

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

No. 214B

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

N° 214B

1st Session
42nd Parliament

Thursday
26 November 2020

1^{re} session
42^e législature

Jeudi
26 novembre 2020

Speaker: Honourable Ted Arnott
Clerk: Todd Decker

Président : L'honorable Ted Arnott
Greffier : Todd Decker

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



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Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400; télécopieur, 416-325-7430
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 1180-2987

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Thursday 26 November 2020

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Jeudi 26 novembre 2020

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MAIN STREET RECOVERY ACT, 2020
LOI DE 2020 VISANT À REDONNER VIE
AUX RUES COMMERÇANTES

Continuation of debate on the motion for third reading of the following bill:

Bill 215, An Act to amend various statutes with respect to the economic recovery of Ontario and to make other amendments / *Projet de loi 215, Loi modifiant diverses lois en ce qui concerne la reprise économique de l'Ontario et apportant d'autres modifications.*

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Ms. Suze Morrison: It's a pleasure to rise today to speak to government Bill 215, the Main Street Recovery Act. Unfortunately, this penny-pinching bill does less than the bare minimum when it comes to actually supporting small businesses in our communities through the recovery from COVID-19. Working folks and small and medium-sized businesses are on the brink of a second financial disaster this year, and this government is refusing to offer the lifeline that they really need.

Once again, we're debating a bill that fails Ontarians. This bill does not go anywhere near far enough to help people and businesses recover from the pandemic's economic crisis.

As the pandemic continues and we face a second shutdown in Toronto and Peel, workplaces and businesses are required to close their doors yet again. We know that it will continue to be difficult for workers to find jobs and small business owners have bills to pay. They urgently need help from the provincial government to avoid financial disaster.

This government needs to invest in solutions that will truly help Ontarians recover from this pandemic and help our communities thrive. Now is not the time for half measures. It's not the time for minor tweaks. We need substantive policies that will help Ontarians stay afloat. My NDP colleagues and I brought forward a plan with many of these policies—and we brought this forward to the government at the beginning of the pandemic—a plan that I sincerely urge the members opposite to adopt.

This is no time for partisanship. Just because a good idea has come from the NDP benches doesn't mean it's one that you should outright reject. Our plan for small businesses, our plan to Save Main Street, is a good plan and is a path forward for recovery for the business community.

Local small businesses play such an important role in ensuring that there are jobs in our community. Small businesses in my riding are hurting during the pandemic. They're struggling to pay rent, and many have had to let their workers go to stay afloat. The unemployment rate continues to rise. I have spoken to many of the businesses and know that they feel invested in our communities. They want to be giving back. But right now, they find it almost impossible to keep the bills paid to keep their operations afloat.

In my downtown Toronto riding, where commercial storefronts on main streets are in high demand, covering the rent without any revenue coming in has been extremely difficult, if not impossible. We're talking about businesses that are paying some of the highest commercial rents in all of Canada, and you haven't provided any sort of rent subsidy. When they have rent payments coming up of \$17,000 a month, how are these businesses supposed to pay for that?

I have spoken several times in this House about the importance of the Church and Wellesley Village. I want to emphasize, as I have on dozens of occasions, how important this community is, not just as a commercial main street but as a cultural main street; it is both. It's a safe haven for 2SLGBTQ+ people, not just from my riding but from your ridings. From all over Ontario, they come into the Church and Wellesley Village to find community. The small businesses in that community play a huge role in creating the welcoming environment that's unique to the Church and Wellesley Village.

I'm not exaggerating when I say the Church and Wellesley Village is at risk of disappearing if this government does not take action. Not only were Pride celebrations cancelled this year, but also Halloween, an incredibly important time for the businesses in the Village.

Church Street is Toronto's unofficial Halloween destination. Every year, the street opens up to pedestrians, packed with people in impressive costumes, and the venues and bars along the street are filled with people partying—and it's not just a party spot; the very act of Halloween on Church Street is tied to the history of homophobia and transphobia in this city.

