: Yes, I'm still suffering.

Charles Pascal called for an Early Years division in the Ministry of Education to develop and implement a coordinated policy around child care. We are sure that this announcement stops well short of the completely integrated child care plan that Pascal put forward.

We are still awaiting the details of the actual form the typical class will take. We want to see the actual distribution of workload between the teacher and the ECE. The government is dumping all the details on school boards and teachers' federations, and there are few specifics in the bill to alleviate the concerns felt by many of these groups.

Many boards are already claiming that the government is not providing adequate funding to pay the going rate for ECEs. The government's pitiful—I repeat, pitiful—education funding formula already places boards in the position of having to take from one program to pay for another. The question now is what programs will have to be cut to pay for an inadequately funded all-day learning program.

Consideration must be given to the potential loss of revenue for daycares, which may put them at risk or drive up costs to parents whose children remain in daycares.

There have also been suggestions that daycares should be allowed to lower standards and increase the number of children permitted per caregiver to cope with the changes. How will this affect the boards that already have full-day kindergarten, like most of the French boards in the province?

There must be subsidies for before- and after-school care to ensure accessibility. The bill acknowledges the need for subsidies but offers no rates for the service and gives parents no specific information.

Madam Speaker, I could go on for a long time, but I'm now going to pass off my last couple of minutes to the member from Nickel Belt, who has great concerns about this herself.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Il me fait plaisir d'ajouter ma voix aux commentaires qui ont été faits ce matin au sujet du projet de loi 242, le projet de loi qui va créer la maternelle et le jardin à temps plein pour les enfants de l'Ontario.

Comme plusieurs de mes collègues l'ont dit, moi aussi j'ai des inquiétudes. Est-ce que la maternelle et le jardin à temps plein sont quelque chose de bien? Absolument. Si tu regardes dans le programme de langue française, ils ont des maternelles et le jardin à temps plein depuis plusieurs années. Ça prépare bien les enfants. Lorsque c'est bien fait, ça leur apporte beaucoup, et certainement, c'est en ligne avec les recommandations que le D^f Pascal avait faites.

Bien que le but dans son ensemble soit quelque chose de bien, là où on a des inquiétudes, c'est vraiment l'impact de cette nouvelle initiative du gouvernement sur les enfants plus jeunes, ceux qui dépendent du système des garderies.

Certainement, mon collègue vient de le dire ce matin : l'impact est considérable, et il semble que les économies qu'on devait faire au niveau des garderies servent à financer ce qui va se passer au niveau du jardin et de la maternelle. Malheureusement, on n'a pas regardé quel est l'impact sur les garderies. On voit dans les journaux partout que de plus en plus de garderies ne sont plus viables; elles doivent fermer leurs portes. On a vu à Windsor que c'était le cas. La même chose se passe dans mon comté, où des garderies n'auront plus suffisamment d'enfants pour rester ouvertes et n'auront plus suffisamment d'argent pour payer les factures.

Ça ressemble un peu à payer un programme pour les enfants de quatre ans sur le dos des petits enfants d'un an, de deux ans, de trois ans. Je ne pense pas que c'est quelque chose que veulent ni les parents, ni les Ontariens et Ontariennes non plus. Il faut une balance dans tout ça; il faut s'assurer que les recommandations du D^f Pascal sont prises dans leur ensemble pour la petite enfance—

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Thank you. It being 15 past 10, I declare that this House stands recessed until 10:30.

The House recessed from 1016 to 1030.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

Mr. Peter Shurman: Good morning. I'd like to introduce a number of Jewish students from the University of Toronto who are here with us in the Legislature today to observe question period and to meet with various MPPs. Welcome to Josh Rosen; Josh Moskowitz; Casey Ben-Chimol; Liat Ben-Choreen; Jesse Braun; and Lindsey Lustig.

Hon. John Wilkinson: Good morning. I'd like all of our colleagues to welcome visitors to the House today as part of Toronto 101, an annual event that's organized with the farmers from my riding and surrounding ridings, who spend a day in Toronto understanding Toronto's issues, because our members, of course, go to our riding to learn about agricultural issues. We have over two dozen visitors here today, and they'll be observing question period before we go out to Scarborough—Guildwood.

Mr. David Zimmer: I too would like to introduce some Jewish students from the University of Toronto, Ryerson and Hillel here in Toronto who are visiting the Legislature today: Adam Solomon; Mitch Reiss; Laura Herman; and Rabbi Aaron Katchen. Welcome to the Legislature today.

Mr. Gerry Martiniuk: I have the family of page Quinton Lowe here today. The parents are Gordon and Tamara Lowe; the grandparents are Marion and George Stewart; the grandparents on the other side are Barry Lowe and Judy Currier; the aunts and uncles are Brian and Mary Ecker; and an additional uncle, Carl Ecker. Welcome to all.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): The Minister of Energy and Infrastructure.

Interjection.

Hon. Brad Duguid: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I guess I do have introductions.

I've got introductions on behalf of page Julia Louis. Her cousin Sonya Louis is here. Sonya's with her grade 10 civics class from Whitefield academy—and they're in the public gallery. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I didn't realize that; I do now.

Well, that doesn't look like their class up there; they must be on their way.

ORAL QUESTIONS

HEALTH CARE

Mrs. Christine Elliott: My question is for the finance minister. Yesterday, when you were asked why a record number of Ontario patients are crossing the border to get the health care they need when they need it, you said, "Fewer Ontarians than ever have to do that." But numbers don't lie. The number of patients crossing the border to get timely health care has gone from slightly under 2,000 to slightly over 12,000 patients per year under Dalton McGuinty.

Why would you say fewer Ontarians have to get American health care?

Hon. Dwight Duncan: To the Minister of Health.

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I welcome the opportunity to clarify. I think the member opposite needs to understand that the number does not refer to patients who are going out of the country, but rather, a good portion of that is specimens that are going out of the country, particularly for genetic testing.

We have made some real progress when it comes to repatriating surgeries that are done outside the country. Particularly, we've made terrific progress when it comes to bariatric surgery. There was a time when very little bariatric surgery was performed here, and patients did go to the States for that surgery. We have now invested \$75 million to bring those patients home.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary?

Mrs. Christine Elliott: There's a distinction that's made there without a difference. The actual question here is the difference between the facts and what comes out of the mouths of the McGuinty Liberals.

Minister Duncan said that fewer patients than ever are crossing into the US to get MRIs, cancer care and cardiac procedures, but the numbers have grown so much that a whole industry of Dalton McGuinty's health brokers has popped up. The number of patients crossing into the US to get the care they need when they need doubled since your 2007 throne speech alone. You had to know this, so why did you say that fewer patients than ever are crossing into the US to get health care?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: Again, I do acknowledge that there is still work to do when it comes to providing care right here. Bariatric surgery is an area where we

have made terrific gains. It's better for the patients, not just because they get the surgery here but because they get the care ahead of time and the post-surgical care. With something like bariatric surgery, it's very important that we think of it not just as a procedure but a series of initiatives that provide the best possible outcomes.

We are moving forward to repatriate bariatric surgeries. We're moving forward with a plan to bring back some of the genetic testing that has been sent out.

It's the right thing to do, and we're doing this in an aggressive way.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Final supplementary?

Mrs. Christine Elliott: It just points to the fact that Ontario families are right not to trust what comes out of the mouths of the McGuinty Liberals.

To get the care they need when they need it, the fact is, Ontario families either have to live in a border town or contact one of Dalton McGuinty's health brokers. Don't take my word for it. On November 26, the Minister of Health told the House: "There has been a dramatic increase in out-of-country health care provided and covered through OHIP." The Minister of Finance was sitting right beside her when she said it. The facts haven't changed since then, but you said that fewer patients than ever are going to the US anyway. Why would you have said that?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: When it comes to repatriating procedures here, we are taking important steps. One example that I'm reminded of by my seatmate is angioplasty that was done in the States and is now being done in Windsor.

New cancer care and drug treatments will save \$15 million in care for people who did previously have to go out of country.

I remember a time when the Conservatives sent pregnant women to Buffalo to have their babies. I think we've made an important improvement, and we will continue to do more.

FOREST INDUSTRY

Mr. Peter Shurman: My question is for the Acting Premier. Dalton McGuinty's throne speech just cannot be believed. In the 2007 throne speech, he said he would help the forestry industry. If that were true, then northern Ontario wouldn't be facing a court decision this week that will see US Georgia-Pacific buy the assets of Grant Forest Products for 30 cents on the dollar. That will kill about 1,500 direct and indirect jobs.

Acting Premier, why did you say you would help the forestry industry when Grant Forest Products' dire situation shows that you haven't?

Hon. Sandra Pupatello: It's important to note what we say in a throne speech and then what happens subsequently by the government, with or without the support of the opposition parties.

We said in our 2007 throne speech that we were going to reduce ER wait times, and we have. We said we were

going to lower wait times for surgical procedures in hospitals, and we have. We said we were going to—

Interjections.

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The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): The member from Simcoe North. Minister?

Hon. Sandra Pupatello: We said that we were going to eliminate taxes across the board for so many businesses, and we are moving to do that. We said that we were going to lower those class sizes, and we did that. In every initiative that appeared in our throne speech, we have moved to make that happen for the people of Ontario, regardless of the greatest recession that we've ever seen.

Yes, we know that there is more work to do in forestry. There is more work to do in economic development. But this member in particular knows full well that we are as aggressive as ever in promoting Ontario businesses around the world—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. Supplementary?

Mr. Peter Shurman: The minister clearly doesn't know what I'm talking about. On the forestry file, it's devoid of notes. This is urgent. If the fire sale is allowed to happen, Engelhart will be badly hurt, Timmins will be decimated, and it will mark the 63rd mill that will be closed under your watch.

Some 1,500 jobs, families and communities that rely on the jobs could be saved by your acting. You have the power to intervene. You have the power to cut the red tape that would allow Grant Forest Products to access the well-funded, underutilized forest sector loan guarantee program. You have the power to save these families, these communities and this historic company. Will you do it?

Hon. Sandra Pupatello: To the Minister of Forestry.

Hon. Michael Gravelle: I think it's important to remind the member that Grant Forest Products is in CCAA, which as you know is a court process, and it would be inappropriate for us to interfere with a court process. Having said that, I am aware—we are all obviously aware—of the sale of Grant Forest Products' Engelhart and Earleton facilities to Georgia Pacific. We know that Georgia Pacific has been meeting with local municipal leaders and the community and that they are, indeed, committed to running the Engelhart facility at full capacity. That's a very important point. We do, indeed, understand that this is a very challenging time. Ownership changes are a very difficult part of the process for all communities, but our objective is to promote and to maintain a sustainable forestry sector in the province of Ontario. That's our goal, and that's what we hope will be the end result of the situation.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Final supplementary?

Mr. Peter Shurman: While this government has forgotten about its promises to the north, it handed Ford Motor \$81 million for 757 jobs that only may be created. Meanwhile, Grant Forest Products represents a made-in-

Ontario business valued at over a billion dollars and the impending loss of 1,500 jobs right now. This is all about priorities in the jobs-starved north. There is \$300 million still sitting in the forest sector loan guarantee fund. Will you commit to a no-cash investment in our own people, a homegrown business, Ontario forestry technology, the resource-rich north, or do we sell our birthright to Georgia Pacific for 30 cents on the dollar?

Hon. Michael Gravelle: I think the member knows that the court has received three bids. The court-appointed monitor is making decisions in that regard. I know that there is a consortium of northern business people who have also expressed an interest in Grant's assets, and I am confident that the court will give appropriate consideration to that request.

Let me remind the member as well that we are taking measures to put Ontario's wood back to work. We've got a wood supply competition presently under way—we've extended the date for that to March 31 for proposals—11 million cubic metres of wood is going to be put up for bid, and we want to see that wood put to work. We are doing a review of our forest tenure process, which I think can bring about a reform about the way that we do allocate licences and price wood in the province of Ontario.

We recognize that there are many challenges. I represent a riding that has faced those challenges, and I can tell you that we're very committed to seeing a return to prosperity for the forestry sector in the province of Ontario.

PATIENT SAFETY

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My question is for the Minister of Health. Today Laurie Johnston announced she'll be going to court after an unnecessary mastectomy. She's not the only woman this happened to. When a mistake like this happens once, it is a tragedy. But when it happens more than once, it is absolutely unforgivable. These cases in Windsor have brought to light growing concerns about pathology in this province.

Is the minister finally ready to look at the way that pathology is practised here in Ontario?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I appreciate the question. What has happened in Windsor is certainly a wake-up call for all of us. I want to start by expressing my sympathy for the people who have been affected by this and their families.

I want you to know that we are taking this issue very seriously. The hospital is doing a review. The College of Physicians and Surgeons is doing their review. But I didn't think that was enough. I have appointed three very highly regarded investigators to go to Windsor, to understand what happened there, to advise us on the lessons that we need to learn from this. My highest priority is to ensure that those who are concerned about their own personal pathology results get the assurance as quickly as possible. I've asked them to make that the top priority. We do need to look at this system, and that is exactly what we are doing.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: A wake-up call? Laurie woke up without one of her breasts. That's what happened in this province.

Pathologists themselves say that there's a patchwork of protocols around their profession right now. New pathologists are ready to work but can't find jobs, and others are saying that they are severely overworked at the same time. Some hospitals have standards and others have none.

People who go to a hospital in Ontario need to know that they're getting the best possible care. Why is Ontario using a patchwork system that leaves some pathologists unemployed while others struggle with unmanageable caseloads?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I want to take this opportunity to assure the people of Ontario that they can be proud to be part of what is, in my opinion, the best health care system anywhere. I would not trade Ontario's health care system for any other in the world.

When a situation arises, it is incumbent upon us to learn what lessons can be learned and to act on those lessons. That is why we have appointed the three investigators. I have asked them to focus first on Windsor, and then, based on that information, if they think the right thing to do is to go beyond Windsor, we will do that.

It's the right thing to do. We want to continue to improve patient safety in this province, and that's why we've taken the steps that we have taken.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Final supplementary.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: People are already very concerned about what they are seeing happening in their hospitals, but these tragedies risk shaking people's faith in our entire health care system. A patchwork system that leaves some pathologists overworked while others are unemployed makes no sense at all.

When will the minister finally set standards for transparency and province-wide protocols to ensure that this never happens again?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I think that all of us in this House have a responsibility to be responsible when it comes to talking about issues such as this. I think the leader of the third party maybe ought to speak to the health critic, her caucus colleague. Yesterday, France Gélinas made a very wise statement when she said we ought to be careful not to incite panic. Let's learn from Windsor and go from there. The member opposite should speak to her health critic.

TAXATION

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My next question is to the Minister of Finance. Last week, when I asked the minister if he could tell us how much the HST is going to cost the average family for gas at the pumps, he said, "No, I can't." However, in an FOI request, an appeal document, the Ministry of Finance actually states the opposite. It says the minister was told how much the HST

on gas is going to cost consumers. In fact, I'll send the document over to him via this page so it will remind him of what's in that document.

Will the minister now, as he reviews that document, admit that he knows the answer to my question, and will he simply provide it?

Hon. Dwight Duncan: I don't know what the price of gas will be on July 1. Now, I notice that you've removed the date on the document, so it could be considerably out of date. I think this document goes back about a year and a half. The price of gas, depending on the specific date, is lower than it was then. But, no, I can't.

What I can tell her is that we have put together a package of tax reforms that will create 600,000 new jobs. What I can tell her is that the personal tax cuts for Ontarians kicked in this past January 1. I can also tell her that 93% of Ontarians will pay less taxes than they did before. And I can also tell her that—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. Supplementary.

1050

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Stop the clock. I just remind the honourable members to reflect on the words of former Deputy Speaker Mr. Johnson, who reminded members that when two people were standing and the Speaker was one of them—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary?

Ms. Andrea Horwath: In blocking our FOI requests trying to find out how much people were going to be paying at the pumps, the Ministry of Finance wrote this: "These figures ... could ... give rise to a negative effect on consumer confidence. A decrease in consumer spending would in turn have an adverse effect on economic growth and job creation."

Does this minister agree with his staff that telling people exactly how much they're going to be hosed at the pumps is going to trigger an economic collapse?

Hon. Dwight Duncan: The member uses an undated document that is taken out of context and not part of the broader FOI that she got. She is trying to be, I think, too clever by half. If she read—

Interjection.

Hon. Dwight Duncan: Taxes are being cut; spending will be stimulated. That is precisely why we put together the package we did. I suspect that's why Hugh Mackenzie and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives rejected—absolutely, categorically rejected—your claim that this is a tax grab. They said, no, it's not. You don't have to believe me. You don't have to believe the chamber of commerce. You don't have to believe Ontario's business community. I invite you to endorse Hugh Mackenzie and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and their document entitled Not a Tax Grab After All.

It's about jobs. We have a plan. We're going to create those jobs. That member and her party are—

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Stop the clock.

Start the clock. Final supplementary.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Gee, all that bluster from the minister. All I was asking was the impact the HST is going to have on people at the pumps—a simple question, and he can't answer it.

The minister is deliberately withholding the basic facts about the HST. People have the right to know how much the HST is going to cost them, and he has that information.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): I just ask the honourable member to withdraw that comment, please.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: I withdraw, Speaker.

The minister's department claims that releasing this information "could be injurious to the financial interests of Ontario and the ability of the government to manage the economy."

Interjection: I didn't hear her withdraw.

Hon. Sandra Pupatello: Give her a polygraph test.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Stop the clock. Minister of Economic Development and Trade, please withdraw the comment.

Hon. Sandra Pupatello: I withdraw, Speaker.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: Does this minister really believe that telling people how much more it's going to cost them at the pumps could actually bring Ontario to the edge of economic collapse, or is it more about protecting the interests of the governing party?

Hon. Dwight Duncan: The member only needs to read the document she sent me, where it says that what she's saying takes everything out of context.

I'd remind her that, as recently as a year ago, she and her party advocated for a 1% increase in the provincial sales tax.

They have no idea about how to create jobs. All they can do is take one line out of one document where they remove the date, torque the answers and ignore the largest personal tax cut for the lowest-income Ontarians in the history of this province.

We will defend this plan. We will create jobs. We will give the whole truth. We will tell the whole story. What that story is is a bigger and better Ontario when this package and the work of this government is fully implemented, as opposed to the old, tired rhetoric of a party that has no idea about how to deal with a deficit, much less—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Stop the clock. New question.

HEALTH CARE

Mrs. Christine Elliott: My question is for the Minister of Health. In the 2007 throne speech, Dalton McGuinty promised Ontario patients that they would get the health care they need when they need it. But here's what the Ontario Health Quality Council says: Waits for

MRIs are three to four times longer than what you said they would be. An industry of Dalton McGuinty's health brokers, like EcuMedical and International Health Care Providers, has popped up to whisk Ontario patients to Michigan or Colorado for an MRI the same day.

If Dalton McGuinty's health brokers were part of the plan all along, why didn't you mention them in the throne speech?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I will be the first to thank the Ontario health quality group for the work they are doing. They do help us make the strategic investments that we need to make.

We have a committed strategy to reduce wait times in this province. We have achieved remarkable success. There are areas where we need to do better, and shortening wait times for MRIs is one of those areas where we've made some improvement and we need to make more. We publicly report what MRI wait times are across the province. People can, if they wish, take the time, go online, check the website and see what MRI wait times are in their area and across the province.

We've really accomplished something quite terrific, because we—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. Supplementary?

Mrs. Christine Elliott: The fact is that cuts are being made to health care across this province. Frankly, Ottawa patients don't trust the minister when she says that cuts at their hospital are going to improve the quality of health care. Only in Dalton McGuinty's Ontario do cuts, wait time increases and health brokers equal improved care.

The Ontario Health Quality Council also says that half of cancer patients who need surgery wait longer than what is medically acceptable.

Maybe before you get rid of the Ombudsman he'll have a chance to report on the Niagara LHIN and say something about Kaleida Health, which has taken out billboard ads that brazenly say, "Fast-track your medical procedure here," with an arrow that points to Buffalo.

You didn't mention this in your last throne speech. How can Ontario patients trust the McGuinty Liberals when they only tell half the story?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: Talk about telling half the story. Let's talk about what we've done to improve health care in this province. Almost 900,000 more Ontarians have access to family care; 2,300 more physicians are practising in Ontario now than in—

Interjections.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Me?

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Yeah, you. Minister.

Hon. Deborah Matthews: There are more than 5,600 international medical graduates practising in Ontario, which represents almost a quarter of the physician workplace. We've opened a new Northern Ontario School of Medicine, and by 2013, we will have doubled the number of doctors graduating every year. We've established 170 family health teams that now care for more than two million Ontarians, including over 300,000 that did not

previously have access to a family doctor. We've hired 10,000 more nurses—and I would be pleased to go on.

The health care system is measurably and significantly—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. New question.

MUNICIPAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Michael Prue: My question is to the Minister of Energy and Infrastructure. Two weeks ago, a Brantford Expositor reporter stumbled in on a meeting between the member from Brant, a mayoral candidate, a city councillor and Tony Perruzza, the man behind the big mega-developer First Urban. The meeting took place in a private room in Brantford's Olde School Restaurant.

Asked about the meeting, the member from Brant said that he was there on behalf of the Premier and as the new parliamentary assistant for the Minister of Energy and Infrastructure.

Can the minister tell this House what instructions he gave to the member from Brant and what the member from Brant said on his behalf while lunching with this developer?

Hon. Brad Duguid: This isn't kindergarten and parliamentary assistants are entitled to take meetings with whomever they wish. The member from Brant doesn't check with me before he takes meetings. He's a grown-up, he's an experienced politician, and he works very hard for the people of Brant. This is a member of provincial Parliament who has very much distinguished himself here through things like private members' business, where he's worked even with members on the opposite side on some very important initiatives, and a member who has worked very hard for his community.

I can only assume that when the member takes meetings, they're meetings that he believes are part of his responsibility, either as an MPP or as a parliamentary assistant. He's totally entitled to do that.

1100

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary?