I have recently been reading *Missing from the Village* by Justin Ling. I'm almost done, but obviously my free time for reading has been cut a little bit short lately. It explores the story of Bruce McArthur, the serial killer who was preying on gay men in the Church and Wellesley Village for years, while we watched missing person poster after missing person poster go up on every street corner for years in our community. Early in the book, Ling

explains some of the history of Halloween on Church. I would like to share that history from that book with the House today. Again, this is from Justin Ling's *Missing from the Village*:

"Halloween has a special significance in Toronto's Gay Village. In the early 1970s, as the gay liberation movement began to get rolling, a small strip of rundown bars, tucked in among the body-rub parlours and arcades, had become, as it was called back then, the gay ghetto. Two bars in particular stuck out: the Parkside Tavern and the St. Charles Tavern. Inside you could find a mix of drug dealers, outcasts and gays. Over time, the gay clientele became the majority, and never was that more obvious than on Halloween.

"Patrons would don full gowns, flowing wigs, and ostentatious jewellery to make the trek down to the bustling and seedy Yonge Street, in drag, from the Parkside to the St. Charles, blowing kisses and waving to onlookers and gawkers. I've watched old newsreels of those nights, down in the sub-basement of our national broadcaster, the CBC, on an archaic grey-green machine the size of a chest freezer. Through grainy footage and intermittent sound, I could see scenes of partying and revelling, not entirely unlike what happens now, on Church Street, on October 31.

"Back then, though, what began as a curious oddity for the city soon got ugly. Crowds formed. Maybe mobs is a better word. Many jeering spectators would launch eggs and insults at the drag queens as police stood idly by. It got so bad that, by the late 1970s, many patrons would sneak in the back doors of the St. Charles, fearing for their lives. Only the fiercest drag queens would risk the stroll to the front door. Some were so bold as to strut down the yellow paint on the centre of the street. Some kept extra outfits prepared, in case theirs was ruined by egg yolk. One would put razor blades in their wig, lest some poor soul try to snatch it. Eventually, police got hold of the situation, but only after well-connected gay activists dragged the police chief down to witness the unruly scene. Finally, barricades went up and police kept the violence from the crowd down to hurled slurs.

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"And, as acceptance of the community grew and as the community occupied its own space, not far off, on Church Street, the parade passed from simple tolerance to acceptance and, eventually, celebration. The irate protesters were replaced with revellers looking to join the party. Now, every year, Church Street shuts down for the night, with a cavalcade of costumed partygoers mingling in the street, popping in and out of the bars."

To all my colleagues: If you go today to the site that's under construction where the St. Charles Tavern used to be, just a few blocks from where we stand today, at Yonge Street and Grosvenor, you'll see the historic clock tower that used to sit atop the St. Charles. That clock tower that sat atop the bar is the namesake for the phrase, "Meet me under the clock tower," a popular phrase in the Village. It still stands today as a testament to the history of queer and trans liberation that fought its way up from the streets of Toronto to become Toronto's gay village.

I'm not just talking about businesses. I'm talking about the history of queer and trans liberation in this city, and that history is in the bricks and mortar of the small businesses that this government is absolutely neglecting to support.

This year, Halloween on Church didn't happen. The lost income of Halloween on Church, on top of a cancelled Pride festival, has been absolutely devastating to the bottom line of queer- and trans-owned businesses that need to survive. They are a historic part of the city's landscape.

So this year, the Church and Wellesley BIA organized a virtual Halloween celebration, encouraging folks to safely support local businesses by ordering online and getting takeout. The BIA did an incredible job, and I'm so proud of them. I want to commend them for their amazing work supporting our small businesses during this difficult time.

Speaker, these businesses need urgent support. They've needed support since the beginning of this pandemic, but this government has continuously refused to act. These businesses need a government that's going to step up and provide rent relief and a full commercial eviction ban, not a temporary one that lasted a few weeks and is long gone. They need help keeping workers on the payroll and support to help them adapt to the new reality where people are making more purchases online. They need a cap on fees imposed by delivery apps—and while I'm pleased to see that bill come forward, we needed that six months ago. Instead, this government is telling businesses in my community, "Too bad, so sad. You're on your own."