Mr. Michael Prue: The member was very clear to the press that he was there on your behalf and on your instruction. The member for Brant told the reporter that his private meeting was about the area's so-called green energy hub.

But people of the community are questioning that claim. After all, First Urban is in the middle of an OMB battle. They are trying to build a suburb on farmland outside of Brantford. To make their development work, they need water and sewer infrastructure, and a way around the growth planning and restrictions—exactly the thing that the Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure oversees.

Why can't the Minister of Energy and Infrastructure tell this House what his parliamentary assistant is promising developers behind closed doors?

Hon. Brad Duguid: That's almost laughable. But let me tell you something: My parliamentary assistant Dave Levac is working very, very hard on promoting the Green

Energy Act. He's very committed to promoting economic development in the region of Brant. We're committed to working with him in those endeavours.

Indeed, it's because of the Green Energy Act that we've attracted 16,000 jobs coming to this province, a \$7-billion investment. It's because of the Green Energy Act that we're going to grow 50,000 jobs in green energy over the next three years. That's something that my parliamentary assistant is working hard to try to promote; that's something I'm proud to work hard to try to promote; that's something that will certainly be a legacy of this government. Fifty thousand jobs over three years in the green energy economy: That's something we're very proud of.

BIODIVERSITY

Mr. Glen R. Murray: My question is for the Minister of Natural Resources. Minister, your ministry is responsible for administering Ontario's vast crown land resources and ensuring the sustainable management of all of the flora and fauna within Ontario. Protecting Ontario's amazing biodiversity of species—cougars, trilliums, sturgeon and other at-risk species—is in the interests of all Ontarians.

Ontario's biodiversity is something we can all be proud of, but very often people do not know first-hand about the species that your ministry works daily to protect. How does the ministry communicate with the public about protecting Ontario's biodiversity for future generations to enjoy?

Hon. Linda Jeffrey: I'd like to thank the honourable member for the question. He is absolutely correct: Protecting Ontario's biodiversity is in all of our interests. I think many Ontarians, including the members here in this Legislature, will be shocked to know that within a 100-kilometre radius of this Legislature, there are 100 species at risk in Ontario.

My ministry strives to make sure Ontarians and the industry are aware of biodiversity. We have an annual presence at the Toronto Sportsmen's Show and we work with partners like the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters to make sure that those who do interact with our biodiversity are aware of the world around them.

There's one initiative that I'm particularly proud of. Just last week, my ministry introduced the Ontario endangered species of the day widget for computers. I'd be happy to elaborate about the widget in the supplementary.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary?

Mr. Glen R. Murray: My thanks to the minister. I understand that the Ministry of Natural Resources's species-at-risk widget has set the Internet on fire, and the popularity has surprised those in your ministry who helped to design and develop it. I know many watching at home will know first-hand what a widget is and I am sure there are many who have already downloaded it. However, as Ontarians have differing levels of computer literacy, is the widget for everyone?

Would the minister share with our honourable colleagues what a widget is and tell our colleagues assembled here what makes it so unique?

Hon. Linda Jeffrey: I'm very proud of the work and the creativity that my ministry staff have gone through to develop this piece of software. I too did not know what a widget was, but I am told the widget is the first of its kind for the Ontario government, and it is for everyone.

It's a small computer program that can run on a desktop or is embedded in a website, and it's easily shared on social media such as Twitter, Digg or Facebook. The widget updates daily with a picture and facts about a species at risk in Ontario. When a person downloads the widget and explores the different species at risk, they can be redirected to my ministry's species-at-risk page for further detailed information.

After originally sharing the species-at-risk widget through my Twitter account, it was subsequently picked up by apple.com, the company behind the famous iPod. Today, the widget is still featured on apple.com and is the eighth most popular—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. New question.

JOB CREATION

Mr. Norm Miller: My question is for the finance minister. Dalton McGuinty doesn't have an economic plan that can be trusted. In his 2007 throne speech, Dalton McGuinty said he had a five-point economic plan to create jobs, not to be confused with his five-point jobs plan in budget 2009. But neither plan was credible. One hundred and forty thousand jobs were lost last year under the McGuinty Liberals. Now you say, "Trust us. Our five-year economic plan will create jobs." Why should Ontario families believe you?

Hon. Dwight Duncan: The member might have missed it: There was a global downturn in the economy since the last throne speech. You might have missed the meltdown in international financial markets. You might have missed the downturn in the auto sector. You certainly voted against helping keep those jobs in Windsor and Brampton and Oshawa. You might have missed the challenges with our tax system, because one day you'd say you'd support the HST and then the next day you wouldn't support it.

This weekend the leader of the Conservative Party is in Ottawa, saying, "Spend more money on hospitals," and on Monday they release a report saying, "Free spending."

We have responded to a changing global economy with a clear vision, working with our federal counterparts to create jobs and a better economy for Ontario. That member and his party have no plan, no idea what to do other than to say, "Wasn't it good under Mike Harris—"

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Start the clock.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Stop the clock.

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): That's not helpful, member from Cambridge.

I will remind the honourable members that if they choose to interject in the proceedings, it is much more helpful to the Speaker that they be sitting in their seats.

Supplementary.

Mr. Norm Miller: Perhaps I should remind the finance minister that Ontario lost 200,000 jobs before the recession started.

There are two things Dalton McGuinty likes in a plan: The number 5, and not being pinned down on creating jobs. In budget 2009, the Premier said he would create 146,000 new full-time jobs and 100,000 student jobs this year, but he didn't. He also said he would create 168,000 jobs next year, plus 50,000 so-called green energy jobs, 800 Ubisoft jobs, 16,000 Samsung jobs and 600,000 HST jobs. Dalton McGuinty knows how to promise a million jobs; he just don't know how to create them.

In the interest of accountability, do you attribute the 140,000 lost jobs to the five-point economic plan, the five-point jobs plan, the five-year economic plan or all of the above?

Hon. Dwight Duncan: Who I will attribute the 600,000 jobs figure is to is the Conservative Party's expert witness at last year's SCOFEA hearings, Mr. Jack Mintz. That's not us; that's them. That's their expert witness.

1110

I have to tell you, the member opposite wants to go back to closing 39 hospitals. They want to go back to calling nurses hula-hoop workers. They want to go back to an era when there was no freedom of information or accountability for the hydro companies. We don't want to do that, and I know the people of Ontario don't want to do that.

I am pleased, however, that the member opposite, just last week in committee hearings, finally agreed with our tax policy. He said, "We're in favour of those reductions for ... small business and the corporate tax rates." It's unfortunate that he and his party voted against it. It's unfortunate that they don't have a plan for the future. All they have is an eye for the past, a past that has been—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. New question.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Ms. Cheri DiNovo: My question is to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Ontarians have waited six years for the McGuinty government to deliver a long-term housing plan. Now, just before the plan is due, the original minister resigned from cabinet and key staff have been dismissed. The former parliamentary secretary went so far as to express his dismay publicly, stating that Mr. McGuinty's moves mean "that expertise and continuity is now lost." Housing groups are extremely concerned that the report will be delayed or reduced in scope. They want to know—it's simple: Will this plan still be released in June?

Hon. James J. Bradley: I thank the member for the question. Usually, I wouldn't thank them for their ques-

tion, but this is a good opportunity to speak about something we're really pleased about, and that's the kind of consultation that took place for this plan. I have had an opportunity to receive input from a number of different sectors in this regard. We are, at the present time, assessing all the information that came in as a result of that consultation and are developing this long-term strategy.

That hasn't prevented us, as you know, from allocating some \$622 million for affordable housing and encouraging the federal government to do the same. There's some significant progress being made.

I know that when your leader moves a person from one seat to another, or from one position to another, I wouldn't comment on that because that's the prerogative of your leader, and I have a lot of respect for her. When she makes those changes, I'm not here to comment—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. Supplementary?

Ms. Cheri DiNovo: I take it that the answer is that the report will not be released in June.

When a parliamentary assistant says something is "really, really wrong" in a ministry, there are real problems. Rents and house prices in Ontario are the least affordable. We have the greatest deficit in affordable housing. Per capita, we invest the least in housing.

There is widespread concern that the ministry lacks resources to tackle a housing crisis and to deliver a strong plan. The Housing Network of Ontario has called for a budget commitment to ensure that Ontario delivers at least 10,000 affordable housing units this year. Will the minister agree to this?

Hon. James J. Bradley: First of all, the member has been a member of this House for some period of time now, and she would know that I can't say what's going to be in the budget ahead of time; that's something that you will have to wait for the budget for. I know she's a patient person and is prepared to do that.

I can assure her that all of the input that we've received, including the input from those who have had the position of parliamentary assistant in years gone by—parliamentary secretaries are very, very helpful federally and provincially in providing information. I can tell her that all of the information from the consultation will be used and that we've already committed \$1.2 billion to housing in this province. I don't want to say that's far more than the NDP did, because that's history and we're in different circumstances. But the fact is, it is more than the NDP committed.

I know she'll support our program. I'm confident she'll support our program when she sees the plan put before—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. New question.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Mr. Ted McMeekin: My question is for the Minister of Education. Minister, today we know it's more important than ever to ensure that students are successful in

school in order to be successful in finding work and to become valuable members of the Ontario workforce. But Minister, sometimes obstacles come into the way of high school students and their goal of graduating and moving on to post-secondary education or the workforce.

We know that statistics and studies have shown that people who graduate from high school are more likely to earn more money, less likely to receive unemployment and social assistance payments and less likely to be in trouble with the law. With these factors in mind, our government has placed increased emphasis on engaging students so they can stay in school and graduate. Minister, could you enlighten us as to some of our recent successes with respect to the student success strategy?

Hon. James J. Bradley: Good question.

Hon. Leona Dombrowsky: It is a very good question, because I know everyone in this assembly is absolutely focused on ensuring that we're doing everything we can as a government so that our young people can be successful in school. That is why we have made the investments that we have and that is why we have introduced some new programs.

What I can say is that we have developed new programs that give students more ways to accumulate credits. We have been making significant progress since 2003, and we have also invested \$1.5 billion to support programs such as the specialist high skills major program, such as dual credits and expanded co-op.

Our investments are having results. Since 2003, we have had more graduates in our schools. In fact, we have 13,500 more students graduating from high school than when we came to government.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. Supplementary?

Mr. Ted McMeekin: I'm particularly interested in the specialist high skills major initiatives and how they seem to grow a different set of specialty courses each year. This year in my riding of Ancaster–Dundas–Flamborough–Westdale, we launched a specialist high skills major in aviation and aerospace.

I'd like the minister to let members of the House know where these programs are being offered, what other innovative majors are being offered by Ontario high schools and how many students are participating in this innovative new approach to keeping students in school and making sure they graduate.

Hon. Leona Dombrowsky: We have had some tremendous success, and what I can say to the members of this House is that all 70 school boards with secondary schools are offering specialist high skills major programs. In fact, I was at T.A. Blakelock in Oakville this morning with my colleague the member from Oakville and I had the opportunity to see first-hand a specialist high skills major program at work.

We offer this specialist program in many areas. I know we have visitors here from the agriculture community; we are offering specialist programs for students in the area of agriculture, in the areas of arts and culture, the

environment, health and wellness, as well as aviation, aeronautics and energy.

This type of programming has been very successful. We now have over 20,000 students who are choosing this type of program so they have an understanding and a sense of what is—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. New question.

AIR QUALITY

Mr. Ted Chudleigh: My question is to the Minister of Energy and Infrastructure. Energy use in Ontario has shown a steady decline since 2005, when the peak surge was 27,000 megawatts. In 2009, the peak surge was just over 22,000 megawatts, and the years in between have shown a steady decline.

Minister, with declining demand, is it really necessary to build the Oakville gas-fired power plant?

Hon. Brad Duguid: I appreciate this question because it gives me an opportunity to publicly thank and commend our colleague Kevin Flynn, the MPP for that area. I want to thank him for his efforts to ensure that the voice of his community is being brought to this chamber. I want to thank him for his efforts to work very closely with me to ensure that any of the concerns being expressed in this area about that project are being brought to our attention.

I can assure the member opposite and I can assure the member from Oakville that I will continue to listen very carefully to the concerns being expressed. We will certainly not ignore those concerns. We respect the voices from the community and we'll do all that we can to ensure that any of the concerns raised are fully addressed.

1120

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary.

Mr. Ted Chudleigh: Today, hundreds of Oakville residents are coming to Queen's Park to protest the construction of one of the largest gas-fired power plants in North America. The Oakville-Clarkson airshed is already one of the worst in Ontario, causing the highest incidence of childhood respiratory diseases in the province. And yet a full and independent individual environmental assessment has not been done on this site.

Minister, your government has said that it cares about health and safety. How can you move forward with this power plant without an individual environmental assessment?

Hon. Brad Duguid: As always, the party opposite simply refuses to change their policy. They wanted this province to stick to dirty coal. They haven't changed their policy one bit. We are for change. We recognize the move to diversify our power mix. We recognize the need to diversify our energy supply. We recognize the need to attract green energy to this province. We recognize the need to invest in the modernization of our nuclear capability, because that is emission free.

We're determined to move from coal, and there are some tough decisions that will need to be made going

forward. But I can assure the people from Oakville that we will make sure their voice is heard, we will listen to their concerns, and we'll ensure that we move forward in a responsible but decisive manner.

HOSPITAL FUNDING

Ms. Andrea Horwath: My question is for the Minister of Health. I've always enjoyed good literature, but I'd like to suggest that we abstain from relying too heavily on Orwellian language when we talk about our health care system. Yesterday, the minister told reporters that 190 jobs that she's cutting at the Ottawa Hospital will somehow improve patient care. "We absolutely expect that quality of care will improve," the minister said in a story headlined: "Cuts at the Ottawa Hospital Will Improve Care, Minister Says."

I'd like to think not even this government would suggest that slashing 190 health care jobs somehow improves care for Ontario families. Would the minister like to clarify her comments in that regard in the House today?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I will remind the member opposite that I actually don't write the headlines; in fact, the headline did not reflect what I said.

Having said that, it's time to get the facts straight here. Reports that the Ottawa Hospital is laying off large numbers of nurses is simply not true. Like hospitals across the province, the Ottawa Hospital is making the changes that are necessary to improve efficiency, while at the same time continuing to improve patient care. There are almost 200 nursing vacancies at the Ottawa Hospital right now. While 48 nurses may be affected by the upcoming changes at the hospital, there are more than enough vacancies to absorb all of those changes.

Dr. Jack Kitts, the CEO of the Ottawa Hospital, has said that "very few if any nurses at TOH will leave involuntarily."

It's important that we work together to make the changes that are necessary in our health care system—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. Supplementary.

Ms. Andrea Horwath: While the health minister weaves a wonderful fairy tale about health care getting better, the fact is that this government's cuts will make health care worse in this province. Families in Ottawa are rightfully worried when they learn that several hundred health care jobs are being eliminated, at a time that the system is already so strained that surgeries are being deferred and services are being cut back. Families in Ottawa deserve much, much better than this.

Will the minister commit today to putting Ottawa families first and rethinking these disastrous job cuts that will only compromise their health care?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I would like to invite the member opposite to actually review the facts on this case. I think it's important to repeat that, according to Jack Kitts, "very few if any nurses ... will leave involuntarily."

We are not cutting services to health care. In Ottawa, we've increased funding to hospitals by \$408 million. We've provided money to bring down wait times and support services outside the hospital.

It might be helpful to just review the NDP record. The NDP actually closed 8,000 hospital beds. The NDP cut the number of medical school spaces, contributing greatly to the physician shortage that we have worked hard to repair.

The upcoming changes at the Ottawa Hospital will actually increase the number of beds for acute care patients. It will maintain current level of patient service for—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. New question.

ANIMAL HEALTH

Mrs. Liz Sandals: My question is to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. Food safety and quality are of great importance to the agriculture sector, as well as the broader general public. Agriculture representatives from both the poultry and livestock sectors have been asking for some time for implementation of animal health legislation like that seen in Alberta and Quebec.

Coming from Guelph, I've had the opportunity to speak with experts from the Ontario Veterinary College, the Ontario Agricultural College and the Guelph Food Technology Centre, and I know that protecting farm animal health is important both in terms of food safety and the economic well-being of the agriculture industry.

Minister, could you inform the House about the economic benefits of the Animal Health Act that was proclaimed into force earlier this year?

Hon. Carol Mitchell: Thank you for the question. The livestock and poultry industries are vital contributors to Ontario's economy, and because of this, we have taken steps to protect these sectors.

The Animal Health Act is the result of requests and consultation with our industry partners, and that certainly bears repeating. This new legislation embraces industry competitiveness by providing a framework for traceability measures to improve market access opportunities that better align with other provinces. It protects animal health and the economy.

The act includes legislative powers that provide for: prevention measures, including a framework for enhanced efforts to protect animals from hazards, proper animal handling at specific premises and proper use of medicines; detection, including disease monitoring at specific locations; and appropriate actions to control or mitigate the effects of—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. Supplementary?

Mrs. Liz Sandals: Ontario's agri-food sector is one of the province's leading industries, contributing more than \$33 billion to the economy every year.

To keep Ontario food safe, we must all take steps to produce, process, handle and store food in a way that prevents or reduces any danger to human health. Mistakes and missteps not only damage a farm or a processor's reputation, they can cost lives. That's why everyone in the agri-food chain, from those who grow and process our food to those who sell it—everyone needs to participate.

I've spoken with farmers who appreciate the direction that our government has taken in partnering and working closely with them to help meet the challenges facing the sector. Could the minister please provide this House with more information about how the Animal Health Act makes Ontario food safe?

Hon. Carol Mitchell: Protecting livestock and poultry is not just important for the economic well-being of the industry. We know there's a link between animal health and human health, and protecting our food animals can help us protect ourselves.

The Animal Health Act is just another tool for Ontario's food safety system, one which already includes comprehensive inspection systems that make sure that unhealthy animals don't enter the human food chain. It helps to address animal health issues that could have an effect on public health.

We know that having healthy animals is a first step to having quality food products, and this legislation adds an additional level of security to the system. This benefits the public by increasing consumer confidence which, in turn, benefits the industry.

Food safety strengthens our agricultural community, and the members on that side of the House just simply don't get it. We know the linkage is strong. We have to ensure—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. New question.

HOSPITAL FUNDING

Mr. Ted Arnott: My question is for the Acting Premier. Last year, on June 10, the Waterloo Region Record reported the Premier's statement that hospital expansion might be included in a 10-year construction plan, which was to be unveiled last fall. It's now the beginning of March of the following year. When does the Premier really plan to unveil his now 11-year construction plan for hospitals?

Hon. Sandra Pupatello: To the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care.

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I'm very happy to have an opportunity to talk about the extraordinary expansion we've made in our health care infrastructure right across the province. We are committed to going forward. We are currently undertaking the important work that's necessary to develop the next 10-year capital plan. But I think that anyone would say that across this province there has been an extraordinary improvement in the infrastructure of our hospitals and our health care system.

1130

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary?

Mr. Ted Arnott: I'm not satisfied with the answer, and I understand that there are some 70 communities waiting for this government to get moving on their hospital redevelopment projects. Groves Memorial Community Hospital in the township of Centre Wellington is one of those 70 hospitals. We've been working for more than seven years, and our patients are, well, running out of patience. What assurances can the Acting Premier provide my constituents that the Groves project will finally move forward, and when?

Hon. Deborah Matthews: I appreciate that there are many members in this House who are hoping to have capital projects approved in their constituency. When we came into office, there was a massive health infrastructure deficit across this province. We, after years of neglect, undertook ReNew Ontario, a five-year, \$30-billion infrastructure plan. We've seen over 100 major hospital projects underway in this province. We've increased health care spending by 45%. We are committed to continuing to improve the infrastructure of our health care system, and we are taking the time necessary to do that right.

TERMINATION AND SEVERANCE PAYMENTS

Mr. Howard Hampton: My question is for the Acting Premier. A few weeks ago, the McGuinty Liberals suddenly found \$200 million for the underfunded Nortel pension plan, just after a by-election was called in the Ottawa West riding, where thousands of Nortel retirees live.

My question is: Can the Acting Premier tell us when the McGuinty Liberals will show the same concern for the 2,000 laid-off workers of the Buchanan Group of Companies in northwestern Ontario, who are legally entitled to \$30 million in severance and termination pay under the laws of Ontario, and who have received nothing?

Hon. Sandra Pupatello: To the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Michael Gravelle: Thank you very much—

Hon. Dwight Duncan: She said “finance.”

Hon. Michael Gravelle: “Finance”? Go ahead.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Stop the clock. Minister?

Hon. Dwight Duncan: There are a variety of challenges, as the member well knows. This government—I know the Minister of Labour and our officials, as well as the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines—will be involved. We did, in fact, move to protect Nortel pensioners. I think it's important to say that today. I regret the NDP opposed that, I regret that you would see that as something we shouldn't have done in this climate. We have taken great caution moving forward on pensions and benefit issues to protect vulnerable workers, and we will continue to do that in all instances.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary?

Mr. Howard Hampton: What's striking is, the McGuinty Liberals showed no interest in the retirees or ex-workers of Nortel until a by-election was called in a Liberal riding. But what's even more outrageous is that over the last three years, the McGuinty Liberals have given over \$120 million in grants, loans and other financial benefits to the Buchanan Group of Companies. Oh, yes—the Buchanan Group of Companies has given tens of thousands of dollars to the Liberal Party. So my question is this: While you were handing out \$120 million to the Buchanan Group of Companies, did anybody over there—the Minister of Forestry, the Minister of Labour, the Minister of Natural Resources—say that \$30 million of it should go to the workers who were entitled to severance and termination pay under the laws of Ontario? Did anybody speak up for the workers?

Hon. Dwight Duncan: In fact, we have worked with a number of companies in the north. The member opposite tries to have it both ways. For the last four years, he has been telling us to help the forest and pulp and paper industry. He has been telling us to work and to put money into that. Frankly, he was right about that. That's why we have responded with a variety of programs in the forestry sector, and we will continue to do that. That is why we worked with the Nortel pensioners for more than a year. This didn't just happen. In fact, had we triggered something sooner, it would have been really devastating for Nortel workers.

We will work with those workers and any displaced worker. That's why we have a jobs plan. It's about jobs; it's about a fair shake for working people. We'll continue to work with our partners in labour and business to help build the best economy we can for the people of Ontario.

LANGUAGE TRAINING

Mr. David Zimmer: My question is for the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. A recent report by Dr. Rick Miner, who is the former president of Seneca College in my riding of Willowdale, stresses the need to incorporate under-represented skilled professions into Ontario's job market and to ensure that Ontario's future labour needs are met. Quite specifically, Dr. Miner focused on skilled newcomers in our province who continue to face barriers to employment. One of the key obstacles he cited was a lack of appropriate language skills.

I know the government is committed to helping newcomers. I've read the report. It does underscore the opportunities at stake and the need to ensure that newcomers have language skills. Minister, what is our government doing to ensure that immigrants get the language skills they need to specifically integrate into Ontario's workforce?

Hon. Eric Hoskins: I would like to thank the member from Willowdale for his question. This government understands that learning English and French is often key to finding a job and being successful in the workplace. That's why our government is investing over \$64 million each year to help more than 120,000 newcomers get the

language training they need, including nearly \$10 million in language and occupational-specific language training to help workers get the skills that they require in language training. We're also working with the federal government to ensure seamless access to language training for learners and consistency in language-level assessments. As a government, we are dedicated to helping newcomers contribute to a stronger Ontario.

Mr. Frank Klees: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker: My point of order relates to the literally hundreds of written questions that have been tabled with the House. As you will know, on prorogation, all of those questions die.

I know that in the motion for prorogation, the Premier has stated clearly that he intends not to disrupt the business of the House. Given that it was probably an oversight that those written questions were not included in the order to carry over into the new session, I would ask for unanimous consent for a motion that would carry over all of those written questions that have been tabled so that we don't have to reset the starting date for those questions. I would like to have unanimous consent to make that motion.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): The honourable member from Newmarket–Aurora seeks unanimous consent to carry over the questions. Agreed? I heard a no.

NOTICE OF DISSATISFACTION

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Pursuant to standing order 38(a), the member from Thornhill has given notice of his dissatisfaction with the answer to his question given by the Minister of Economic Development and Trade concerning Grant Forest Products and Ontario's forest industry. This matter will be debated today at 6 p.m.

There being no deferred votes, this House stands recessed until 3 p.m.

The House recessed from 1139 to 1500.

ESTIMATES

Hon. Monique M. Smith: I have a message from the Honourable David Onley, the Lieutenant Governor, signed by his own hand.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): The Lieutenant Governor transmits estimates of certain sums required for the services of the province for the year ending March 31, 2010, and recommends them to the Legislative Assembly. Dated March 2, 2010.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

AIR QUALITY

Mr. Ted Chudleigh: I'd like to thank the residents of Oakville who came out today to protest on the front lawn

about the building of a power plant in their community. There were young people there. There were old people there. There were all kinds of residents of Oakville there, including Pinball Clemens, whom I was very pleased to see. There were over 1,200 people on a Tuesday at noon, and they filled the front lawn. They were wondering why you would build a power plant of this magnitude that is three kilometres from 11,000 homes, 16 schools, five seniors' homes and eight daycare centres. In the middle of all this, there's going to be a power plant.

Along with the building of the power plant, there's a serious question about the air quality. The Clarkson-Oakville airshed is already seriously impacted with the highest incidence of childhood respiratory diseases in the province. An individual environmental assessment has not been done on this site. How this government can claim to be environmentally sensitive without an individual environmental assessment of this plant—the need for power is somewhat questioned.

Minister Duguid said he would listen to the people of Oakville, but he wasn't there to hear them, and he's continuing not to hear them.

The people of Oakville are to be congratulated.

PUBLIC SKATING EVENTS

Mr. Bob Delaney: In January, I shared a public skate with an estimated 250 constituents in western Mississauga at the Vic Johnston arena in the heart of Streetsville.

Co-sponsored with my federal counterpart, member of Parliament Bonnie Crombie, constituents were invited to a free skate and hot chocolate and cookies. As some of my legislative colleagues know, I'm celebrating my 50th season of playing hockey. It's very special to lace up the blades and skate with residents, young and old.

The public skate promoted healthy activity for families in the area and encouraged our constituents to meet face to face with their federal and provincial representatives. In fact, the provincial skate was such a success that we decided to host an encore event this month. Along with Mississauga Ward 9 city councillor, Pat Saito, I'm going to host another family skate on Sunday, March 21, from 2 to 4:30 p.m. at Meadowvale 4 Rinks at Turner Valley Road, near Mississauga Road and Erin Mills Parkway.

I invite our western Mississauga residents to join Councillor Saito and me at Meadowvale 4 Rinks. You don't have to be a good skater; you just have to come out. And if you do want to come out and skate, Councillor Saito and I would be very pleased to come and have a skate with you.

ONTARIO BUDGET

Mr. John O'Toole: I'm pleased to rise and bring to the attention of this House some of the great work of Clarington's voice of business for the 2010 budget. Sheila Hall, executive director of the board, has shared with me the Clarington Board of Trade's pre-budget

submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs—and I congratulate her on making that presentation.

The Clarington Board of Trade represents about 360 businesses in my riding of Durham. Its president is Elaine Garnett. The businesses, along with me, are advocating for completion of the 407 and new-build nuclear, as well as supporting serviced lands to support investments in Ontario in that region. That is why one of the budget priorities for the Clarington Board of Trade is to develop programs to support the serving of employment lands and, indeed, jobs. The board of trade is optimistic that additional serviced land will build on existing infrastructure investments and further strengthen the local economy.

I would urge the McGuinty government to take the advice of the Clarington Board of Trade on this initiative. That will create jobs and investments not only in Clarington, but, indeed, throughout Ontario.

I've always found that working with small business to help grow the economy is the way to go, and I don't think the Premier is listening to small business any longer. All he's listening to are Samsung and other foreign investments. I'm disappointed. Listen up to the—

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you.

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Michael A. Brown: I rise today to bring the attention of the House to more good news for Algoma-Manitoulin, particularly the communities of Blind River and Elliot Lake.

Less than two weeks ago, the community of Blind River celebrated a rural economic development, or RED, program grant of \$41,000. The money goes to support the Blind River health centre to develop and administer a registered practical nursing program, recruit and retain RPNs and assist local personal support workers who wish to transition to nursing. As Mary Ellen Luukkonen, the chief nursing officer of the hospital, said, “We warmly welcome the province and Sault College as partners in helping develop a local solution to our nursing shortage.”

Last Thursday, I joined Todd Stencil of the chamber of commerce; Dan Gagnon of the city of Elliot Lake; Sean Hurd from the Elliot Lake and North Shore Corporation for Business Development; and Bob Sjonnesen from the Ministry of Northern Development, Mines and Forestry in announcing \$165,000 from the RED program. This project builds on a three-year commitment from the community and the province to deliver a market-driven, comprehensive downtown revitalization project.

Congratulations to both communities, and special thanks to the Honourable Carol Mitchell, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, for her support of these projects.

HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE

Mr. Toby Barrett: I've contacted the Ministry of Transportation regarding the deplorable conditions

residents of Haldimand-Norfolk have been forced to endure while driving on provincial Highway 6 between Jarvis and Port Dover. I'd like to make members aware of what has become rural road rage in my area.

I've lived on Cockshutt Road—it's just to the west of Highway 6—all my life so far. In 1957, I watched Cockshutt Road get redone and paved, and some 50 years later, it's holding up pretty well. However, in 1994 we were NDP locally and provincially. I also recall the repaving job of provincial Highway 6 between Jarvis and Port Dover.

My question: What happened? The road is collapsing. We'd like to know what's under that asphalt. As an editorial in the recent edition of the Port Dover Maple Leaf cites, “If highways had a theme song, ‘Shake, Rattle and Roll’ would be a fitting condemnation of the 15-kilometre stretch of highway.”

Or as someone else put forward in a letter to the editor, it has “heaved so much in the last few years that it is like driving on speed bumps doing 80 kilometres per hour.”

I will just reiterate my plea to the Legislature. This was a question in the letter to the editor: “Am I asking too much for the road to be fixed?”

FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN

Mr. Bill Mauro: I am happy to note that four- and five-year-old students in my riding will start full-day kindergarten this September. It's of course a completely voluntary program, and parents will have the opportunity or choice to enrol their children if they so choose.

A number of schools will be offering this program to the children in my community, and they are among the 35,000 young students in communities all across Ontario who will be enrolled in this program this fall.

All of these students will receive a very high-quality early learning program. It has been proven in studies to provide many long-term benefits in cognitive and social skills. Students who participate in early learning programs are more likely to succeed in their education, graduate, earn a post-secondary degree and have successful careers.

1510

I'm very excited about this, and I can tell you that in my riding, there are a number of schools that will be offering the program: McKellar Park in Thunder Bay, Lakehead District School Board; Sherbrooke school, the same school board; Westmount in Thunder Bay—Atikokan, the same school board; St. Patrick's School in Atikokan, part of the Northwest Catholic District School Board; also in Atikokan, the North Star Community School, and that's part of the Rainy River District School Board; and finally, also back in Thunder Bay—Atikokan, is St. Vincent School, a school that I had the opportunity to attend many years ago when I had a great principal there by the name of John Schelling. I was very fortunate to have had that opportunity.

So I had two great events in Thunder Bay announcing this, and I look forward to the beginning of this program this fall.

ENERGY RETAILERS

Mrs. Donna H. Cansfield: I'm pleased to rise today in the House to welcome Ontario's leading energy retailers to Queen's Park. Direct Energy, Just Energy, Summit Energy and Superior Energy provide employment to over 3,500 people directly in Ontario and create hundreds of spinoff green energy jobs.

They are here today to communicate to government their shared interest in Ontario's culture of conservation, along with their desire to ensure that consumer protection and choice is significantly enhanced in Ontario. These energy retailers see the Ontario market as a key part of the North American portfolio. They want to ensure a vibrant market in Ontario and one that is conducive to further investments.

A reception is being held today from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. in committee room 228, and all MPPs are invited to attend this event to learn about the energy retail sector's consumer protection initiatives, their contribution to the success of Ontario's economy, along with their desire to grow supports for a very green future for the people of Ontario.

OLYMPIC ATHLETES

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: It's with great enthusiasm and pride that I rise today to salute and thank our Canadian Olympic athletes. What an incredible two weeks we had through the Vancouver 2010 Olympics, where we really demonstrated to the world how great Canada is and how superb our athletes are.

It was just an incredible event, and I think the result was clear: We won 14 gold medals as a nation, the most any country has ever won, and we have gained a new sense of pride as Canadians.

I think the game on Sunday will be in our memories for a very, very long time. What a nail-biter game. We're proud of our Canadian men's Olympic hockey team for bringing that gold at that last minute.

There were 48 members from Ontario as part of Team Canada. As many of the members know, I have a bias towards Ottawa, so I do want to recognize some of the athletes from Ottawa who were great in these Olympics: John Morris, who is an Ottawa native, won the gold medal in men's curling; Dan Boyle, who was part of the gold-medal men's hockey team; Kristina Groves, who won two medals, a silver medal and a bronze medal, in long-track speed skating; also, we had Robin Clegg from Ottawa—whose mother, Cindy Clegg, is a very good friend of mine—in biathlon; Perianne Jones of Almonte; and Patrick Biggs of Orléans.

Our heartiest congratulations to the whole Canadian Olympic team. Thank you very much for making us proud.

TAXATION

Mr. Howard Hampton: Virtually every week, we hear members of the McGuinty government talk about this government's new relationship with First Nations.

I recently had the opportunity to spend some time with a number of First Nations communities in my constituency, and they continue to ask about this so-called new relationship. They, in particular, ask how a government could sign an agreement in the backroom to create the harmonized sales tax and, in process, take away the point-of-sale exemption from First Nations—without any consultation, without any notice, without any discussion and without any dialogue whatsoever with First Nations.

Then, when they find that a \$100 tank of gas will now become \$113 with the HST, a \$300 hydro bill will become a \$339 hydro bill with the HST, vitamins at \$50 will become vitamins at \$56.50 with the HST, and \$200 to have your vehicle towed will become \$226 with the HST. First Nations who live on limited incomes wonder, how could any government do this to them with no dialogue, no discussion, no consultation, and then have the nerve to stand up and boast about a new relationship with First Nations?

PETITIONS

ELMVALE DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL

Mr. Jim Wilson: “To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

“Whereas Elmvale District High School is an important part of the community of Elmvale and surrounding area; and

“Whereas the school is widely recognized as having high educational requirements and is well known for producing exceptional graduates who have gone on to work as professionals in health care, agriculture, community safety, the trades and many other fields that give back to the community; and

“Whereas Dalton McGuinty promised during the 2007 election that he would keep rural schools open when he declared that ‘Rural schools help keep communities strong, which is why we're not only committed to keeping them open—but strengthening them’; and

“Whereas Dalton McGuinty found \$12 million to keep school swimming pools open in Toronto but hasn't found any money to keep an actual rural school open in Elmvale;

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

“That the Minister of Education support the citizens of Elmvale and flow funding to the local school board so that Elmvale District High School can remain open to serve the vibrant community of Elmvale and surrounding area.”

I will sign this petition and I agree with it.

SOUND BARRIERS

Mr. Monte Kwinter: I have a petition to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

"Whereas we, residents of the affected neighbourhood, respectfully request the Legislative Assembly take the action necessary to replace the sound barrier on the north side of Highway 401 from the westbound entrance of Highway 401 to approximately the intersection of Ridley Boulevard and Delhi Avenue, Toronto.

"The barriers immediately east and west of our neighbourhood have been replaced, providing our neighbours additional quiet enjoyment. We request that we be afforded the same consideration. The highway noise continues to increase and it has been proven that the existing steel barriers do not provide the same noise reduction qualities as new currently available barrier systems.

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

"To replace the existing steel barriers with a new noise-reducing barrier."

I have affixed my signature to this petition.

POWER PLANT

Mr. Ted Chudleigh: I have a petition to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, and it's written out by hand. It's the first petition I've had that has been written out by hand, and it's in the proper form.

"Whereas the province of Ontario, through the Ontario Energy Board, has selected a location for a gas-fired electrical generating power station within three kilometres of 16 schools and more than 11,000 homes; and

"Whereas the Oakville-Clarkson airshed is already one of the most polluted in Canada; and

"Whereas no independent environmental assessment has been completed for this proposed building location; and

"Whereas Ontario has experienced a significant reduction in demand for electrical power; and

"Whereas a recent accident at a power plant in Connecticut demonstrated the dangers that nearby residents face;

"We, the undersigned, petition the government of Ontario to immediately rescind the existing plan to build a power plant at or near the current planned location on lands ... on Royal Windsor Drive in Oakville and initiate a complete review of area power needs and potential building sites, including environmental assessments and a realistic assessment of required danger zone buffer areas."

It's signed by Marie-Anne Neumayer, and I want to thank her for taking the time to send that in. As I agree with the petition, I will sign it and pass it to my page, Julia.

RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGERY

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: I am tabling this petition on behalf of the Minister of Revenue, the MPP for Perth-Wellington.

"To the Legislative Assembly of Ontario:

"Whereas to cover the cost of reconstructive surgery when a patient has had extreme weight loss after bariatric surgery, as these surgeries are not covered under OHIP and are at present considered cosmetic;

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

"That when patients have bariatric surgery and lose the required amount of weight and keep it off, they also have another set of health care issues that can be very costly to take care of. As these individuals lose weight, they end up with so much excess skin and fat pockets that no amount of exercise will take care of it. This excess skin and folds in the skin can cause anything from boils, cysts, skin infections and more that have to be cared for constantly in hospital emergency rooms and cared for by agencies like community care access centres. If preventative reconstructive surgeries are not approved, the constant medical care will cost the taxpayer much more money as said health issues would cost over time."

I affix my signature and send this petition to the table via page Julian.

1520

TAXATION

Mr. John O'Toole: I'm pleased to present a petition from the riding of Durham, which reads as follows:

"Whereas Premier Dalton McGuinty is increasing taxes yet again with his new 13% combined sales tax, at a time when families and businesses can least afford it;

"Whereas by 2010, Dalton McGuinty's new tax will increase the cost of goods and services that families and businesses buy"—and use—"every day. A few examples include: coffee, newspapers and magazines; gas for the car, home heating oil and electricity; haircuts, dry cleaning and personal grooming"—personal care—"home renovations and home services; veterinary care and pet care; legal services, the sale of resale homes, and funeral arrangements," and the list goes on, and many of the Liberals now are angry about it—they're barking, anyway;

"Whereas Dalton McGuinty promised he wouldn't raise taxes in the 2003 election. However, in 2004, he brought in" the dreaded health tax, which now costs up to \$900 per individual, and now he is going to raise your taxes again;

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

"That the Dalton McGuinty government wake up to Ontario's current economic reality and stop raising taxes" on families in Ontario and the businesses in Ontario.

I'm pleased to sign and support this and present it to the constituent Quinton in his second-last week here at Queen's Park.

LUPUS

Mr. Bob Delaney: I'm pleased to read this petition on behalf of my colleague and seatmate, the member for

Niagara Falls. I especially want to thank Grace Bennett and Sharon Fedor for having gathered some of the signatures on his particular petition. It's addressed to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario and it reads as follows:

"Whereas systemic lupus erythematosus is under-recognized as a global health problem by the public, health professionals and governments, driving the need for greater awareness; and

"Whereas medical research on lupus and efforts to develop safer and more effective therapies for the disease are underfunded in comparison with diseases of comparable magnitude and severity; and

"Whereas no new safe and effective drugs for lupus have been introduced in more than 40 years. Current drugs for lupus are very toxic and can cause other life-threatening health problems that can be worse than the primary disease;

"We, the undersigned, hereby petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to assist financially with media campaigns to bring about knowledge of systemic lupus erythematosus and the signs and symptoms of this disease to all citizens of Ontario.

"We further petition the Legislative Assembly of Ontario to provide funding for research currently being undertaken in lupus clinics throughout Ontario."

On behalf of the member for Niagara Falls, I'm pleased to affix my signature to this petition and to ask page Amy to carry it for me.

TAXATION

Mr. Jim Wilson: I want to thank Cathy Scott of Wasaga Beach for sending this petition to me.

"Whereas the hard-working residents of Simcoe–Grey do not want a harmonized sales tax (HST) that will raise the cost of goods and services they use every day; and

"Whereas the 13% blended sales tax will cause everyone to pay more for, to name just a few, gasoline for their cars, heat, telephone, cable and Internet services for their homes, house sales over \$400,000, fast food ... electricity, newspapers, magazines, stamps, theatre admissions, footwear less than \$30, home renovations, gym fees, audio books for the blind, funeral services, snowplowing, air conditioning repairs, commercial property rentals, real estate commissions, dry cleaning, car washes, manicures, Energy Star appliances, vet bills, bus fares, golf fees, arena ice rentals, moving vans, grass cutting, furnace repairs, domestic air travel, train fares, tobacco, bicycles and legal services; and

"Whereas the blended sales tax will affect everyone in the province: seniors, students, families and low-income Ontarians;

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

"That the McGuinty Liberal government not increase taxes for Ontario consumers."

I will sign that petition and I agree with it.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ELECTION STATUTE LAW AMENDMENT ACT, 2010

LOI DE 2010 MODIFIANT DES LOIS EN CE QUI CONCERNE LES ÉLECTIONS

Resuming the debate adjourned on February 16, 2010, on the motion for second reading of Bill 231, An Act to amend the Election Act and the Election Finances Act / *Projet de loi 231, Loi modifiant la Loi électorale et la Loi sur le financement des élections.*

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Further debate? The member for Beaches–East York.

Mr. Michael Prue: Another one of these bifurcated debates—this time, I have exactly half the time left.

Interjections.

Mr. Michael Prue: Yes. I'm pleased that my colleagues in the Progressive Conservative Party appreciate the use of the word.

On the last occasion, I had an opportunity to talk about what was good with the bill and what was bad with the bill, and today I hope to continue with what has been left out of the bill, which is very unfortunate.

Just to reiterate, I talked about the three things contained within the body of the bill that I thought were actually quite helpful, quite good and quite forward thinking. Those were: the special ballots that are going to be allowed in order that people will have an opportunity to vote by way of the special ballot; the opportunity for students to vote not only where they're going to school, but in their home ridings—I told the story about my having to get on a train in Ottawa many years ago and come to Toronto in order not to miss my first vote, which was very special and important to me, and the expense of it all in those days. The third one is the depoliticizing of the poll workers, which I think is long overdue. Gone are those days of government largesse—or the opposition party, if you're lucky enough to have run second in a particular riding, to appoint poll workers. I think we have come to expect a level of expertise and competence that we require of people, and that it is about time people were chosen on the basis of their ability, as opposed to the party they have supported in the past.

Then I went on after that to talk about some of the things I thought were missing, although they were discussed during the special committee known as the Sorbara committee: things like municipalities not being included; things like the minister not changing the rules by which corporations and unions are allowed to give a great deal of their funding; things like the province of Ontario falling way behind other jurisdictions, particularly the federal jurisdiction, the Quebec and Manitoba jurisdictions, which give public financing for municipalities. I went on to talk about real-time disclosure and how that is not happening and how some parties, particularly the government party, funnel money through riding associations so that the disclosure does not have to take place in real time.

Oh, I see my friend the member from Vaughan is here. My goodness. He has arrived.

I talked about the citizens' juries and the farcical machinations they had to go through in the most recent vote on changing the electoral rules in the province of Ontario and the first-past-the-post system—a 60% vote was necessary, plus 50% in at least 64 ridings—how very few other jurisdictions around the world do that. We recognize “one member, one vote,” we recognize that the majority rules, but impossible conditions are put down here when citizens come up with a good idea.

I closed by talking a little more about some of the difficulties the government had in not implementing everything that was before the Sorbara committee.