Yesterday, I received a letter from the St. Lawrence Market Neighbourhood BIA. The St. Lawrence Market is another historical landmark in Toronto, part of the city's original first 12 blocks. Not only does this heritage neighbourhood attract tourists, but for many locals, the market is where they purchase fresh local groceries from local food vendors every week.

George Milbrandt, the chair of the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood BIA, and Al Smith, the executive director of the BIA, wrote to me about how businesses in the area had taken important safety measures to keep customers and workers safe and prevent the spread of COVID-19. They wrote about the importance of the holidays to ensuring that businesses are able to turn a profit. I want to read some of the letter that they shared with me today so that members of this House can fully understand the reality of what small businesses in my riding are facing. It says, "The most frequent questions asked by our members that quite frankly we have no answer for is 'Why should large, multinational, American chains be deemed essential and permitted to stay open while offering thousands of "non-essential items" including but not limited to books, toys and clothing yet a local bookstore is forced to close their doors?'"

Businesses in my riding and across the province are frustrated, and I understand their frustration. Despite what the Premier wants to say about his heart breaking for businesses, he has decided to follow through with unfair

rules that leave our local small businesses barely hanging on, because those small businesses can't afford to pay for the Conservative insider lobbyists that folks like Walmart can. What business is the Premier here to support? The Walmarts and the Real Canadian Superstores—those businesses that pulled pandemic pay from their workers? Or the mom-and-pop stores on our local main streets? Who is he here to support? I think it's clear.

Earlier this week, my colleague the MPP for Waterloo asked the Premier why he's willing to let small main street businesses go under while propping up big businesses that, like I said, have been cutting pandemic pay to their front-line workers. She revealed some enlightening findings: Surprise, surprise, Melissa Lantsman, the Premier's former war room director, is currently registered to lobby the Premier on Walmart's behalf. Walmart also hired David Tarrant, the Premier's former executive director of strategic communications, to lobby on their behalf. Together, these two PC Party insiders set up a meeting with the Premier and the Walmart CEO, where the CEO convinced the Premier that they had no choice but to stay open, even though their small main street competitors all had to shut down.

The small businesses in my community aren't PC insiders. They aren't able to set up meetings directly with the Premier, but that shouldn't mean that their concerns are ignored. They shouldn't be unfairly disadvantaged so that this government can favour their corporate friends. This is not a fair response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the small business owners who work in their own shops or restaurants and the workers who have been let go from those businesses or had their hours reduced, the pandemic has been an incredibly stressful time.

A few weeks ago, I spoke in the Legislature about William, a constituent in my riding who is struggling to pay his rent. William changed his career just before the beginning of the pandemic. He lost his new job in March and has since struggled to find work.

During a press conference earlier this month about the Ontario NDP's plan for housing, another constituent in my riding who runs a small business spoke about how he is having difficulty paying his rent as the pandemic continues and his contracts have dried up.

There are so many workers in Ontario right now who are in the same situation as the folks I have just described. They are extremely worried about their financial stability. For many of these working folks, their pantries are about to go bare, their rent or mortgage is going unpaid, or they're having to crack open their retirement savings just to get by.

We know that many people lived in difficult financial situations even before the pandemic. For years, unemployment reports and academics have warned Liberal and Conservative governments about the increasing number of people in this province who are working in unstable and precarious employment. These workers often live just a paycheque or so away from being unable to make ends meet. They work jobs with no benefits and no paid sick days, and where just taking a day off work or going a month without a job just isn't possible.

Paid sick days, good jobs and financial security for working folks is what will help people weather the COVID-19 storm and it's what will drive the recovery. Imagine how different our communities would look right now if either the Conservative or the Liberal government, over the last 20 years, had tackled the issue of precarity in our workforce that has developed over the last two decades. And it has seeped its way right into our post-secondary education system. Think about the number of sessional teachers working in our colleges and universities who have to scramble together three and four and five contracts, where they don't have permanent, stable employment at any one institution because of the institutionalized underfunding and under-resourcing by both Liberal and Conservative governments going back two decades now—or the rise of the gig economy.

Our workforce has no stability. They have no paid sick days. Imagine how different our communities could look right now if we had entered into this pandemic with stability in our workforce, with the paid sick days that this government rolled back, with a fair minimum wage, with real rent control that meant that people in my community weren't paying an average rent that's higher than the CERB payments ever were. The average rent in my riding for a one-bedroom apartment is \$2,100 to \$2,200 a month; the CERB payments were only ever \$2,000. So in my riding, even if they got CERB, it didn't even pay their rent. They were \$100 to \$200 short on the first of the month, even when the CERB cheques came in.

And then you fast-tracked a bill to make it easier for landlords to evict tenants.

You're not supporting working people; you're not supporting renters; you're not supporting workers. What are you doing? This bill does nothing to protect or create jobs, to help small or medium-sized businesses get back on their feet or to help everyday Ontarians recover from the financial strain that this pandemic has caused. It's so disappointing because, like I said, it never should have reached this point.

Ninety per cent of all COVID-19 spending in Ontario has come from the federal government, and for months now, going back to March, the Ford government promised to kick in but hasn't. Instead, they've continued to sit on \$9.3 billion of unspent, unallocated money that was earmarked for the pandemic response, \$7 billion of which was federal money transferred to the province to help with the pandemic. Do your jobs. Why aren't you providing the relief that our communities so desperately need?

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In this bill, we are again seeing this government trying to do things on the cheap. There's nothing in this bill to support businesses—no paid sick days or any extra help to hot spots in crisis, including Brampton, Scarborough and northwest Toronto. Instead, the Premier is doing what he always does: spending on big businesses while cutting and shortchanging the things that working families and small businesses rely on.

The solution is that the NDP has put forward an actual plan to save Main Street that offers financial security for

working folks, and it's exactly what this government should be doing right now. We believe that only by investing in working folks will we come out of this pandemic healthier and more prosperous.

We will support small businesses by ensuring a ban on all commercial evictions, lockouts or eviction threats until the end of the pandemic. That's what we should be doing.

We should be placing a utility payment freeze for small businesses and medium-sized businesses.

We should be offering a stand-alone emergency 75% rent subsidy of up to \$10,000 a month for our small businesses.

We should be creating a fund for businesses that face historic barriers to access investment and traditional sources of capital.

To keep workers safe, to work remotely, we should be helping businesses with remote work set-up funds so that they can provide the equipment that their workers need to work from home.

We should be focusing on paid sick days so that when workers are sick they can actually afford to stay home, so that if their kids are sick they can afford to stay home and keep their kids out of school—not sending their children into the school system sick because their parents can't afford to take the day off work. No one should have to shoulder the depths of this pandemic or face eviction because they got sick from COVID-19. All workers in this province deserve paid sick leave.

As my colleague from London West has said many times in this House, we also need to address the fact that this pandemic has disproportionately hurt women. We need to help women recover from the economic impact of this pandemic. The NDP is calling for more, safer, not-for-profit and public child care spaces. Women can't return to the workforce if their kids have no child care spaces to go to that they can afford.

We're also calling for a cap on class sizes and school bus capacity to keep kids safe and ensure that parents are able to return to work and trust that their children will be kept safe in daycare or at school.

We're also calling for a dedicated retraining fund and an office to advance women's apprenticeship to help more women enter the trades.

We need more from this government. We have a strong plan that we have put forward to you that's the kind of response that we need to save our main streets. I'm urging the government members: Take those ideas, implement them, incorporate them into your plans. Steal our ideas, please. It's what our community needs. Just because an idea has come from an NDP bench doesn't inherently make it a bad one. We need to see real action that will help keep working folks in small businesses, help make sure that they can survive the pandemic.

I'm calling on this government to do more to help people who are struggling and to prepare our province for a just economic recovery that will ensure that working folks don't have to shoulder the mistakes of this government for years to come.

Thank you so much to my colleagues.