On the last occasion, I promised to spend about a half-hour talking about the last disappointment that I had, and that is around the whole issue of disabilities. We know that a great many more than a million people in the province of Ontario list themselves as having a disability. Whether that is caused from age, infirmity or birth, they have a disability. They ask merely that they be accommodated, so that they can enjoy the same benefits and privileges of every other citizen in this province. They don't want to be special, but they do recognize that from time to time they are going to need accommodation so they can have equality. What they really are asking for in the end is to enjoy the same rights as everyone else. It isn't enough in this bill to simply say that a citizen who is disabled can vote in an advance poll. That is not enough. We know if that was all that citizens had to do, every one of our citizens would vote in an advance poll. But that's not what happens, and there's a very good reason for that.

1530

Citizens and electors want to be able to watch what is happening in the political process, right up until the very end. Oftentimes, because of the conflicting messages that they're getting or because sometimes it takes a while to get the literature from door to door, an opportunity to meet the candidate or an opportunity to go to an all-candidates' meeting, it literally takes them from the time the election is called to 28 days later to make up their minds.

For those people who have made up their mind in advance, of course an advance poll is good. For those who have no other condition and have to do an advance poll because they're leaving the country or because they're not otherwise available on election day, of course an advance poll is a good thing. But the majority of citizens want to vote on election day. They want to feel part of the history and of the process of actually voting.

We have not done enough in this bill to accommodate people with disabilities. They are very bitter, some of them, about what is not contained in the body of this bill and at the way they were treated, both in the committee and when the issue was put before the appropriate minister.

To go on, this bill does not accomplish what the disabilities community is expecting to have. I have letters

here that were sent to all three parties from ARCH, from the Canadian Hearing Society and, most importantly, I think, in the circumstances of the bill, from David Lepofsky, who is the chair of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance. They are saying quite convincingly and very strongly that they do not believe that this bill accommodates the needs of the disabled community.

They talk with some real power about what happened in the by-election in Toronto Centre. We know, if you read the local newspapers, that on that day in February of the Toronto Centre by-election, some of the polls were not accessible to people with disabilities. One person in a wheelchair had to be carried down the stairs when they arrived to vote. Thankfully, that person was more than happy to be accommodated in that way, although I am sure that that would not have been the first choice. I am sure that there was a certain degree of angst and trouble about having to be carried into a polling station and not being able to get there of your own strength, your own volition, or about the accommodation that should have been there, either a ramp or an elevator. If it was truly to be accessible, that was not going to happen. I know that David Lepofsky wrote to the government and said that this has to be the very last election in which such things are not done.

It is possible to accommodate people in wheelchairs. It is possible to accommodate the deaf and hard-of-hearing. It is possible to accommodate those who do not have good vision or who are blind. It is possible to accommodate all manner of disabilities, whether visible or invisible. But there has to be a commitment from the government to do so. There has to be a legislative effect that will make it possible. This bill does not contain that. This bill and the committee that saw it, the Sorbara committee, did not set their minds to doing this, to going through this.

I'm going to rely here in great part on the letter from Mr. Lepofsky. The first thing he said was that there was no consultation with the Ontario government. He writes to the Honourable Madeleine Meilleur on February 8, 2010, and outlines in his letter precisely what did not happen. “Since the 2007 election, we have repeatedly offered to work with the Ontario government on implementing this commitment. There is no reason why the next municipal elections in 2010 and the next provincial elections in 2011 could not be barrier-free for voters and candidates with disabilities. The Ontario government has had ample time to address this.”

Of course, he is absolutely right. This government has known for months, this government has known for years, that it intended to take action and present a bill such as Bill 231. There has been little or no effort made to accommodate people with disabilities. If there had been, we would not have had the fiasco of Toronto Centre occur. It would not have happened. But it did, which means that Mr. Lepofsky is absolutely right: The Ontario government has not had the kind of consultation process with the disabilities community to make sure that every-

thing is barrier-free and everything is possible for persons with disabilities.

Again, I have to state, and as strongly as I can, they are not looking for something extra. They are looking to have the same rights. All they require is a little accommodation to do so. They have the same rights to show up in the polling station to cast their vote, and they shouldn't have to be carried down a set of stairs when they show up in a wheelchair or a walker unable to accommodate themselves.

Mr. Lepofsky goes on to talk about passing the buck and how this particular committee, the Sorbara committee, attempted to pass the buck when they tried to appear before them. I quote again from his letter: "On April 28, 2009, we appeared before the Select Committee on Elections. Regrettably, after receiving our input, that committee's report did not adopt many of our recommendations. Once that select committee reported, we asked you with whom we should deal to address this issue. In your August 13, 2009, letter to us, you referred us to MPP Greg Sorbara, who chaired the Legislature's Select Committee on Elections. However, as we told your office, Mr. Sorbara had previously told us that he does not have lead responsibility for this, and that after his select committee had submitted its report (which it had rendered in June 2009), it would be up to the government to decide what it will do to achieve accessible elections for voters and candidates with disabilities."

There you go: People with disabilities come before the government and ask to get something done. They are referred in turn to the Sorbara select committee, and they are told by the Sorbara select committee that they have to go back to the government, and then, "Oh, by the way, all the time frames have been over, and it is not possible for it to happen." I think that they have every right to feel aggrieved. I think they have every right to think that no one is paying attention to their issues.

They write again for the third time that there is no input; they have had no input in the legislation. They tried time and again to meet with government members and with bureaucrats who work at Queen's Park. They tried to meet so that the questions and the things they wanted to raise would be reflected in the legislation. Mr. Lepofsky, who is well known and often saluted and introduced in the House by my Liberal colleagues across the way, tried to be invited. He tried to participate. He tried to get his views known and the views of the disabled community, but he was rebuffed at every stage.

I go on to quote his letter: "In December 2009, we were surprised to learn via the Internet that your government introduced Bill 231 into the Legislature, to reform the Ontario election process, including addressing disability accessibility issues. After your government received the June 2009 report of the Select Committee on Elections and received word that we were not happy with how it addressed disability issues, no one in your government consulted us on the preparation of this legislation. This was a dramatic departure from your government's consulting us on various disability accessibility issues."

I do remember Mr. Lepofsky coming before this House. I do remember him coming to committee. I do remember him talking about the accessibility that he had had to the government under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. I remember that he was quite laudatory in terms of how the government listened to the issues. He was quite laudatory of how his input was welcomed and part of the legislation. But it's quite clear that, in the preparation of this bill, he was not consulted. His group was not consulted. People with disabilities were not consulted.

I don't know how the government with a straight face can stand there, as some of the members have, and say, "This is all well and good; we're going to have special ballots," as if that is going to solve the problem. How is it going to solve the problem for people who want to fully participate in the democratic process in the way that every citizen can and does? How is it going to accommodate them to vote on election day? How is it going to accommodate them to get to the polls? This has not been answered and no one has consulted with Mr. Lepofsky or anyone else in the disabled community to find out what their input and their views are.

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I think the government has failed miserably when it comes to dealing with disability issues on this particular file. I know that Mr. Lepofsky and others have seen the bill, and they are asking for full public consultation if and when this goes to committee. I can only support that they be listened to. I can only support that this bill be expanded to include a whole section on how the disabled community is to be accommodated to make sure that they have the full rights of every citizen. It is important that they vote. It is important that their views be known, that their candidates be supported and that they have the same right as everyone else. To disallow them would be a huge disservice to all Ontarians.

The disabilities community is asking for three very realistic things. At the outset, they are demanding that the fiasco of February 4, 2010, in the Toronto Centre by-election not be repeated. But they are asking, in order for that not to be repeated, that three things happen. They're asking, first of all, that all barriers be removed in provincial elections; secondly, they are asking that the government use its power to legislate that all barriers be removed in municipal elections; and thirdly, and I think most importantly, they are asking that there be a monitoring and enforcement of the act and of the laws that they don't see here, when and if it is passed.

They are asking as well, in conjunction with that, that the government of Ontario release all of the existing research that has been made available to the bureaucrats and to the ministry to the disabled community, and particularly, if the government of Ontario has that research, which was made available from the United States, that it be released. Because we know that, after the fiasco of the hanging chads in the United States, there was a great deal of consternation and upset that people who were disabled were denied votes, and that the federal government of

that country—of that jurisdiction—has spent millions upon millions of dollars to make sure that the disabled community in the United States has full access to vote. They also want to have a look at some of that information, and I think it's reasonable for them to request it and reasonable for the government, if they have that information, to make it available to Ontarians. Surely, if the government was concerned about how to make elections more open and democratic and available to people with disabilities, they would have that somewhere in a dusty tome or two hanging around in their office.

They are asking, very importantly, that there be public hearings, because, to date, there have not been public hearings, and I want to go back to that. Should this bill pass second reading and be sent for third, then I would think it incumbent upon the government to hold public hearings and to make those public hearings freely accessible. I know they're accessible if they're held in this building, but if they are to travel outside of Toronto, to make sure that they are accessible in every place that it goes. It is not good enough to say that you're going to be holding a hearing in North Bay or in Vaughan or in Sudbury or in Oakville, or—I'm just looking at members who are present here from out of town, from, I don't know, Chatham way. It's not good enough to just say that you're going to be holding those hearings if you cannot ensure that they are accessible to the people of those communities. They are asking for that.

Again, to quote Mr. Lepofsky about the public hearings—and I want to talk from his letter again. He goes back and he says the following: “As indicated in our December 18, 2009 letter to you, the Premier and the municipal affairs minister, we ask you to commit as soon as possible on behalf of your government to holding full, open and accessible public hearings on Bill 231. These public hearings are needed to enable the disability community to have their voices heard at the Legislature on this bill.”

He goes on to say: “The need for your government to move promptly and effectively on this issue is reinforced by the troubling use of an inaccessible polling station during the February 4, 2010 Toronto by-election. We seek your government's leadership by condemning that incident, and by ensuring that Bill 231 includes provisions that will ensure that this never happens again.” They close the letter, “We are writing to both opposition parties to seek their support for public hearings on Bill 231, and for strong amendments to ensure fully accessible municipal and provincial elections.” It's signed:

“David Lepofsky CM, O.Ont.

“Chair, AODA Alliance.”

Copies were sent to everyone, so me standing up here now—this should not be a surprise to the government. You have had this letter for a long time. It was sent to you, to the opposition and to us in the third party. I am standing here, though, as the NDP disabilities critic, to again make the strongest possible case that this be included in the legislation. Of what value is the legislation if all citizens cannot benefit from it? If only some citizens can benefit from it, then it is not good enough.

We have, as I said, more than a million people in the province who list that they have some form of disability. We need to make sure that they have the full rights of citizens of this province and not one bit less, and if this government needs to take some time and hold full public consultations, so be it. If this government needs to take the time to go back and redraft those sections that have been left out—I was going to say inadvertently, but I don't think it was inadvertence; I think that there really wasn't the political will to do so—then go back and do it, because you have that obligation. Those citizens have the right to expect the same from this Legislature as any other citizen.

I would just like to close off, again, by going back to where I started from. I have been speaking for 50 minutes, and I haven't repeated myself once.

Interjections.

Mr. Michael Prue: I'm hearing some “ohs.”

I just want to go back and repeat where I started from. This bill is a modest bill. It does a couple of things right: It does have special ballots, it does give opportunities for students to vote in a couple of places—their home poll and their university or college poll—and it depoliticizes the process. But so much more needs to be done. It is not enough to simply introduce little tiny bills, piecemeal, one step at a time, some form of incrementalism. It is important to seize wholeheartedly what needs to be done, to go there and to do it.

This government has the option. You have the power. You have the authority. As an opposition member, I am merely asking that you listen to the debate that is going on out there, that you listen to what the opposition parties have to say, that you listen to the disabilities community, that you listen to those people who will be affected and that you take the necessary steps to hear from them and to make sure that they are accommodated in every way possible.

If that happens, then I would be pleased to support this bill. It's up to you whether or not it gets support from the other side, because if you do the right things, I'm sure all members of the House will accommodate by supporting it. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Bob Delaney: I'd like to thank the member for Beaches–East York for his observations on this particular bill. There's one provision in this bill that I particularly like. The member for Beaches–East York alluded to it; it's the depoliticizing of the process of the appointment of the Chief Electoral Officer.

Now, in the riding that I represent, the electoral officer who had been in place prior to my first election was a very capable lady. Not long after I was elected, I got a call: People were asking if I would say something nice about this person, who wanted to be reappointed. I thought to myself, “Why am I even involved in this?” In point of fact, she is a very competent, very nice person. I said, “I have no particular desire to be involved in this appointment, and I think you should appoint the person on merit.”

I feel much the same way about the idea of sending a list of potential deputy returning officers in my riding in to Elections Ontario. I mean, I did it. I did it because that was what was expected, but I would rather not. I would rather that the campaigns not be involved in the act of being the referee.

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So what this bill really does is say that Elections Ontario is an entity that exists apart from the political campaigns, which is exactly how it's supposed to be. We should, in an election, focus on doing the things that we're there to do. While we can get along to a greater or lesser degree for three years and change, in that last six months or so we put on our party colours, go out and talk about the things we want to do, the vision that we have for Ontario, and it's a very adversarial system.

I want to keep my best people for me. I grasp what this bill is trying to do. These are very much-needed reforms, and I look forward to the passage of this bill.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments.

Mr. John O'Toole: I appreciate the comments from the member from Beaches–East York and respect his dogged participation in the process as well.

His comments today, representing David Lepofsky in terms of persons needing to be accommodated—I think section 14 of the bill is clear. It says, “The Chief Electoral Officer is authorized to study methods of improving the voting process and facilitating voting by persons with disabilities. The studies may be conducted by commissioning research and reports, establishing advisory committees and holding conferences.”

In fact, each municipality has a pretty significant role in this. The municipal elections occurring this year have a disability advisory committee by law that gives them some advice, and I think they should work with the local community because it would be wrong to assume that the needs are the same all over the province. To be realistic, the accommodation should be as practical as possible, but is essential, so I comment on the member's role in advocating, and I want to compliment him for that.

But I think the bill fails in some respects as well. It has some good things, and it has some things that are missing. This whole idea of the family coalition funding of third party advertising is being addressed in other provinces. The Working Families Coalition is code language for the unions that supported Dalton McGuinty, and the organizational effects underneath that are something that challenges the very fundamentals of democracy itself. I think it should be strengthened there. We should all have the right to participate in it, and it fails in turning out the vote—this fixed-term election stuff that we're dealing with. The voting turnout has gone down since McGuinty took over. Although I'd like to support the thrust of this, there's not the content that I like.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments.

Mr. Peter Kormos: I listened carefully to the comments by my colleague Mr. Prue, who's the democratic

reform critic for the NDP. Mr. Prue, of course, is the member from Beaches–East York. I also listened carefully to the speech by the member for Willowdale, who gave an excellent discourse on this matter. I know because I spent more than a few hours with him. Howard Hampton was the member of the committee that considered these matters under the leadership, the helmsmanship of Mr. Sorbara, who is the member from Vaughan, you should recall, and who's here with us today and I'm sure will be addressing this bill.

I'm looking forward to speaking to it as well. I have some words for Mr. Zimmer and about him; similarly, some for and about Mr. Sorbara. I have some comments, I suspect, about the Premier and that gaggle of unelected who increasingly dominate policy development here at Queen's Park.

It's interesting because one of the first Premiers, in my experience, who centralized power in the Premier's office and who increasingly used unelected people was that former Liberal Premier, Bob Rae. Now we see his successor Liberal Premier, Dalton McGuinty, compounding those sins as if Mr. McGuinty were like Charlie McCarthy sitting on the knee with Edgar Bergen operating the strings.

I'll be speaking to this, I suppose, in around an hour's time. I hope people will have the—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Thank you. Questions and comments.

Mr. Lou Rinaldi: It's a pleasure to rise to make a couple of comments on the member from Beaches–East York in regard to Bill 231. I understand the opposition and third party positions. They're there to try to indicate those things that, as they would say, are missing or we need to do more about. The fact of the matter is, there was a select committee of all three political parties in this House that sat together and worked on this proposed piece of legislation to reform how we vote in this province of Ontario.

I'm going to focus a little bit on what the legislation does. The member from Beaches–East York focused on what the legislation doesn't do.

This legislation, if passed, will allow voters to vote by special ballot. Special ballots will enhance accessibility and convenience for many electors, including persons with disabilities, snowbirds, seniors, and military personnel. What this piece of legislation, if passed, will also do is allow post-secondary students, who in many cases don't go to post-secondary establishments within the riding where they live—I don't have any post-secondary places of education in my riding, so obviously, all my young voters would be somewhere else in Ontario. It was always a lot of work to try to get these kids either to come home or vote by proxy. But now, those young folks who shape our future will have the ability to vote either/or.

I hope we pass this piece of legislation.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): The member from Beaches–East York has up to two minutes to respond.

Mr. Michael Prue: I'd like to thank the members from Mississauga–Streetsville, from Durham, from Welland and from Northumberland–Quinte West for their comments.

In two minutes you don't have much time, but for the member from Streetsville, yes, I tried to speak as forcefully as I could, although not today—on the last occasion. I don't know whether the members had the opportunity to be here on two occasions, but I did try to speak forcefully and in support of the depoliticizing of the positions of people working on election day, particularly because we have come to the maturity that it's no longer seen as some kind of political plum job to be handed out by the party in power or the party that happened to have come second in the last election. It is time to recognize merit and professionalism, and so I welcome this.

Also, to the member from Northumberland–Quinte West, I don't think he was available to hear the beginning of my speech; only the last half. I spent some considerable time talking about special ballots and how they are an important improvement. I talked as well about students being able to vote in two locations, and gave the classic example of myself having to travel from Ottawa to Toronto to exercise my first franchise.

It's important that we looked at the special ballots, the students and the depoliticizing—all of those things. I'm quite conscious that they're good things, but I am on the opposition side; it is my job to tell the government where improvements can be made. Those improvements can be made particularly for people with disabilities, by treating them the same way that everyone else is treating them and by making the accommodation necessary so that they can vote on election day—not just in a special ballot, not just in advance, but on election day itself, at the polls like every other citizen. That's what I tried to emphasize today and that's what I hope the government had an opportunity to hear.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Further debate?

Mr. Greg Sorbara: Let me just say that for me, it's a real pleasure to be given the opportunity to speak for a few moments on this bill. In doing so, I really want to do three things: I want to talk a little bit about what this bill is really all about, I want to tell members of this House and people who are watching the proceedings how this bill came about, and finally, I want to answer some of the criticisms that have been launched, particularly from my friend from Beaches–East York.

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I had a lot to do with the creation of this bill. As you know, during the last campaign, our party made a commitment to take on some revisions to the Election Act and the Election Finances Act and the Boundaries Act as part of our overall platform for this Parliament. It was shortly after that election that this House struck a committee to begin that work. I had the honour of chairing that committee. It was an unusual committee, and I think it was a committee process that is to be commended because it worked very well. As you know, Speaker, mostly

in a majority Parliament the government side gets to have the largest number of votes on a committee. In practical terms, the government controls the committee. The government can outvote the opposition parties on committees, except in certain circumstances with certain committees under our rules of procedure. But this committee was different, and it was different for a purpose. It was different because it deals with rules that are, for want of a better expression, inside baseball. It's all about us and the rules and procedures that we use to renew this Parliament every four years. So it really relates to how we go about our business of campaigning and winning elections, and the rules that govern that. Because of that, I think the government wisely decided and this House wisely decided to strike a committee made up of a Chair—that was me—and one representative from each party. In this case, it was the member from Carleton–Mississippi Mills, the member from Welland—from whom apparently we are going to have to hear in a little bit—and the member from Willowdale, my colleague in the Liberal Party David Zimmer.

The government had no power to control the committee process. The fact is that any time the opposition parties wanted to outvote the government on this committee, they had the numbers; they could do it. It never happened once. There was a real consensus that the three political parties would get down to the business of looking at the Election Act and bringing forward recommendations that would ultimately result in a bill in this Legislature to improve the Election Act.

I made it perfectly clear, I think the government made it perfectly clear, and it was perfectly clear to the public and those who followed the process that we were not about to go about rewriting and reforming and transforming how we elect members to this Parliament. There were those who said, "We've got another chance to raise the question of proportional representation." There are others who said, "We have to figure out a way to make sure that other major electoral reforms were put into place." The fact is that it maybe disappointed a few—certainly not me. The mission was to do some modernization of the act—there were areas where the law was just dysfunctional—and some modernization, some housekeeping and some language that gave us a better system for the election that will take place in 2011.

I want to take a moment in my remarks to thank my colleagues on that committee: the member from Welland, the member from Carleton–Mississippi Mills and the member from Willowdale. I think we worked well together. We produced a report. That report was submitted to this House. The government then examined the report, and this bill is the product of that work.

What are we actually proposing in this legislation? What are some of the changes that will result if and when this bill is passed? Let's go through some of them. I'm going to repeat some of the ideas put forth by my friend from Beaches–East York. He mentioned getting rid of the politicization of the process. What does that mean? There were some really odd things in the old law, things that

required candidates, 10 days before voting, to submit their lists of who should go and work as poll clerks on election day.

Mr. Michael Prue: Bizarre.

Mr. Greg Sorbara: My friend says, “Bizarre,” and he’s absolutely right. That has been in there—in the old days, it was all about patronage and “I’m a candidate. I can get a job for my friends on election day. They’ll get \$10 for going to work the polls and maybe a beer at the end of the day,” even during Prohibition times. This thing remained in the act. It was really foolish, so we’ve taken that out.

More importantly, the act itself was very prescriptive, down to the number of people who needed to sit around each particular polling desk. It prescribed exactly what had to be done. It lacked flexibility, and in very many cases we’ve been able to address that issue and add flexibility and authority to the Chief Election Officer to do what makes sense on election day to make sure that the election is conducted properly and that people have easy access to the polls and are able to vote quickly and efficiently. There are a number of changes—I’m not going to go into all of them—to bring those changes about.

We also wanted to address specifically the issue of access to polling places by the disabled community. Now, my friend read into the record a number of comments, letters from my dear friend David Lepofsky. I’ve known David a very long time. I went to law school with David, one of the brightest people that walks this stretch of land that we call Ontario, a very bright man. From his days in law school until today, he has been one of the most articulate advocates for the disabled community that I’ve ever met, certainly, and that has ever served in any jurisdiction in Canada, perhaps North America.

The fact is that although our committee, made up of three parties, did not hold broad public hearings, our committee heard directly from David Lepofsky and the disabled community. Above and beyond that, I personally, as Chair of the committee, met on a number of occasions with David and with advocates from the community.

Am I surprised now that David is writing a letter saying, “Well, we didn’t get a chance to comment on the bill”? No, I’m not surprised at all—not a bit. His job as an advocate is to say, “It’s not enough.” I understand that. He’s doing what he needs to do and calling for broad public hearings. I understand that.

The good news is that, on this piece of legislation, there has been broad public consultation on the committee work and on the language of Bill 231. We have consulted broadly, and we have consulted fairly. We have consulted with political parties, and we have consulted with the disabled community.

Is this bill representative of everything that that community wanted? Certainly not. David made the point over and over to me, for example, that you’ve got to deal with the municipal voting as well: “You’re dealing with the

Elections Act. You guys should take on the work of reforming the Municipal Elections Act.” And if I said it once, I said to him 10 times, “David, we don’t have the authority to do that.” Our responsibility is simply the election laws that govern elections through this Parliament, so we were unable to do that.

But let’s look at what we actually did. Firstly, in a new, more permissive bill, a bill that gives more authority to the Chief Election Officer, an officer of this Legislature, this legislation directs him, on an ongoing basis, to make sure that everything that can reasonably be done to provide for voting by the disabled community is done, and there will be a regular process of review by the Chief Election Officer.

My friend from Beaches–East York talked about special ballots. That’s an amazing transformation from what was. In Canada, it’s not anything that’s really new, and let’s be fair; we stole the notion of special ballots from the federal government and we expanded it and made it even more reasonable and rational for voters who cannot get to the polls.

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In the old days, under the old act, if you were not able to get to the polls, you could exercise a proxy. We’ve gotten rid of proxies. You know why? Because they don’t work, they’re unfair and they take away from the disabled person the right to actually mark the ballot.

Some people ask, how does a proxy work? Well, I’m the Liberal candidate. I go to somebody’s apartment and I say, “You know what? You can’t get out to vote. Here, sign this and I’ll vote for you.” That voter doesn’t know whether the ballot was marked for the candidate that the voter wanted.

We’re scrapping that; we’re scrapping the proxy system. We’re bringing in special ballots so every voter in Ontario who feels like he or she cannot get to the poll to vote can have a ballot sent to that voter’s home. The voter can mark the ballot and get it to the returning officer so that the voter knows the ballot was marked in the way the voter wanted it to be marked. I think that’s a great reform, and I am glad to say that we have incorporated the federal process here into our own system and indeed improved upon it.

One other thing that we did, in redesigning or making recommendations for the design, was to ask ourselves what other jurisdictions in Ontario do, and in particular what the federal government does. Nothing upsets voters more than getting to the polls and finding out that the rules are different for the federal and the provincial systems of voting; it doesn’t make any sense to them. So wherever we could, we have made the Ontario Election Act in this bill reflect the standards that people know from voting in federal elections.

We have ended a number of silly provisions that no longer work. One of them is enumeration. I know my friends in the Conservative Party wanted to retain enumeration. In fact, in every election, my friends in the Conservative Party wanted everyone to be enumerated again. Remember those days when people would come

and knock on your door and say, “Who lives here? How many are 21? Do they want to get on the voters list?” Well, that maybe once worked, and it provided a lot of short-term work for people who were out of work, but the fact is that enumeration, in that model, meant that at six out of 10 homes there was no one home, and at two homes, people just didn’t want to answer the door; it was too late at night. So maybe you would get two out of 10.

We have incorporated, in this bill, mechanisms to make sure that we have the most accurate voting lists possible. We have made provisions to make sure that those accurate voting lists are available as quickly as possible and that they are available to candidates so that candidates can go about encountering the voters and identifying voters and preparing themselves for elections.

I want to say a couple of things about the changes that we’re making to the election financing act.

Way back when, this Parliament struck a committee that dramatically changed the way in which we finance election campaigns, and in my view, the rules have worked pretty well. We have a system of quasi-public financing. There are funds provided to every campaign and every political party, based on the number of voters in that area. We have a system that very carefully regulates the donation process. We have very strict limits on how much can be donated per candidate and per political party.

But there were a few anomalies, and in the context of modernization and housekeeping, we have made a few changes, or proposed a few changes, that I think will serve people well.

For example, it sounds foolish that we would even have to write it into a bill, but if you’re an individual, you are able to give to a political party by way of a credit card. Makes sense: Most of us pay for most of what we buy these days with credit or debit cards. But if you ran a small business and you wanted to make a contribution to Mike Colle’s riding or David Zimmer’s riding or Glen Murray’s riding, you couldn’t use a credit card, so we’ve changed that.

One other thing that I think might garner a little bit of press is that we’ve made a provision to allow people to make a gift to a political party in their wills. You couldn’t do that before. It’s not as if it’s going to change the world. I mean, yes, in writing my will, I would probably do that.

Mr. David Zimmer: Here, here.

Mr. Greg Sorbara: And I know David is going to do that. I’ve got a lot of blood, sweat and tears in this business of electoral politics; I believe in it strongly.

Mr. Peter Kormos: What about your organs?

Mr. Greg Sorbara: My friend from Welland says, “What about your organs?” That, too, but not in my will. Our friend George Smitherman made specific provisions to allow us to do that in another form. I’ll tell you, no political party would want my organs at the time that I leave this marvellous planet.

Mr. Peter Kormos: They can be rebuilt.

Mr. Greg Sorbara: My friend says they can be rebuilt. Well, in some cases that might be true, but in my case I wouldn’t have thought so.

We’re in the midst of second reading of a simple piece of legislation that is designed to modernize the Election Act and the Election Finances Act and do some house-keeping. It’s inside baseball. It’s about us. This is not going to change the plight of Ontarians who are out there looking to get a job because their factory has just closed down. There are a lot of problems out there, and mostly that’s what we deal with in this Parliament. Those are the important things. But there is an election coming up in October 2011. I don’t know about the other parties, but I know our party is starting to prepare ourselves to make sure we are prepared for that campaign: that up until that campaign we have been dealing with the issues that confront this province, and that when that campaign comes, we will have a set of proposals for the next Parliament that will ignite the imaginations of the people of this province. But you know something? In the interim, we have a little bit of work to do with those mechanisms that we use to get us there, and I think this bill does that.

In closing, I would like to thank a few people: once again, my colleagues in this House who sat on the Select Committee on Elections. I’d also like to thank our new Chief Electoral Officer, Greg Essensa. He’s an officer of this House. This upcoming general election will be his first. He has overseen three or four by-elections—

Interjection: Four or five.

Mr. Greg Sorbara: Yes, most of which have been very favourable to our side. That’s an aside; it’s not the major theme of this speech. Greg Essensa, I think, is just a real champion of fair and efficiently run elections, and we are very glad to have him.

Finally, although my name stands as Chair of the select committee, in all of the work that I’ve done, I’ve been assisted by my executive assistant, Sharon Laredo, who really does all the work in my office. I just have an opportunity to take credit every now and again.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this bill. I hope the House passes this rather quickly.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Jim Wilson: Just in response to the member from Vaughan, we’re gravely disappointed on this side of the House, at least the PC Party, by what’s not in this particular piece of legislation, and that’s dealing with third party advertising. I can understand why the Liberals didn’t deal with it: the Working Families Coalition, which has run in the last two elections, 2003 and 2007, third party advertising in favour of the Liberal Party only. As labour leader Buzz Hargrove said, the objective of the Working Families group was to “make sure the Tories don’t get elected here.”

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People at home will remember that in the 2003 campaign their TV ad said, “Not this time, Ernie,” referring to Premier Ernie Eves, and in the 2007 campaign it was,

“You decide.” They raised \$1.482 million, and they spent, on those primarily TV ads, \$1.084 million, almost \$1.085 million. Most of that money is recycled public money because it comes from unions who get contracts from the government. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers contributed \$9,720; Ontario Pipe Trades Council, \$400,000; International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, \$280,000—

Hon. Rick Bartolucci: They're a good group.

Mr. Jim Wilson: I'm sure they're excellent groups, but the fact of the matter is, these people get government money.

Other people that contributed: the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, \$100,000; International Union of Elevator Constructors, Local 90, \$7,000; the operating engineers, \$150,000—all unions that benefit from public money that shouldn't be allowed, through the back door, through third party advertising, to do what isn't allowed during the election campaign by political parties themselves. It's a way for the Liberal Party to benefit from \$1 million worth of advertising that should be accounted for through this type of legislation.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Peter Kormos: As I indicated earlier, I'm going to be speaking to this, I suspect at some point this afternoon. Folks will know that I was away in the latter part of 2009; I could mention that briefly, I suppose, when I have my modest 20 minutes. But it was fortunate that I got fixed up by the doctors and nurses and so on in time to get back here for February 15, when the House resumed after the Christmas break. I was grateful to have my Christmas break to do this recovery. I was grateful for the generous welcome that people gave me when they returned to the Legislature, and I want to extend that welcome today to Greg Sorbara on the occasion of his return to the Legislature. I hope that his recovery is as complete and gratifying and personally fulfilling as mine was. He deserves no less.

I'm going to talk to you, when I get a chance to talk, about serving on the Sorbara committee, because it was indeed a delight and an incredibly novel experience. It was unique, and I regret that there were but three of us amongst 107 who were able to join Mr. Sorbara, who of course was the standard-bearer for the Premier, and not inappropriately. He's one of the brightest people that the government has in its benches, and the government needs him now more than they ever have before. I suspect that they will be wooing him, and the seduction will acquire almost unsavoury qualities in the course of trying to bring Mr. Sorbara back into the matrimonial bed, if you will.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Thank you. Questions and comments?

Mr. Jean-Marc Lalonde: I want to congratulate, first, the chair of the committee, the member from Vaughan, and also all the members of this committee for their work and recommendations.

Even though we need to have better participation, I have to tell you that we are way ahead of many countries,

because I had the privilege to observe elections, as appointed by the United Nations, in Cambodia, in Congo, like the member on the other side of the House from Trinity-Spadina.

But over here, today, when we see some of the recommendations that were made by the committee—first of all, there won't be any more proxy vote. I've seen those proxies every election; they're flying around, and as soon as they can put their hand on that, they run to the polling station.

Also, one of the very important parts is in the nursing homes. In nursing homes today, we will have mobile voting services. When I say “mobile,” in the past they were working in the nursing home all day to get, sometimes, four to six votes, and immediately you knew who those people had voted for. This is not right. Today, with this new regulation that they're going to have in place—and by the way, the member for Beaches-East York mentioned that we should have had a consultation on it after the second reading. I'm sure that we will have public hearings on that, either here or on the road.

Once again, thank you to the whole committee that has come up with some recommendations.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Norm Miller: I'm pleased to have an opportunity to comment on the speech from the member from Vaughan on Bill 231. I would say that our party supports some aspects of the legislation, including the depoliticization of polling workers.

I do have a couple of questions for the member, and that has, first of all, to do with special ballots: how they're going to ensure, from the mail-in part of the special ballots, that there's no fraud involved. In many of my municipalities, they've had problems with spoiled ballots when they allowed mail-in ballots, so I'd ask how he's going to deal with that.

Also, I'd ask why the committee didn't put forward recommendation 26, as recommended by the member from Carleton-Mississippi Mills, to do with third party spending in Ontario. Specifically, I note that the member from Carleton-Mississippi Mills wrote in the dissenting report that the PC caucus endorses recommendation 26 of the committee to limit third party spending in Ontario and wants to make certain that this recommendation is implemented. He goes on to point out that other Canadian jurisdictions have enacted limits on third party spending. They range from a low of \$300 in Quebec to a high of \$183,000 federally. We have a situation, as the member from Simcoe-Grey outlined, where organizations like Working Families are spending millions of dollars in third party advertising outside of the election rules, and this is something that should be dealt with in this legislation.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): The member from Vaughan has up to two minutes to respond.

Mr. Greg Sorbara: I'll begin by going back to the comments of my friend from Simcoe-Grey. I think he was quoting Buzz Hargrove, who said that the purpose at

hand with third party advertisers was to make sure that the Tories didn't get elected in that election over two years ago. I'm not sure that's right. I think that the Tories did a good enough job all by themselves making sure that they didn't get elected. I don't think they needed help from anyone else.

I do appreciate, though, what my friend from Prescott-Russell had to say about some of the changes. He talked about elections elsewhere in the world. As we put this legislation ultimately into law, we ought to appreciate here in this jurisdiction that all of us, partisanship aside, are very dedicated to the notion of fair elections, where the democratic will of the people is ultimately the objective of conducting the elections. I think we move a few steps down that road with the changes that we have made here.

My friend from Parry Sound raises again the issue of third party expenditures during elections. I paid very close attention during the committee discussions as to what the member from Mississippi Mills had to say about it.

I want to end by saying that under the Election Act, the expenditures of all parties in elections must be reported and disclosed. That was the law. That has been the law up until now, and that will continue to be the law in this jurisdiction.

I hope this bill gets passed quickly.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Further debate?

Mr. John O'Toole: It's a pleasure to speak this afternoon on Bill 231. Just for the record, I did listen to the member from Vaughan. I'm only sorry that I wasn't given two minutes to respond to it, because he brought up a couple of very good points.

One of them was that Greg Essensa, the new elections officer for the province of Ontario, is an arm's-length officer of the Legislature. I feel that he should feel somewhat vulnerable since they fired the Ombudsman, as well as the Environmental Commissioner, Gord Miller. So I hope that this next election goes well or they'll fire him.

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Now, the bill we're dealing with—they are independent commissioners at the will of the government. But here's the deal: This bill has 20 different sections, and our critic, the member from Halton, Mr. Chudleigh, spoke to this bill on the 16th, and I think did a commendable job in outlining our party's position on a bill that, for the most part, we agree with.

Listening to the comments today and from the previous speaker, Mr. Lalonde from Glengarry-Prescott-Russell, it sounds like you're going to have public hearings. The member from Vaughan said that there was an all-party committee that struck a report, and that report is somewhat included in Bill 231, An Act to amend the Election Act and the Election Finances Act.

The points that we have trouble with—I think the member from Simcoe-Grey, in his response to Mr. Sorbara today, stated clearly one of our chief concerns

with the legislation as it is currently drafted. Now, we have great hope that they will listen to us and the public in public hearings and change their tack on this third party financing.

This is the deal here: In the last provincial election, all joking aside, there was an inordinate amount of third party advertising that was really unfair. Those resources weren't available to the NDP and they weren't available to the opposition party as well. We know that the war chest—the Liberal Party just had a huge fundraiser last week, at \$920 a plate, and they raised well over \$1 million—close to \$2 million. So they really do have the lobbyists and the consultants on the string. We see that with the Samsung deal. We see that with the new deal this morning in the media with the solar panels with Bosch. And we see it in many respects in the eHealth scandal and the OLG scandal. We see this ability to attract lobbyists, and those lobbyists are willing to buy tables at fundraisers, which is just an unbalanced approach to the fairness of democracy. I wouldn't want to compare them to US Vice-President Dick Cheney, but they're awfully close to the edge of an unacceptable role in democracy for lobbyists. This is what they're failing to do.

We call on them now to amend the act by removing the third party contributions. In the portion on electoral finance, it's quite acceptable to put an amendment forward—the member from Simcoe-Grey tried to, in all fairness, point that out—to improve the bill, because those same rules would apply to us, if and when we become government in 2011. So it's not something where we're trying to unweight the balance here. We're trying to find a way of moving forward in fairness.

The member from Simcoe-Grey's been here quite a while, I think since 1990, and he's been on both sides of the House. He's been a minister and an Acting Speaker of the Legislature, so he's a very fair-minded person. He took the time to get the election finance information, and we found out under this freedom of information that they got \$1.4 million—this group. This group was made up of—and we're not making it up to smear or malign anyone.

Interjection.

Mr. John O'Toole: The truth will set you free.

The Working Families Coalition is the group. You'll see their advertisements on television. It's basically paid advertising over and above the threshold that's allowed by any of the parties under election finances. This is another way of getting more airtime, unbalancing the public debate and discourse. And when you look into the details, it's not surprising that many of these people are finding themselves building the Windsor casino, the Windsor Energy Centre or other projects.

I don't want to impute motive. I just think that sometimes—we look here and we see the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 1739—\$9,700; the Ontario Pipe Trades Council—\$400,000; the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 353—\$280,000; the International Union of Elevator Cons-

tractors—\$33,000; the International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers, Local 721—\$50,000; the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 586—\$50,000; the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 1687—\$12,000. These are members' dues being used for questionable purposes, I'd say. For any members listening today, if you'd like to call, we will give you a complete list.

What we're asking for is for Mr. Sorbara and Mr. McGuinty to eliminate this unreasonable and unacceptable politicization of the democratic process in Bill 231. Many countries throughout the world are fighting this corruption, if you will, in elections. I would say to you that most provinces are taking the lead ahead of Ontario. This is being debated as we speak in Alberta, BC, Quebec and many other provinces. And regions of the United States are trying to get rid of this. Barack Obama is doing it, so it's got to be right. I mean, he's perfect.

I'm going to go on. The CAW—\$200,000. The auto sector is falling off the cliff, and they're giving \$200,000 to these campaign ads. You've seen them. One of them was quite good because they picked almost personal battles. They demean the leaders of the opposition parties. They characterize them as untrustworthy. I think the suspicious tone of these ads is reprehensible. It's contrary to the Canadian way of kindness and gentleness and inclusivity.

Laughter.

Mr. John O'Toole: Now they're laughing, see? This is where the smugness comes over, which I frequently hear in this House—that somehow, they're the only ones with integrity and compassion. It simply is not the case. I would not discredit any member; I would say that all members come with the right motives. This is one way you could make it better and fairer and more honest here.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation—\$100,000; the Canadian Ironworkers Political Action group—\$60,000. The list goes on.

In the limited time I have left, I want to mention a few more. Pollara strategic opinions: They're a polling company. Here they are, in for \$65,800. They're the ones the government contracts to do the polling data.

I'm speaking directly to the people of Ontario: What you're seeing here is the evidence. This is simply not right. It's not right for the Liberals, it's not right for the Conservatives, it's not right for the NDP. It's simply wrong. Get in line with the process. There are election rules: that they can contribute directly to the party, and the parties have spending limits. That's the issue here: In many cases, it's simply unfair.

When you look at the whole issue of the last provincial election—there was a referendum, and that referendum was to examine voting practices. There was a proportional representation ballot on there; mixed member proportional, I believe, was the actual question.

This is what we're striving for: fairness at the ballot box and fairness for all the parties, whether it's the Green Party or whatever party.

I look at Fair Vote Canada. Here's a good thing: It says, "Why don't politicians listen?" This is the bridge that I'm making to this bill. We're saying to eliminate this third party advertising. The cynicism you get is that you have Fair Vote Canada, in fact, running campaigns to break through the barrier of intolerance or being frustrated by the system that we have.

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We've got fixed-term elections now. There's more clarity about who can contribute and how much they can contribute to the political parties. But we've got to get rid of this fringe group.

The people in those unions are very credible people. Their leadership have determined that they don't want too many NDP in there and they don't want too many Conservatives, so all the money was spent purely on supporting Premier McGuinty. Now Premier McGuinty owes them. There's an IOU. There's an expectation—a direct link with some of these OLG scandals, the WSIB scandal, the eHealth scandal, the million dollars a day in consultants. There's a link here, and I'm saying we can fix it with this bill.

If they want to contribute to the parties, there's a contribution limit per company and per individual to the party and to the individual candidate. What could be more fair, more clear and more simple? On this side of the House, under our leader, Tim Hudak, we certainly want that amendment made.

For the most part, we're very much in support of some of the provisions under the bill. The special ballot procedure: We're in support of that.

Our member Mr. Chudleigh, when he was speaking on the 16th—it's worth looking up his comments because, as our critic, he took the time to review the 20 sections of this bill and listened to Mr. Sterling, who was our member on the select committee: a very seasoned person, I think, with 30 years here, who I believe has the right attitude towards democracy. He wouldn't be here that long if he wasn't trying to make it a better place for all of us and for all the people of Ontario.

I'm looking at one of the sections here. It's very important, this section. The member from Beaches—East York, I think, spoke quite passionately—I think it's important—about inclusivity, of extending the franchise of the ballot to everyone in whatever means that we can do it while those people can maintain their grace and presence, which is the special ballot.

Under section 114, the Chief Electoral Officer is authorized to study methods of improving the voting process and facilitating voting by persons with disabilities. The studies may be conducted by commissioned research and reports, establishing advisory committees and holding conferences. I think that empowers and mandates them, looking across Ontario at the different needs for the different regions of Ontario, whether it's in cities or rural, in small towns or large towns, and accommodating people with special needs, whether it's a sight problem or whatever other problems. I think that each of us, as members, would like that corrected and expanded to the extent necessary.

I think there's an extremely important flexibility, and even Mr. Sorbara, the member from Vaughan, in his remarks, made reference to that in his remarks, that he did want to get this right.

I think it's clear that the member from Glengarry–Prescott–Russell said that there would be hearings. I don't think we're going to change too much here today on the floor, but I can tell you there were three things. One of them Mr. Sorbara alluded to as well. There's an effort here, for those functional people within the ridings, to have federal and provincial rules in harmony. I think that makes practical sense, administrative sense, and is efficient as well.

What is missing, though, is that there was a change—and this is pretty important. The general public might not find this that important, but when constituents call my office in Durham, which I would encourage you to do, regardless of what riding you're in—if you happen to be more comfortable with any member, phone them. They'll usually advise the member who represents you, or at least get in touch with them electronically; we're all connected anyway.

This is the procedure here, where there was supposed to be what they call electoral boundaries. The boundary commission is not in here and probably should have been. What has happened here is, now they're starting to cherry-pick. This is important. Some of the members here are familiar with this as well. The member from Halton certainly is one of the examples. Some ridings in Ontario have about 60,000—some members. They tend to be in the north and they tend to be quite large, geographically. This presents a challenge of accessibility to the MPPs and their constituents. But there are provisions in our budgets for allowing them to travel more frequently, to get to these remote places. Mr. Brown as well, from Algoma–Manitoulin, is one example. He has served in cabinet and as Speaker, and he knows that it is harder for them. They have half as many constituents, often remotely, but they have specialized needs within those areas. Maybe it's a one-industry town; we heard about the lumber industry in such trouble.

Here's my point: We have other ridings, and Halton would be one, with 213,000 members. Are the constituents getting the same weighted vote in this Legislature? That's the issue on the boundaries commission. Those people with 200,000 have one vote, and the people with 60,000 get one vote, so their vote is worth almost twice as much, maybe four times as much.

Then you're looking at regionalization. The whole idea is that when my constituents call my office in the riding of Durham, they sometimes don't know if the policy is a federal issue under immigration, or it could be a birth certificate or passport. Often they just know the person, which is the way it should be, really. Politics is when there's an election; after that it's about customer service. When they call, we don't care if it's a federal issue, a provincial issue, a municipal issue, a school board issue or if it's not even the right riding.

We don't give them the bureaucratic shuffle like, "You've got the wrong number," or "You didn't know

your riding." We try to help them because, actually, each of us is paid by you, the voters of Ontario, so we all work for you. If you're not, you should be out of office in the next election, in October 2011. Deal with that.

But here's the point: If you had a boundaries commission, federal and provincial members, as they are by legislation that we passed, would have coterminous boundaries, federally and provincially. My federal member is the Honourable Bev Oda. She's the international development minister federally, a wonderful person. I work very closely with her, and I would say that if people call our office, we make sure that our federal member knows the issue. If they call our office, and it's a municipal issue—they often call us on Mr. Arthurs', the member from Scarborough-Pickering—

Interjection: A good member.

Mr. John O'Toole: A very good member. He was the mayor of Pickering. Lots of people would call him because they know and trust him. When they call his office, I'm sure his staff say, "Look, the nuclear plants, you should call John O'Toole's office. He's the member for Durham." But, in fact, he has nuclear plants in his riding. My point is that, in reality, members do try to work together.

This bill is successful in some of it and it fails in other parts. The failure part, as I have mentioned, is this: The boundaries commission as well as third party advertising are two unacceptable breaches of what is a very solid piece of legislation.

Our leader, Tim Hudak, has made it very clear to us that we want to move forward and support it in second reading. We want it to go to committee, and we feel confident that we can find all-party agreement to correct the parts of the bill that just don't work to make Ontario the best place and the fairest place, and to be the leader in this country in terms of doing the right thing.

I can only say that I won't try to bring up these third party contributions every time, but if it happens during the next election, I think those organizations' members should come to their leadership group and say, "Look, we simply can't do this. It's unacceptable behaviour." These ads demeaning and characterizing people falsely are simply unacceptable in Ontario today.

I ask the public here to contact your member or my office, and we will make your views known to get this bill to move forward and to do the right thing.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Peter Kormos: Once again, I listened oh, so carefully. This is not a trivial matter. I suspect I'm wont to say what I do, that this is a relatively modest proposal. In terms of the content of the bill, it is a modest proposal, but the whole proposition of electoral reform is far from modest. It is crucial.

I suppose one of the things that I find regrettable, and I'm going to speak to this, is that the committee felt itself somewhat restricted by the time frame that was imposed on it and by the scope—the limited, the very restricted, the very narrow scope—that was allowed at the end of

the day, notwithstanding the terms that were voted upon by this assembly.

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Does the bill tinker with things and make life easier from section to section for some voters and do some things that secularize some of those appointed positions—local electoral officers and so on? It does. The real issue, as people have been pointing out, is what it doesn't do. That's not, in the total scheme of things, in and of itself a reason to oppose the bill necessarily; sometimes it is. I'm eager and New Democrats are pleased and eager to see this bill go to committee because I suspect the public has some things to say. There are going to be some issues around accessibility. I know Mr. Prue has spent a good chunk of time on the accessibility issue. He, of course, is the New Democrats' critic for disability issues. And I've got some things I want to say around that too—some things around broader accountability. The bottom line, something that should concern all of us, is voter turnout—getting people to vote. Lord love a duck, we've got lower and lower and lower voter turnouts. That should be of concern, and I'm going to have a chance to speak to that in a few minutes.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. David Zimmer: Back in September 2007, in a letter to the Accessibility for Ontarians and Disabilities Act Alliance, Premier McGuinty made the following commitment: to “develop an action plan to make elections fully accessible to voters” with disabilities. When the select committee was meeting and in the process of doing its work, it took that direction to heart, and I can tell you that one of the things we spent a lot of time talking about was how to improve the voting process for those Ontarians with a disability. That was very, very important to all members of the committee. Ontarians with a disability are often, in many, many cases, our most acute followers of what's going on in this Legislature. It struck the committee as odd that that particular group, which has some of the greatest interest in what goes on in this Legislature, was in many cases faced with the greatest challenge to actually get out and vote.

What this legislation does is that it authorizes—and I'm very proud of this on behalf of the committee—the concept of special ballots that will be managed and supervised by the Chief Electoral Officer. The Chief Electoral Officer can assess a disability need and create a special ballot that is tailored to that particular disability. It goes so far as to give the electoral officer the authority to do a home visit to assist at the home with the voting process.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Peter Shurman: I'm pleased to comment briefly on the facts that were put into the record by my esteemed colleague from Durham, who always brings a balanced perspective and has the years of experience to do it in pretty well anything that he's debating.

The reason I raise that at the outset is, with his experience, I have to balance that with my own, which is much more limited. The very first thing that he said was very much related to the very first thing that I experienced a day or two after being nominated as the candidate in Thornhill back in 2007, and that was the politicization—is that the right word?—of the voting process in Thornhill, which we had to challenge. The first press release I ever sent out said, “You've got to remove the chief returning officer because of a relationship to an opposing candidate,” and indeed that was done at the senior levels of the province. So it pointed up a need, and I'm very happy to see that my colleague has raised that need and that the bill indeed reflects that need. That's one thing that I wanted to say.

The other thing that I wanted to do was echo my colleague from Durham's concerns—and indeed all of our party is concerned; our caucus is concerned—with the fact that we really haven't, in this piece of legislation—which is a good piece of legislation—completed the task, and that task is to address the issue of third party contributions.

I know that the member from Vaughan reminded us all that parties and individual candidates have an extreme responsibility to Elections Ontario to do the reporting that they have to, to justify the use of funds that are collected for their individual campaigns. That's fine, and I think we all are responsible or we wouldn't be sitting here. But it's necessary to do it at a party level and it's necessary to do it on a third party level so that we can ensure a level playing field.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments?

Mr. Jeff Leal: I always have great respect for the member from Durham. He's a man of great experience. I think he started his political career—I know the history. He was born and raised in Peterborough. I think he started his career as a school board trustee and went on to become a local councillor and then moved to the region of Durham, and in 1995, he was elected to the Ontario Legislature. So he has certainly experienced several elections at various levels.

We do know that this bill incorporates a number of changes. It certainly cleans up the issue of proxy votes, and I think there is certainly no one in this House who would not suggest that this is a very good thing to do. It also looks at best practices that have been incorporated in other provinces across Canada.

It also allows post-secondary students to choose where they want to vote. Having been a university student and been away from the riding of Peterborough, I think we should give that opportunity to make sure that students, where they choose to vote, have the ability to vote.

It does provide some new provisions for people with disabilities, which is extremely important. I know when I was a municipal politician, we had to go to great lengths over a number of years to make sure that public buildings that were deemed and identified as polling locations in municipal elections were accessible for people with

disabilities. That was often a difficult challenge, because many of our public buildings were older in design and nature and had to be extensively modified to make accommodations for people with disabilities to make sure that they exercised their franchise—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Thank you. The member from Durham has up to two minutes to respond.

Mr. John O'Toole: The member from Welland spoke briefly on the voter turnout issue, and I look forward to his remarks next, because I do have a lot of respect for his participation here and on that special committee. I'm sure his input will be valued and informed.

The member from Willowdale also spoke on the special ballot process, which I think all of us are in agreement with.

I think the member from Thornhill was most accurate when he said it was a balanced debate, and as a good friend of mine, he brings great deal of informed opinion to the table. He spoke, most importantly, about enumeration. Now we're going to have a permanent electoral list, which I think is an advancement that all of us would probably agree with.

The member from Peterborough, much like myself, has a mixed background, having served quite some time on the municipality of Peterborough council, along with one of my uncles or relatives certainly, Jack Doris, who has served as mayor. In fact, he's going to run again. I think he's served publicly as long as Hazel McCallion.

Mr. Jeff Leal: Forty-plus years.

Mr. John O'Toole: Forty-plus years. Anyway, congratulations, Jack Doris.

The municipal election has been moved to October, which I think was a good move by the government as well—not in this bill but in another bill—and I want to wish the municipal candidates coming into the election this year—which isn't to be confused with this election. Mr. Sorbara said this bill does not affect the Municipal Elections Act, but it is important. The province does have authority over that.

Jim Abernethy is the current mayor of Clarington, Bob Shepherd is the current mayor of Uxbridge, and Marilyn Pearce is the current mayor of Scugog. Those are the three municipalities that I work directly with at the lower tier, and of course, at the upper tier we have the discussion about the election of a regional chair in Durham, which is a controversial issue that I won't go into.

But all of the councillors and municipal people are our partners, along with you, the constituents, the viewers today, and we're there to serve. This act changes it, and we are calling on one change, and that's to eliminate this third party advertising.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Further debate?

1700

Mr. Peter Kormos: First, please indulge me for just a moment, because we came back February 15, we're going to prorogue but just for the weekend, so that's fine.

We'll be out of here on Thursday and then come back on Monday, which is the regular sitting schedule. As indicated earlier, some folks know that I had some back problems and had some surgery that fixed it up. This is the first chance I've had to speak during orders of the day since we got back. I sincerely want to express gratitude to all the people here who wished me well when I was not here and when I was suffering the incredible pain of some serious back problems. I'm really grateful; people were very kind to me, very generous to me, people who may not ever believe how much I missed them and being here—and I really, really did. I missed my detractors; I missed my most severe critics.

It was very serious. I'm glad to be back, in any event, and as I say, I'm incredibly grateful to folks for their generosity of spirit, and I'm grateful to my caucus colleagues who, of course, had to carry the extra load. I'm also left very conscious of how relevant one can or can't be by noting that they did quite well without me. That's something all of us should reflect upon, that at the end of the day, your folks will do quite well without you. So a sincere thank you to the people here. It's not just the members; it's the staff and everybody. I was watching things that were going on. I was making phone calls. I'm on my second flat-screen TV. I don't want to tell you what happened to the first one, but Sony has done well by me.

Howard Hampton was the member of this Sorbara committee, as I'm going to call it, and I remember—he's a delight. David Zimmer was the member for the Liberal caucus, and I've always enjoyed working with David. David is a very intelligent, very capable person, just a joy to work with, always challenging, and he was not an inappropriate person to have on this committee. I want to be very careful. Norm Sterling was the Conservative member, and of course Norm is the longest-serving member, along with Jim Bradley. Not poor Bob Runciman. Poor Bob Runciman—give me a break. He's not poor at all. Bob Runciman, who is a dear friend whom I love dearly, he and his wife—and I'm so pleased for him. Bob won't be advocating for the restoration of MPP pensions anymore, will he? Bob effectively got his. But I miss Bob. I missed him from the get-go. I'm sorry he's not here. I'm very, very fond of him, and he is an irreplaceable person. But how that came about, of course, was that I was mentioning that Norm Sterling, who, along with Jim Bradley, is the longest-serving member of the House—they were on this committee, and Greg Sorbara was chairing the committee.

Again, I have a lot of respect for Greg Sorbara. I indicated that earlier. I have a lot of respect for him, I like him and I admire his intellect, but Greg had never, I don't think, chaired a committee before, and he thought, through no fault of his own, that as the chair he was going to sort of be like Fidel to the Cuban politburo. He was going to summon Raúl and Che and Camilo Cienfuegos and seat them around him and explain to them what was going to happen next in the revolution.

Well, to Greg's surprise, he learned that majority rules in a committee. Mr. Sorbara made reference earlier to the fact that this was a unique committee because it was a tripartite committee with one member from each caucus, and the opposition parties effectively formed the majority. He darned near swallowed his bubble gum, to be fair, when he discovered that because he just had no idea that was how it was going to work.

Mr. Sorbara comes from the corporate world; right? He's very successful. He and his family are very successful entrepreneurs, and like so many corporate people who get elected—now, Mr. Sorbara's so very politically savvy too, one of the best around, no two ways about it in terms of the backroom of politics; right? He knows how the machinery works. I'm confident that if the truth were to be known, if one could be entirely candid, he would acknowledge that this was a revelation.

But it wasn't long before the opposition members learned that the committee, with its rather majestic terms of reference—and you'll recall them. I'm not going to read them, because I hope people have got the copy of the committee report with them. Mr. Zimmer does. Others who have the copy here in this debate, the copy that was tabled in June 2009? I guess nobody bothered reading it. Everybody got a copy.

That's the problem with these types of reports. It was a report to the Honourable Steve Peters, "Your Select Committee on Elections has the honour to present its report and commends it to the House," signed by Greg Sorbara MPP, Chair, June 2009. Of course, the opening of it is the terms of reference of the committee. I recall the motion because the motion was pretty broad. You recall it, too, don't you, Speaker? The motion that the Premier's office wrote to strike this committee was very broad, and New Democrats quite frankly were rather enthusiastic. Mr. Prue was. He thought, "Hey, here's an opportunity to really grab the bull by at least one horn and do some meaningful things."

My caucus colleagues met with me and the leader. There was a lengthy discussion about the sort of issues that we in the New Democratic Party thought could and should be raised and considered by a committee that had such broad scope, that had such a wide or robust mandate.

New Democrats came to this committee eager to see a number of things addressed. We made it very clear that we saw the committee—and I call it the Sorbara committee. We felt very strongly that it could deal with election financing. Mr. Zimmer remembers that. When we talked about that, when we raised that in this committee, Mr. Zimmer's eyes lit up—and again, he's a person of great intellect. He was eager, I suspect. People around here tend to be very careful about what they say, especially on the record, so you have to read body language, I suppose. You have to use your intuitive intelligence; right? There's a book written about that just recently—wasn't there, Mr. Prue?

Mr. Michael Prue: There is.

Mr. Peter Kormos:—about how valuable intuitive intelligence is. Now, if Mr. Zimmer considers me to be

totally out of line in saying this, I suspect he'll rise on a two-minute response and say that the member for Welland has got it wrong, that he, Mr. Zimmer, wasn't enthusiastic. I don't think he's going to do that, because he was enthusiastic. He was ready to spend the time, invest the emotional and intellectual energy to address some of these issues—and not to say that we were going to write law but to prepare a report back to the Legislature.

The NDP had high hopes for this committee. We had hoped that maybe the committee would consider the Manitoba, Quebec, federal election financing approach, so that once and for all, once and for all, forever and ever and ever, public and private, more importantly, interest group financing shouldn't determine election results.

1710

Why do corporate donors give money to political parties? They're not buying them—I'm not going to suggest that for a minute—but they sure as hell are renting them. It may not be a long-term lease, but corporate donors to political parties expect to see some return on their investment.

When they buy \$10,000-a-plate tickets to dinners with the Premier and his gang of however many happen to be conscripted to that evening's soiree, they want the ear of the Premier. And they don't just want his ear; they want results. You've got corporate donors putting cash on the dash, and they want to see the goods delivered.

That's the nature of the beast, isn't it, Speaker? You've been around. For a person as young as you, you've sure had a lot of experience. You know what the story is, and it's not pretty.

That's what corporate donors are all about. From time to time, so-called public interest groups—most of them have modest means, but there are a couple kicking around that have pretty significant means, don't they, Mr. Prue?

Mr. Michael Prue: A lot of money.

Mr. Peter Kormos: They are "public" in corporate title only, because from time to time, when you peel back the veneer, you find that they represent some mighty interesting interests. Do you remember Silvio DeGasperis? Asked why he attended a \$10,000-a-plate Liberal fundraiser, he said bluntly, and I quote Hansard, "I wanted to speak to Dalton about my development issue in Pickering. I knew the reason I was there." Hell, at \$10,000 a plate DeGasperis expects to be on a first-name basis, and he expects to see the goods delivered. This level of corporate financing, interest-group financing of political parties—Mr. Prue, just the other day, the member for Beaches, during question period raised the fact that the airport authority, with public monies—monies paid to it; they get a transfer of payments from the federal government. Am I right, Mr. Prue?

Mr. Michael Prue: Yes.

Mr. Peter Kormos: Which is taxpayers' money. Then the surcharge on tickets: A surcharge is charged by airports, and then, of course, the airlines themselves charge you—as a customer, as a flyer, as a passenger on that plane—for the landing rights, the tax on the plane land-

ing at that airport. This is all consumers' money. You've got the airport authority funnelling—shades of Patti Starr—public and taxpayers' money into the coffers of the Liberal Party of Ontario and into the coffers of the campaigns of Liberal candidates in some very, very recent by-elections.

Mrs. Laura Albanese: Not everybody's.

Mr. Peter Kormos: Ms. Albanese complains, "Not everybody's."

Mrs. Laura Albanese: I'm not complaining.

Mr. Peter Kormos: Ms. Albanese, talk to your colleagues and ask how it's done. There are a couple of them who, I'm sure, could give you the phone numbers of the contacts—there's that line, "I have many contacts amongst the lumberjacks." There are a couple of colleagues you've got here who could tell you how it's done.

You're a wonderful member of—look, I like you, Ms. Albanese. You've not been corrupted yet, but clearly your resentment, Ms. Albanese, of not being a beneficiary of this largesse demonstrates some sort of passion to be corrupted. I don't want to be a party to that, but I suspect she's got Liberal colleagues here who would more than eagerly assist her.

Mrs. Laura Albanese: No resentment whatsoever.

Mr. Peter Kormos: Now Ms. Albanese says she doesn't want the money. She doesn't want to be a part of that crowd. I don't blame her. She has morals, and she's not about to surrender them by selling herself to corporate interests that are prepared to funnel taxpayer and public funds—with no consent or permission by those taxpayers or the members of the public—through to political parties, one presumes, so as to achieve political ends.

New Democrats thought that it was important for this committee to consider banning corporate and union donations. New Democrats thought it was very important that this committee consider that.

New Democrats wanted to talk about other ways for the electoral process to be more accessible to persons with disabilities.

New Democrats were concerned about the abandonment of enumeration. There isn't one of us—never mind us, we who get elected. The teams who elect us, volunteers who go door to door, sometimes in the miserable cold of late winter or early spring by-elections—the most uncomfortable season of the year to be out campaigning—know that the fact that voters' lists are not up to date and complete is an incredibly frustrating thing and makes it very hard to do what people should be doing in the democratic process.

My time—are you sure that clock is accurate, Speaker? Speaker, you could intervene now and exercise your jurisdiction to provide justice for individual members by rolling that clock back, because I'm sure it has not been accurate.

One of the real concerns that I think everybody on the committee had, but the government clearly didn't—what we learned, and Mr. Zimmer will recall this, is that at the

end of the day this wasn't about what the committee was going to recommend. We learned not to spin our wheels, not to let the engine idle or to burn gasoline unnecessarily—or propane; whatever your choice of fuel might be—because this was all about what the Premier's office was going to do at the end of the day anyway. What we've got here is what the Premier's office was prepared to do—very disappointing.

Read the New Democrats' dissenting opinion in the report, but also hearken to this: You tell me how, in 2010, in an election in the most prosperous part of Canada—Toronto Centre—after all of this consideration about accessibility during the voting process, could we have possibly had a voting site that was inaccessible? After all this time, after all of the focus, after the Ontarians with Disabilities Act, and as I say, amongst the wealthiest and most densely populated parts of the world, you still have people confronted with, as I recall it, and based on the Toronto Sun article, a set of stairs that made it impossible for people in wheelchairs, amongst other things, to get up and down to vote.

How can that be? What is going on? Who's in charge? You don't need a Sorbara committee to address that. You need somebody who is prepared to be accountable and accept some responsibility.

I haven't yet heard an apology from whoever is responsible or accountable. Surely, with this government's obsession with apologizing—and, Lord knows, they haven't done enough—you'd think that at the very least there would have been a public apology by the people who are responsible for selecting those sites, and perhaps an explanation of exactly how stupid they were, that they would confront persons with disabilities with a stairway in downtown Toronto—not some rural, remote community where the opportunities are limited.

1720

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments.

Mr. Wayne Arthurs: I'm pleased to have just a couple of minutes. I want to take the opportunity, since the member from Welland indicated that this would be his first opportunity to get a full rotation in since his return. Certainly it's my honour to be able to spend a couple of minutes commenting on his speech and to welcome him back in that fashion.

I have to tell you, Speaker, I haven't always enjoyed all of his speeches. In my time here, there's been one or two times that I've questioned whether or not I've really got the full value from his hour. Maybe the good news today is that it was 20 minutes, so he can get back up to full speed.

I must say, though, I did appreciate yesterday's article in the Toronto Star written by Jim Coyle. I thought it was not only gracious and generous, but there were astute observations of the role the member from Welland has played in this place and the contributions he has made for so very, very long. I think that it's well deserved, and I was very pleased to read that article.

As to his comments in respect to the legislation itself, I'm pleased to see that there are members here, certainly from the government side—both Mr. Zimmer and Mr. Sorbara—who participated on that committee, which was an important initiative untaken by the government. I think there are some very good initiatives within the legislation, not the least of which is the special ballot provision. I know from my municipal days that garnering proxy votes, when people couldn't be there—it was always nice that people entrusted you with their vote. I recall during one of my early mayoralty campaigns that a young lady came with her father to my office, and it was her first opportunity to vote—she had just turned 18 six or so months before that. But she was going to be out of town at that point in time, and she entrusted me with her vote. That was important. But I think this is a better provision: special ballots, so she could cast that vote herself and not depend on me or anyone else to fulfill her wishes.

So I think there are some very important provisions, with reference made to issues of disability, the use of technology—a lot of good provisions in the bill that are available. I'm anxious to see the debate continue and hopefully see the legislation adopted.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments.

Mr. Norm Miller: I'm also pleased to welcome the member from Welland back to the Legislature and see that he's returning to his usual fine form. We had a member from our party on the committee as well, the member from Carleton–Mississippi Mills. He, too, wrote a dissenting report, specifically to do with recommendation 26 of the committee. So I would like to ask the member from Welland: What happened to recommendation 26? Because it's dealing with third party advertising. In that dissenting report, he writes, "Third party advertisers have a legitimate role to play in the democratic process but they need to be open and transparent and should not have a freer hand to influence the political process than the individuals and parties who take part in the election."

I agree with that, and we've seen the Working Families Coalition spend millions of dollars in the last two elections. Like the member from Welland, when he was talking about corporate donators, I think the Working Families Coalition is wanting a return on their investment, or, as he described it, "They want the goods delivered." Frankly, I think we've seen that happen with bills like Bill 144 and Bill 119. So I would like to ask the member from Welland, what happened to this recommendation 26 of the committee to limit third party spending in Ontario? For further detail on it, you can read the complete dissenting report by the member from Carleton–Mississippi Mills.

There are other aspects of the bill that we do support: certainly modernizing and getting rid of some archaic rules, like having a list of workers supplied by the political parties 10 days before voting, which, I think, is a depoliticization of the workers involved with elections. I

think that's a positive thing, but I would be interested in seeing what happened to recommendation 26.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Questions and comments.

Mr. Michael Prue: It is indeed an honour to comment on my friend from Welland. I came back in order to make sure that I heard the full 20 minutes of his speech, because he always speaks with such an educated, yet folksy, down-home charm. He tells great stories, he holds the audience captive, and he brings them all within the ambit of what he's trying to say.

Mr. Greg Sorbara: Yes, but what about Kormos's speech?

Mr. Michael Prue: I'm talking about Kormos. I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about the member from Welland.

Within that time, he brought up some really key issues. He brought up the issue—which I'm still hoping to have resolved by the Minister of Transportation—the whole thorny issue of the GTAA and how they took \$12,875 of people's money who had to pay, and have no option but to pay, the fees when they travel through Canada's busiest airport. They took that money and they funnelled it to the Liberal Party. I don't know whether it's illegal, but I sure think that it's morally reprehensible what was done. The member from Welland had every right to question exactly how that money came about, how it was spent and whether or not political parties of any stripe should be taking it, because we discovered, after the question, that in fact other parties were taking the money as well.

He also raised a very real question, which I spent some time on today, about disabilities, and asked a very solid and good question: What was happening in the riding of Toronto Centre in 2010, in a province as rich as Ontario, in a city as cosmopolitan and savvy as the city of Toronto, where a person would show up in a wheelchair and couldn't vote and had to be carried down the stairs? I think these are legitimate questions and asked in his own—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Thank you. Questions and comments?

Mr. David Zimmer: The member from Welland is back, and I welcome him back. We enjoy listening to him, but we always have to be vigilant about the mischief that he's trying to stir up.

In his 20-minute remarks, he made comments somehow implying that I, as the Liberal member of the committee, was keen to launch into the whole area of electoral financing reform. He challenged me, if that was not the case, to say that he was wrong. So I stand here and I look at the honourable member from Welland and say categorically: You're dead wrong, and I invite you to review the transcripts and so on.

I would add this additional thought: The member from Welland implied that but for Liberal intransigence on that select committee on election reform, that somehow we would have delved into the whole area of electoral reform. But I can tell you, from comments at the com-

mittee and in public, that the one place the member for Welland did not want to go, in terms of electoral financing reform, was anywhere near a discussion of union donations. So you see, you're stirring up the pot here, trying to create discord in the Liberal ranks.

I say, in closing, that I spoke my mind at that committee, and I spoke forcefully. I was not in any way intimidated by our illustrious chair, who guided us through complex and detailed discussions and reached a fair series of recommendations. So I say to the member opposite, the chair of the committee—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Thank you. The member from Welland has up to two minutes to respond.

Mr. Peter Kormos: I feel compelled to join Mr. Zimmer in his praise and adoration of the great helmsman, Mr. Sorbara. In fact, I'm surprised that this report wasn't printed in a little red book. I suspect that, should I visit Mr. Zimmer's office in the near future, there will be portraits of the helmsman, Chairman Sorbara, on his wall, perhaps with candles lit around it and wreaths and garlands of flowers.

I also want to apologize to Mr. Zimmer: I misread him. But I'm heartbroken to learn that he's not keen at all about considering or discussing election finance reform. I saw him and understood him to be an enlightened, progressive person who was interested in a fairer and more just electoral process. I've known him for years now. I've always known him to be an open-minded person who never shied from a discussion, never mind a debate. So I'm saddened to learn that he's just not the man I thought he was, that he's not the advocate for far-reaching and wide-ranging consideration of topics that may not have ended up in the report, but at least warranted some consideration.

But I know him well enough and my affection for him is strong enough to know that, given some time, we can bring Mr. Zimmer around—and I'm confident that the fair-minded people around him in his family and his social life will help us put the appropriate pressure on him.

1730

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Cheri DiNovo): Further debate?

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: It's always a joy to speak after the member from Welland. It's just good because the expectations are much lower when I'm standing to speak. But I do want to join the members in welcoming him back to Queen's Park and to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. You, sir, were truly missed, and it's good to get you back here. As I mentioned to him once before, when he's speaking, I learn far more about this place, the history and the tradition, so it's good to have him back to educate the rest of us on how to get things done right.

This is a very important bill, Bill 231, speaking on dealing with both the Elections Act and the Election Finances Act, pieces of legislation that ensure that our democracy, our electoral system continue to move further forward and progress in a manner that is truly fitting of a

democratic society. This really ensures that our institutions remain strong so that those of us, like ourselves, who are privileged enough to be elected and to be standing here are elected in a manner that is legitimate and reflective of people's decisions and desires.

I think a lot of you know a little bit about my background. I have spoken about that before, as to how my family and I came to Canada. That's why I feel very strongly about this particular bill and all our democratic institutions. I think I have mentioned before that my father was involved in the pro-democracy movement in Pakistan, in my native country where I was born. I lived there in the 1980s when there was a military dictatorship and there was no right to vote. There was just simply no right to vote because a military junta was the one in power, and a general made the decision. When he did at one point decide that there would be elections, they were not party-based elections because political parties were banned. In fact, I remember a time when any gathering of five or more people was not allowed under the martial law.

In those kinds of circumstances, you cannot have any type of healthy debate. You cannot have an assembly of people where you can share political ideas, because a repressive regime feels that that's not right, because that undermines that regime's authority.

It was in that climate that I started to learn about politics, about rights, about democracies and what's important to make sure that everybody in a country is respected. My parents were very involved in that process. As I have mentioned before in this House, my father was part of a movement to restore democracy. He led a pro-democracy march. It was illegal to do so, so he was arrested. He was tried by a military court, a general. He was sentenced to up to 10 months as a political prisoner, and he spent about nine months—and the story goes on.

I vividly remember visiting my father every weekend, along with my mother and my other siblings, and that was a very transformative part of my life: Why did he do this? It's interesting; you can imagine being 10 years old and attending school at that time—and 10-year-olds can be very cruel to each other—and getting taunted and teased by your peers, because for them, your father was a criminal because he was in the jail. I was standing there trying to make those arguments about, "No, my father is a political prisoner because he believes in democracy." None of that mattered, right? Ten-year-olds don't understand. This 10-year-old did because he was living through it, but the other 10-year-olds did not.

It's quite a learning experience, being able to visit your father and seeing him in shackles, literally, both hands and feet, and being treated as a criminal when his crime—his only crime—was that he wanted his fellow countrymen and countrywomen to have the right to vote in a fair and open election. That was it; that was his crime.

I still have a copy of his charge sheet. I should bring it translated one day from Urdu to English and read it in this House. It makes you laugh when you read it because

it talks about offences which are fundamental to democracy: “inciting people to vote,” I think it read; “inciting people to have democracy,” the right to speak out. Those were the charges that were laid against him.

Thank God, in their wisdom they made the great decision of moving to a country like Canada because they did not want their children to grow up in a society where they did not have a voice. They did not have the most simple, most fundamental right to vote.

Now, fast forward: It was 1988 when we moved to Canada. I remember distinctly, I became a Canadian citizen in 1992, and my very first vote was on the Charlottetown accord, the referendum.

Mr. Peter Kormos: How did you vote on it?

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: I voted for it. I was really against the Meech Lake accord, I don't know why—I had just come to Canada. I was just learning Canadian politics. But with Charlottetown, I was really engaged.

Mr. Peter Kormos: Bob Rae screwed me around on that too.

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: I'm sure I'll hear about that in your two-minuter, Mr. Kormos.

To this day, I remember feeling the goosebumps, walking into that voting booth and being able to cast a ballot. I thought about my father and my mother and the sacrifices they made to make sure that I was in a position, as a free citizen, to be able to cast a ballot on the future of my newly adopted country. Merely in the country for four years, and here I was an equal citizen having the right to cast a ballot, to decide on the future of my country, to change the Constitution of my country. This is where people lose blood on the streets in some parts of the world, and we were able to do it in our Canadian society in an extremely civilized manner.

I don't think I have missed any single election, municipal, provincial or federal, since that day, where I have not cast my ballot, because I will not let my parents down. I would not let my father's sacrifices down by not exercising my right to vote.

It amazes me when I go door to door during campaigns—and I've campaigned for a lot of people in the past, and I've campaigned for myself, and there are by-elections going on right now—the number of people who tell you at the door, “Oh, I don't vote.” It really breaks my heart every single time. I feel like giving them a speech like I'm giving right now, telling them why it is so important that they should vote. In our democratic country, where we have all the benefits and privileges of living in a very civilized society, it's sad to see that people sometimes exercise not to vote. I always say, “Listen, you might just want to go and spoil your ballot, but at least make that effort, because there are a lot of people around the world who would give their life for the opportunity to mark that X on a ballot.”

Imagine the time when I got to vote for myself. That was exciting. Can you imagine, 19 years later, walking into a booth—

Mr. Michael Prue: It's supposed to be a secret ballot.

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: I'm letting you know I voted for me. That's no secret. There's only one vote in Toronto I have, and that's me, and I got my vote.

I remember very quickly putting an X by my name: Naqvi, Yasir. It was after that I just paused and thought, can you imagine, I just voted for myself. I'm sure a lot of you have voted for yourselves many, many times. If it happens every single time, it becomes routine. But for me, it really gave me pause to see the ballot. I was hoping there might be a way that I could keep that ballot for posterity's sake, but I'm sure that would be breaking some provision in the Election Act, which I'm supposed to be talking about.

Anyway, I just wanted to give the context of where I'm coming from when talking about the system we've got.

1740

We have a great system in this province. We have an incredible system which allows people to exercise their right to choose representatives every four years. We are extremely lucky to have that system where all 107 of us sitting around this assembly are legitimately elected as the voices of our communities.

Of course, we're at a heightened level of enlightenment where we want to make the system even better. That is the effort we are trying to make, as I read Bill 231: to make sure that we have a system which allows people to properly exercise their rights so that they are able to cast their ballots. So it's important that we have issues around accessibility, that Ontarians with disabilities are not denied their rights. It's extremely important, because we are at that level of democracy where we want to make sure that nobody has any impediment to casting a ballot in an election, because if there's an impediment then their voice is being muzzled, and we cannot afford that in our democracy. That's one of things this legislation is trying to do: It's trying to give the Chief Electoral Officer the authority to have accessible voting equipment.

The special ballot procedure which is allowed for eliminates proxy voting and ensures that if you're not around in your community, you still have an opportunity to cast a ballot. If you happen to be out of the country or if you're on military duty, we do not deny you your right to vote. Just because you do not happen to be in your community, you still get that opportunity to vote. Through the amendments introduced in this bill, we're making sure that special ballot procedures are put in place so that those who are not in Ontario at the time of an election have an opportunity to exercise that very, very important right.

I note the provisions around post-secondary students. I think Mr. Prue, the member from Beaches–East York, talked about his experience, which I think a lot of us can relate to because most of us probably went to university or college away from our homes, and there was always that battle: “Where do I vote? Do I vote at my university or do I vote at home?” I'm sure we lose a lot of young people because of that. I'm sure we lose a lot of young

people who probably don't go out and vote because they don't know whether they are on the elections list at their post-secondary institution or if they are in their hometown. I have the honour of representing Carleton University, which is located in Ottawa Centre. There are a lot of students—I'm trying to remember the number, how many live in the residences. It's a large number. I've knocked on their doors during the campaign. That question always comes up: "I don't know. I think I vote in Toronto, where my mom and dad live," or, "I vote in Sault Ste. Marie, where I was living before." This bill, through a provision, speaks to that. It allows for students to choose whether they want to vote in the electoral district where they reside temporarily or where they live permanently, giving students an opportunity to make that decision. It's a very, very important point to make sure that our students have the opportunity to vote.

This is an important point because we also know the level of apathy that exists in our elections right now. That is becoming a serious issue, as I alluded to earlier. A high proportion of people who don't vote happen to be young people. You are often reminded that there are two kinds of people who vote—and you can go a polling station and see this. Our senior citizens vote, and why do they vote? This is my speculation: They vote because they remember what it was like. They fought for many of the freedoms we enjoy so much, so they don't take their vote for granted. Thanks to all the seniors who go out and make sure that they cast their ballot. That's why you've always got to listen to seniors and their point of view. It's extremely important because—you know what?—they have voted and they will vote again.

The other people I've also noticed who vote a lot proportionately are new Canadians. They go out and vote, and I think they go out and vote for the reasons I was talking about earlier: In many instances, they have lived in countries where they did not have the right to vote. For them, this is a blessing. This is why they came to live in Ontario or Canada. It's incredible to see them go and vote.

Unfortunately, somehow our young people are not as inclined to vote. We need to make sure that we make our system as accessible and easy as possible for them so that they can exercise the right to vote, so that they don't run away—and I will use the words "run away"—from that right, that obligation they have, come election time.

I'm confident that a provision like this is a good step, when we allow our students who are either at university or college, away from home, to choose whether they want to vote where their post-secondary institution is located—for example, in my case, Carleton University in Ottawa Centre—or in their home riding, where they lived before, whether it be with mom and dad or by themselves. This is an important issue.

I'm mindful of the time, but I wanted to talk about a couple of other things which are very important in this legislation, and speak more to the modernization of the whole Election Act and Election Finances Act.

One of the issues is around election finances: receipting when donations are made. In this day and age,

with the Internet and the capacity to give money securely on the Internet, one of the things we're getting very used to is—I often do this. If there's a breast cancer run or the Terry Fox run and a friend of yours is participating in it, they send you an e-mail saying, "Give me a pledge." You just go online and put your credit card number in and voilà, you just made a donation, but what I also find very convenient is that my tax receipt is immediately e-mailed to me. I have that, right there, and I can print it out and use it. I don't have to wait until it arrives in the mail, and it comes closer to election time.

I believe that this legislation, as I read it, will allow for that provision to take place, that if political parties choose to have e-receipting when people make donations, either to a riding association or a campaign or political party, they will be able to get those receipts right away, electronically. That is a step in the 21st-century direction. I think we should not shy away from that. It is the right thing to do. We need to continue to adapt to technologies. Of course, we need to make sure that the integrity of the system is always maintained, but we need to make sure that those mechanisms are fully utilized so that we are making it easier for people to exercise their democratic rights, even when they are making donations to political parties.

Lastly, another point which has been made quite a few times is about de-politicizing poll workers and returning officers. I think this is a step in the right direction. I don't think that MPPs or candidates need to give names of individuals to be poll clerks and returning officers. It's better that the chief returning officer for the riding is the one who gets those people and appoints them. I think it makes the system far cleaner and makes sure that voting procedures are followed accurately.

Anyway, I look at the clock. Almost 20 minutes are gone. This is what happens when you speak after Mr. Kormos.

Interjection.

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: No, I'm not done yet. Wait for my big wrap-up.

I think this is an important piece of legislation. I think, as I said earlier, we need to look at this in a broader context. I think we need to appreciate the democracy we live in. We need to appreciate the kinds of opportunities we have as Ontarians in terms of the way we conduct our elections every four years. We are extremely lucky to have that opportunity.

In my context, in my life story, this is a very important part of who I am, because that's how I landed in this great country and this incredible province. I feel very honoured and privileged that, through the same system, the same mechanism, people had faith in me and were able to give me the opportunity to be their voice here in this great Parliament of ours. So the system works, the system is great, and we are far, far better for it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak on this important bill.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Jim Wilson): Questions and comments?

1750

Mr. Toby Barrett: The member for Ottawa Centre has put things in perspective with respect to his opening remarks and his childhood memories in the country of Pakistan during the 1980s, I think he indicated.

I spent some time there briefly in the late 1960s, and I can't remember the political situation then. I wasn't too concerned with things like that at the time. But it is a little chilling to realize, as the member from Ottawa Centre explained, that one was not permitted to vote or to participate in democratic processes in a free and open and transparent manner. He went on to describe the hand of the state coming down on his father for doing such things as inciting people to vote and for doing such things as inciting people to speak out.

That certainly puts things in perspective and makes us realize something that I so often overlook, something that is exemplified in the closing phrase of the Speaker's prayer, or what was referred to as the Speaker's prayer up until quite recently, where we live in a society, if I can recall the quote, "where freedom prevails and justice rules." For many, many years we would commence our working day with that expression in our mind. There's no argument that justice and the rule of law really underpin our democratic process, something that was not seen in Pakistan during the member's childhood.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Jim Wilson): Further questions and comments?

Mr. Peter Kormos: I, for one, enjoyed the comments and contribution to the debate by the member for Ottawa Centre: very well put, and I am pleased that I was here in the Legislature listening carefully.

He raises an issue around encouraging people to vote, ensuring that people vote. In conversations with members of other caucuses around the committee work that Mr. Sorbara led, the prospect of, I believe, Australian models of making it compulsory for people to vote was discussed. One of the observations I made is that it should be—because the whole trend is, "Let's make it easier for people to vote. Let's let people vote from the luxury of their armchair while they're sitting there in their underwear with a remote control in one hand and a beer in the other."

I say: To the contrary, it shouldn't be too easy to vote, because then a vote could simply be cast carelessly. I don't think there's anything at all wrong with people having to take the initiative to get out there and go to a polling area and cast their ballot. I think the comments from the member for Ottawa Centre reflecting on places in the world where people struggle for the right to vote should compel us to take that tack rather than simply open the doors and let people vote willy-nilly by a click of their computer button.

Let's get around to what is going to happen next. I'm sure all three caucuses—I know the New Democrats—are going to vote for this bill on second reading. The bill is inoffensive in and of itself. It's a modest proposal, as I indicated earlier. It's far from a major overhaul or reformation, never mind transformation, of our electoral

system, and it's far from all that could be implemented. But I'm looking forward to committee. I hope this government is committed to the committee process, and a healthy committee process, so that members of the public can comment on this bill, just as members of this Legislature have.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Jim Wilson): Further questions and comments?

Mr. Mike Colle: It was a very compelling debate by the member from Ottawa Centre. It just makes us stop and reflect on how critically important and vital it is to our democracy in allowing people to participate in our elections. He certainly made that very clear, especially in light of his own family and his father.

I was remembering, in terms of our own piece of legislation—and the member from Welland makes a good point. I hope there are some amendments to this bill.

I know I've been pushing for one amendment, but I get deaf ears on it all the time. The stupid thing is that when we do the audit of our election statement, we have to get a CA to do it, and the CAs don't want to do it.

Interjection.

Mr. Mike Colle: Why can't we get the CGAs to do the audit? They're willing to, and they've got the time. That's one simple amendment I've asked for, and I don't know why it's not in there.

The other thing is, I remember in the by-election in St. Paul's, there was a lady in a wheelchair who I have known for years in the Doug Saunders building. She had to go in her wheelchair to the next building to vote. There should have been a polling station in that building. There are about 400 people in the building. The worst thing of all was when she went to the building to vote, they wouldn't let her vote. They said, "Where's your stupid card?" She said, "Well, listen, I got that card, but I get so much junk mail, I lost the card." But she had her ID with her picture around her neck. They said, "No, you can't vote." This lady has been voting for 50 years. They wouldn't let a disabled person vote who had a card around her neck because she didn't have that stupid card that gets mailed and that everybody loses.

Mr. Peter Kormos: It's not that stupid.

Mr. Mike Colle: Anyways, they lose the card because they get so many cards that come in junk mail.

I think we've got to make a few amendments in this bill and make an even better bill if we can.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Jim Wilson): Further questions and comments?

Mr. Peter Shurman: I listened with interest to the presentation of my friend from Ottawa Centre, which I probably can summarize—and I don't mean this in any tongue-in-cheek way—as an ode to democracy. He spent a considerable amount of time talking about how lucky we are here in the province of Ontario and how lucky we are in Canada to have the kind of freedom that allows us the elections that we enjoy, and a bill like this does nothing but enhance him.

On that I agree with him, but his comments are also not unlike the bill for this reason: The bill is a good bill

that contains an awful lot of improvement in how we go to the polls, but is conspicuous by the absence from within it of things that we need. You were conspicuous, I should say to my friend, in the speech that you made by not alluding to those aspects.

I'm talking particularly of, while you're talking about other jurisdictions, the other jurisdictions in Canada that have addressed the issue of third party financing quite well, while we have left this alone. In comments that I've heard this afternoon, both the ones that you missed and the ones that had been made by other members, the comment is consistent: We'll go to committee with this bill, we'll talk about ways to improve this bill and we'll talk about things that we can use to enhance this bill. I would hope that that would be one of them.

I think, on the positive side, that it's good to know that one of the things that has been addressed—and you talked about being part of a university environment—is the fact that we can get the vote to people where they are, as opposed to making them come to vote somewhere else. That applies very much to our university community, a community with which I find myself very involved. I think that anything that we can do to increase voter turnout would be a positive, and this bill does begin to address that very well.

We'll be supportive of it, but we'll equally try to bring amendments at committee.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Jim Wilson): The honourable member for Ottawa Centre has up to two minutes for his response.

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: I want to thank my colleagues the member from Haldimand–Norfolk, the member from Welland, the member from Eglinton–Lawrence and the member from Thornhill for their very constructive views on the comments I was making.

I'll probably start in reverse order with the member from Thornhill. I agree: Part of this process, again, is that we go through three readings and we go to the committee process so that we try to improve the bill, and we debate that. I hope that some of the suggestions you're making—and the member from Eglinton–Lawrence was talking about a very specific suggestion—that there's an opportunity to consider all that, absolutely.

This is, again, part and parcel of the system we have in place in this Legislature. It is historic in nature. It comes from convention. It has been practised for hundreds and hundreds of years, and it has worked.

I wanted to come to the comment made by the member from Welland. I'm not sure where I am on the point about whether or not we should make it easy for Ontarians to vote. I think there has to be a balance somewhere; there probably has to be a line somewhere. I agree that it should not be as easy as sitting at home, having a remote control—

1800

Mr. Peter Kormos: In your underwear.

Mr. Yasir Naqvi: In your underpants—see, I said it for the first time, and probably, hopefully for the last time, in Hansard—and be able to vote. But who knows?

We don't know where the technology will lie 10, 15 or 20 years from now, where that may be considered a norm. We have to adapt with time. We need to make sure that the opportunities exist for people to vote, just like we're doing in terms of accessibility issues. There was a time that that was not considered a priority. You'd show up and if you had to climb 10 flights to vote and you were in a wheelchair, nobody cared. But times have changed. Now we accept and recognize it's our responsibility to make sure that our polling stations are fully accessible for those who are disabled.

There is a fine line, and we need to make sure that we are always evolving and adapting to ensure that our system of democracy remains strong and healthy and that it allows for Ontarians and Canadians, broadly speaking, the opportunity to vote in an effective manner.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Jim Wilson): It being 6 of the clock, the question that this House do now adjourn is deemed to have been made.

ADJOURNMENT DEBATE

FOREST INDUSTRY

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Jim Wilson): The member for Thornhill has given notice of dissatisfaction with the answer given today by the Deputy Premier. The member for Thornhill has up to five minutes to debate the matter, and the Deputy Premier may reply for up to five minutes.

Mr. Peter Shurman: I want to address this question in a very specific way that covers this question but other ones as well. The matter that I was questioning the Acting Premier on this morning is a very, very serious issue. We're not talking about some grant that we're asking for. We're not talking about a transfer of money. We're talking about saving 1,500 real jobs that pertain to the livelihood of 1,500 real families in the northern part of the province of Ontario, where the forestry industry, to say the least, is not doing very well and where we have an opportunity to do something together that will work on behalf of the region and on behalf of these families. So this is not about asking a question of the government and getting back the stock response that tells us on this side about some deficiency that might have existed, in their perception, 10 years ago. It's talking about a deficiency that exists now on the part of the government of the day.

Grant Forest Products, the subject of this question, is a historic made-in-Ontario company worth somewhere between \$1 billion and \$1.5 billion, and it contributes almost \$110 million in wages alone—more than that, but just in wages—to northern Ontario communities, and it holds made-in-Ontario technology and know-how developed here, particularly in the fibreboard business. The bankruptcy court may allow the sale of the assets of Grant Forest Products to Georgia-Pacific of Atlanta for 30 cents on the dollar, and it may do so—the indications

are that it will—some time this week. That will mean the imminent possible loss of as many as 1,500 direct and indirect jobs to which I refer. We're talking about communities like Englehart, Timmins and Earlton.

There are a couple of programs that address this, and my questions this morning pertained to them. The forest sector loan guarantee program—\$350 million initially—is a five-year program created by your government in June 2005 to support and leverage capital investments in new value-added manufacturing, increased fibre use efficiencies, energy conservation efficiency, and development of cogeneration. To date, only seven applications have been accepted, with total loan guarantees of less than \$43 million, which leaves \$307 million on the table unsubscribed. Couldn't that be used?

The forest sector prosperity fund: a \$150-million, three-year program created in September 2005, also by your government, and now closed, with \$92 million left unsubscribed.

The response that I got to my question from the Acting Premier was basically a complete and utter disaster of a response. In fact, it was embarrassing to watch. She made reference to everything except forestry and made no reference to Grant Forest Products at all. As a matter of fact, I believe that she, at that point in time, had no clue at all what this file was about. Then it went, for the two supplementaries, to the minister of northern affairs. He refused to interfere on the grounds that Grant Forest Products—

Hon. Sandra Pupatello: Be careful what you say. I get the last five.

Mr. Peter Shurman: You'll get your chance—was going through bankruptcy court. Bankruptcy court was where we were trying to settle the issues of Chrysler and General Motors not too many months ago, and it didn't stop this government from getting involved in those bankruptcy proceedings to rescue businesses that were going basically south.

The minister of northern affairs never addressed the availability of the loan guarantee program at all, never addressed the availability of the funds in the programs that have already been committed by the McGuinty government, and never provided a satisfactory response to our proposal for a no-cash investment in a made-in-Ontario historic company, its workers, their families and the communities they live in. Our proposal would not involve the expenditure of any new money; our proposal would not involve the taxpayers of Ontario becoming shareholders of a private company at all.

The bottom line here is, what are you going to put money in? We talked about a Ford investment. I'm not going to get into the issue of that, but in that investment, in broad strokes, you're looking at a possible 750 jobs in five years. This one is not even an investment, and we're talking now about 1,500 jobs being rescued now. The idea of maintaining an interest in Ontario's north, of maintaining an economy that's vibrant up there, of not losing a 63rd mill, is what this question was about, and I don't feel that the question was in any way, shape or form adequately answered at all.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Jim Wilson): Acting Premier, you have up to five minutes to respond.

Hon. Sandra Pupatello: What I recognize is that the member opposite in fact really didn't repeat the question that he started with in the House this afternoon, so I relish the opportunity to respond now.

First of all, he started with asking, how have we implemented our throne speech? That's what he said. Allow me the opportunity to suggest that not only do we deliver on the throne speech, we deliver in droves. And that's what we are doing today, despite the fact that Ontario has seen the greatest recession of our time, certainly in our lifetimes and maybe that of our parents as well.

We've really suffered in Ontario, more than most places in Canada. That's meant that we have had to come to the table innumerable times for many sectors. But one issue that affected the forestry sector in particular started long before we became the government; it started in about the year 2000, and that was the dollar value.

We know there are changes in the forestry sector around the world, and they have a lot to do with the fact that in our climate, you can't grow a tree like you can in the south; they grow three times as fast as a Canadian tree. If you look at how Ontario stacks up in Canada, BC, Ontario and Quebec, with a massive forest industry, all have taken their share of hits because of changes around the world in the forestry industry.

How have we responded? That's really what you're asking. How does an Ontario government step up to the plate when they see changes around the world that affect them, when we know we have to push our companies forward to be competitive on the world stage? I say that every time we've had a significant initiative, we've never had the benefit of the opposition parties voting in favour of the very support that we want to give to our private sector partners. The Next Generation of Jobs Fund that landed new investment even in our most difficult year: They voted against it. Even the advanced manufacturing investment strategy, a loan program that helps companies in your own backyard: You voted against that initiative.

When we come forward with serious tax reform, the greatest reform to help the competitiveness of our companies of all time in at least the last 30 years, these opposition members want to be opposed. When what we need now is support for our private sector to create jobs and we come forward with initiatives to do just that, the opposition members are opposed.

Let me say, in particular for the forestry sector, where were they when it was time to make those votes on support to the forestry industry that flowed over \$600 million, an unprecedented amount? The member opposite decided to ask these questions tonight, after question period and after everyone's gone home, when I could stay all night to talk about our support and how you voted. You are opposed to every measure that we've extended, whether that was building new roads through the forests to help those companies, whether it was stumpage fees, you name it—unprecedented support by this government to that sector.

In particular, I think this member should be aware—and so should all the constituents in the north. I recognize he's only from the south, but the northern people out there who might be watching need to understand: \$205 million through the prosperity fund; \$141 million through the loan guarantee program—these are all new—\$94 million through the northern pulp and paper electricity transition program; \$87 million in stumpage relief; \$3 million in wood promotion; \$38 million in forestry inventory funding. For every single one of these initiatives, the opposition members were opposed when it came to the vote.

Are you really interested in the forestry sector? Are you really intent on helping people maintain jobs, or are you just doing this for show? Because when push comes to shove and it comes time for the Speaker to stand up and see where you stand on a vote, you have been opposed every time to every initiative helping the forestry sector. We're going to call a spade a spade here.

This is the only government that has given this level of significant support to forestry, and not just forestry, because other sectors have suffered too: many sectors, in particular advanced manufacturing, that frankly were the hardest hit with the advent of the rise of the dollar against the American dollar.

So how can we insert ourselves to be helpful, to help that competitiveness, to make up for 35% that they had naturally just because of the dollar value? We've done many things, and many of them are working. We expect this member to stand in the House in support of the forestry sector, just like the government of Ontario.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Jim Wilson): There being no further matter to debate, I deem the motion to adjourn to be carried. This House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 9 a.m.

The House adjourned at 1811.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO
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Speaker / Président: Hon. / L'hon. Steve Peters

Clerk / Greffière: Deborah Deller

Clerks-at-the-Table / Greffiers parlementaires: Todd Decker, Lisa Freedman, Tonia Grannum

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Arthurs, Wayne (LIB)	Pickering–Scarborough East / Pickering–Scarborough-Est	
Bailey, Robert (PC)	Sarnia–Lambton	
Balkissoon, Bas (LIB)	Scarborough–Rouge River	
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Bentley, Hon. / L'hon. Christopher (LIB)	London West / London-Ouest	Attorney General / Procureur général Minister of Aboriginal Affairs / Ministre des Affaires autochtones
Berardinetti, Lorenzo (LIB)	Scarborough Southwest / Scarborough–Sud-Ouest	
Best, Hon. / L'hon. Margaret R. (LIB)	Scarborough–Guildwood	Minister of Health Promotion / Ministre de la Promotion de la santé
Bisson, Gilles (NDP)	Timmins–James Bay / Timmins–Baie James	
Bradley, Hon. / L'hon. James J. (LIB)	St. Catharines	Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing / Ministre des Affaires municipales et du Logement
Brotten, Hon. / L'hon. Laurel C. (LIB)	Etobicoke–Lakeshore	Minister of Children and Youth Services / Ministre des Services à l'enfance et à la jeunesse Minister Responsible for Women's Issues / Ministre déléguée à la Condition féminine
Brown, Michael A. (LIB)	Algoma–Manitoulin	
Brownell, Jim (LIB)	Stormont–Dundas–South Glengarry	
Cansfield, Donna H. (LIB)	Etobicoke Centre / Etobicoke-Centre	
Caplan, David (LIB)	Don Valley East / Don Valley-Est	
Carroll, M. Aileen (LIB)	Barrie	
Chan, Hon. / L'hon. Michael (LIB)	Markham–Unionville	Minister of Tourism and Culture / Ministre du Tourisme et de la Culture
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Colle, Mike (LIB)	Eglinton–Lawrence	
Craitor, Kim (LIB)	Niagara Falls	
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Dhillon, Vic (LIB)	Brampton West / Brampton-Ouest	
Dickson, Joe (LIB)	Ajax–Pickering	
DiNovo, Cheri (NDP)	Parkdale–High Park	Second Deputy Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Deuxième vice-présidente du Comité plénier de l'Assemblée législative
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Elliott, Christine (PC)	Whitby–Oshawa	Deputy Leader, Official Opposition / Chef adjointe de l'opposition officielle

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Gélinas, France (NDP) Gerretsen, Hon. / L'hon. John (LIB)	Nickel Belt Kingston and the Islands / Kingston et les Îles	Minister of the Environment / Ministre de l'Environnement
Gravelle, Hon. / L'hon. Michael (LIB)	Thunder Bay–Superior North / Thunder Bay–Superior-Nord	Minister of Northern Development, Mines and Forestry / Ministre du Développement du Nord, des Mines et des Forêts
Hampton, Howard (NDP) Hardeman, Ernie (PC)	Kenora–Rainy River Oxford	Deputy Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire adjoint de l'opposition officielle
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Horwath, Andrea (NDP)	Hamilton Centre / Hamilton-Centre	Leader, Recognized Party / Chef de parti reconnu Leader, New Democratic Party of Ontario / Chef du Nouveau parti démocratique de l'Ontario
Hoskins, Hon. / L'hon. Eric (LIB)	St. Paul's	Minister of Citizenship and Immigration / Ministre des Affaires civiques et de l'Immigration
Hoy, Pat (LIB) Hudak, Tim (PC)	Chatham–Kent–Essex Niagara West–Glanbrook / Niagara- Ouest–Glanbrook	Leader, Official Opposition / Chef de l'opposition officielle Leader, Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario / Chef du Parti progressiste-conservateur de l'Ontario
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Kular, Kuldip (LIB) Kwinter, Monte (LIB) Lalonde, Jean-Marc (LIB) Leal, Jeff (LIB) Levac, Dave (LIB) MacLeod, Lisa (PC) Mangat, Amrit (LIB)	Bramalea–Gore–Malton York Centre / York-Centre Glengarry–Prescott–Russell Peterborough Brant Nepean–Carleton Mississauga–Brampton South / Mississauga–Brampton-Sud	
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Mauro, Bill (LIB) McGuinty, Hon. / L'hon. Dalton (LIB)	Thunder Bay–Atikokan Ottawa South / Ottawa-Sud	Premier / Premier ministre Leader, Liberal Party of Ontario / Chef du Parti libéral de l'Ontario
McMeekin, Ted (LIB)	Ancaster–Dundas–Flamborough– Westdale	
McNeely, Phil (LIB) Meilleur, Hon. / L'hon. Madeleine (LIB)	Ottawa–Orléans Ottawa–Vanier	Minister of Community and Social Services / Ministre des Services sociaux et communautaires Minister Responsible for Francophone Affairs / Ministre déléguée aux Affaires francophones
Miller, Norm (PC) Miller, Paul (NDP)	Parry Sound–Muskoka Hamilton East–Stoney Creek / Hamilton-Est–Stoney Creek	
Milloy, Hon. / L'hon. John (LIB)	Kitchener Centre / Kitchener-Centre	Minister of Research and Innovation / Ministre de la Recherche et de l'Innovation Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities / Ministre de la Formation et des Collèges et Universités
Mitchell, Hon. / L'hon. Carol (LIB)	Huron–Bruce	Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs / Ministre de l'Agriculture, de l'Alimentation et des Affaires rurales
Moridi, Reza (LIB) Munro, Julia (PC)	Richmond Hill York–Simcoe	Third Deputy Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Troisième vice-présidente du Comité plénier de l'Assemblée législative

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
Murdoch, Bill (PC)	Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound	
Murray, Glen R (LIB)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	
Naqvi, Yasir (LIB)	Ottawa Centre / Ottawa-Centre	
O'Toole, John (PC)	Durham	
Oraziotti, David (LIB)	Sault Ste. Marie	
Ouellette, Jerry J. (PC)	Oshawa	
Pendergast, Leeanna (LIB)	Kitchener–Conestoga	
Peters, Hon. / L'hon. Steve (LIB)	Elgin–Middlesex–London	Speaker / Président de l'Assemblée législative
Phillips, Hon. / L'hon. Gerry (LIB)	Scarborough–Agincourt	Chair of Cabinet / Président du Conseil des ministres
		Minister Responsible for Seniors / Ministre délégué aux Affaires des personnes âgées
		Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille
		Deputy Government House Leader / Leader parlementaire adjoint du gouvernement
Prue, Michael (NDP)	Beaches–East York	
Pupatello, Hon. / L'hon. Sandra (LIB)	Windsor West / Windsor-Ouest	Minister of Economic Development and Trade / Ministre du Développement économique et du Commerce
Qaadri, Shafiq (LIB)	Etobicoke North / Etobicoke-Nord	
Ramal, Khalil (LIB)	London–Fanshawe	
Ramsay, David (LIB)	Timiskaming–Cochrane	
Rinaldi, Lou (LIB)	Northumberland–Quinte West	
Ruprecht, Tony (LIB)	Davenport	
Sandals, Liz (LIB)	Guelph	
Savoline, Joyce (PC)	Burlington	
Sergio, Mario (LIB)	York West / York-Ouest	
Shurman, Peter (PC)	Thornhill	
Smith, Hon. / L'hon. Monique M. (LIB)	Nipissing	Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs / Ministre des Affaires intergouvernementales
		Government House Leader / Leader parlementaire du gouvernement
Sorbara, Greg (LIB)	Vaughan	
Sousa, Charles (LIB)	Mississauga South / Mississauga-Sud	
Sterling, Norman W. (PC)	Carleton–Mississippi Mills	
Tabuns, Peter (NDP)	Toronto–Danforth	Deputy Third Party House Leader / Leader parlementaire adjoint de parti reconnu
Takhar, Hon. / L'hon. Harinder S. (LIB)	Mississauga–Erindale	Minister of Government Services / Ministre des Services gouvernementaux
Van Bommel, Maria (LIB)	Lambton–Kent–Middlesex	
Wilkinson, Hon. / L'hon. John (LIB)	Perth–Wellington	Minister of Revenue / Ministre du Revenu
Wilson, Jim (PC)	Simcoe–Grey	First Deputy Chair of the Committee of the Whole House / Premier vice-président du comité plénier de l'Assemblée
Witmer, Elizabeth (PC)	Kitchener–Waterloo	
Wynne, Hon. / L'hon. Kathleen O. (LIB)	Don Valley West / Don Valley-Ouest	Minister of Transportation / Ministre des Transports
Yakabuski, John (PC)	Renfrew–Nipissing–Pembroke	Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire de l'opposition officielle
Zimmer, David (LIB)	Willowdale	
Vacant	Leeds–Grenville	
Vacant	Ottawa West–Nepean / Ottawa-Ouest–Nepean	

**STANDING AND SELECT COMMITTEES OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
COMITÉS PERMANENTS ET SPÉCIAUX DE L'ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE**

Standing Committee on Estimates / Comité permanent des budgets des dépenses

Chair / Président: Garfield Dunlop
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Robert Bailey
Robert Bailey, Gilles Bisson
Jim Brownell, Kim Craitor
Bob Delaney, Garfield Dunlop
Phil McNeely, John O'Toole
Khalil Ramal
Clerks / Greffiers: William Short (pro tem.), Sylwia Przewdziecki

**Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs /
Comité permanent des finances et des affaires économiques**

Chair / Président: Pat Hoy
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Laura Albanese
Laura Albanese, Wayne Arthurs
Toby Barrett, Kevin Daniel Flynn
Eric Hoskins, Pat Hoy
Norm Miller, Charles Sousa
Peter Tabuns
Committee Clerk / Greffier: William Short

**Standing Committee on General Government / Comité
permanent des affaires gouvernementales**

Chair / Président: David Oraziatti
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Helena Jaczek
Helena Jaczek, Kuldip Kular
Amrit Mangat, Rosario Marchese
Bill Mauro, Reza Moridi
David Oraziatti, Joyce Savoline
John Yakabuski
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Trevor Day

**Standing Committee on Government Agencies / Comité
permanent des organismes gouvernementaux**

Chair / Président: Ernie Hardeman
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Lisa MacLeod
Laura Albanese, Michael A. Brown
Howard Hampton, Ernie Hardeman
Rick Johnson, Lisa MacLeod
Yasir Naqvi, Leeanna Pendergast
Jim Wilson
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Douglas Arnott

**Standing Committee on Justice Policy / Comité permanent de
la justice**

Chair / Président: Lorenzo Berardinetti
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Jeff Leal
Lorenzo Berardinetti, Ted Chudleigh
Christine Elliott, Peter Kormos
Jeff Leal, Dave Levac
Leeanna Pendergast, Lou Rinaldi
David Zimmer
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Susan Sourial

**Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly / Comité
permanent de l'Assemblée législative**

Chair / Président: Bas Balkissoon
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Khalil Ramal
Bas Balkissoon, Jim Brownell
Bob Delaney, Joe Dickson
Rick Johnson, Sylvia Jones
Norm Miller, Michael Prue
Khalil Ramal
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tonia Grannum

**Standing Committee on Public Accounts / Comité permanent
des comptes publics**

Chair / Président: Norman W. Sterling
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Peter Shurman
France Gélinas, Phil McNeely
Jerry J. Ouellette, David Ramsay
Liz Sandals, Peter Shurman
Norman W. Sterling, Maria Van Bommel
David Zimmer
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Katch Koch

**Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills / Comité
permanent des règlements et des projets de loi d'intérêt privé**

Chair / Président: Michael Prue
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Paul Miller
Bas Balkissoon, Mike Colle
Kim Craitor, Gerry Martiniuk
Paul Miller, Bill Murdoch
Michael Prue, Tony Ruprecht
Mario Sergio
Clerks / Greffiers: Trevor Day (pro tem.), Sylwia Przewdziecki

**Standing Committee on Social Policy / Comité permanent de
la politique sociale**

Chair / Président: Shafiq Qaadri
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Vic Dhillon
Sophia Aggelonitis, Vic Dhillon
Cheri DiNovo, Linda Jeffrey
Sylvia Jones, Jean-Marc Lalonde
Carol Mitchell, Shafiq Qaadri
Elizabeth Witmer
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Katch Koch

**Select Committee on Mental Health and Addictions / Comité
spécial de la santé mentale et des dépendances**

Chair / Président: Kevin Daniel Flynn
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Christine Elliott
Bas Balkissoon, Christine Elliott
Kevin Daniel Flynn, France Gélinas
Helena Jaczek, Sylvia Jones
Jeff Leal, Liz Sandals
Maria Van Bommel
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