Again, I sincerely urge the government members on the other side: Please look at our Save Main Street plan. Steal our ideas. Put them into your government bills. The half measures in the bill that we're here debating today do not go far enough.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions to the member for Toronto Centre, based on her presentation?

Mr. Randy Pettapiece: I listened intently to the member from Toronto Centre's words.

Speaker, you may know that my wife and I had a small business until four years ago. That's when she decided she would close it down. I had hoped it was because I was no longer there and she missed me, but she put that to bed pretty quick. What a lot of it had to do with was red tape. She got tired of filling forms out. This was back in 2016, so the previous government was in power—form after form, and they kept bringing up more stuff, bringing up more stuff, and she was spending more time at nights doing all of this type of thing, as a small business owner does.

Red tape is very costly. It adds a lot of cost to businesses. We know that. We've heard that across the spectrum.

I wonder if the member opposite could tell us her ideas on reducing red tape and how much that would save our small businesses.

Ms. Suze Morrison: Speaker, I'd like to thank the member from Perth-Wellington for the question, but I'd also like to redirect his memory back to the consultations that this Legislature held with small businesses for weeks and weeks on the COVID-19 recovery. What we didn't hear in those consultations was that red tape was the number one issue for businesses to surviving the COVID-19 emergency.

What we did hear as the number one issue from small businesses in those consultations that government members were part of that drew on for weeks was that small businesses in this province needed rent relief. They needed a commercial eviction ban. They needed real, tangible financial supports from this government. They needed paid sick days, support to keep their workers on the payroll.

Instead, this government has thrown their hands in the air and said, "Maybe if the federal government wants to step in and do some of that stuff, sure. But we're going to sit on our \$9 billion of unspent federal money and not deliver any of that to small businesses."

That was the number one issue—rent relief and an eviction ban.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for London West.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to share some comments from a woman entrepreneur who owns four different food establishments in London. Jess Jazey-Spoelstra says her business is down \$2 million in revenue since March, and she has six salaried staff on hand. She says, "These staff need this wage as they have families to support, lots being single parents and cannot afford life on EI. They are also integral staff for my business and I need them when this pandemic is over. I cannot afford to lose them."

My question to the member from Toronto Centre is, has she heard similar things from businesses in her riding about how much they value their staff? And what would the NDP do to enable businesses to keep staff on the payroll?

Ms. Suze Morrison: Thank you to the member from London West for the question. It's a great one.

I have heard from small businesses in my community. They love their staff. They pay them well. A lot of times it's the small businesses in our community that are going above and beyond and paying above minimum wage. It's the baristas in the local coffee shop who are making \$16 and \$17 an hour, not the unlivable \$14 an hour that this government has refused to raise. They want to keep them on board, and they need support.

How much easier is it for a government to help a small business with things like wage subsidies to keep their staff on board at the organizations and businesses and companies they work at—how much more affordable is that to a government than for all of those workers to go on EI, where, as the public, we're subsidizing those lost jobs?

We need to support workers to stay in their jobs because it's the right thing to do, it's the responsible thing to do.

Small businesses don't want to lose their employees. They're a valuable part of our community and make up the fabric of local main streets.

Yes, we need to be doing more to support workers to stay on the payroll at their local small businesses.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions?

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: I appreciate the remarks from the member for Toronto Centre. I know she has a lot of wonderful small businesses in her riding. I'm particularly fond of Craig's Cookies myself, which I've visited several times over the pandemic, as folks, I'm sure, can notice by taking a look at me.

During the hearings at the finance committee, we heard time and time again about the cost of PPE for some of these small businesses. So I wondered if the member opposite could speak a little bit about how important the main street recovery grant is going to be to some of those small businesses, like Craig's Cookies—to be able to support them with the cost of PPE?

Ms. Suze Morrison: Thank you so much to the member from Ottawa West—Nepean for the question.

I love Craig's Cookies, too. They're a great local store on our main street in the Church and Wellesley Village.

The businesses that are on that stretch of Church Street are paying, in some cases, close to \$20,000 a month in rent. PPE is not what is making or breaking small businesses in my community. Giving folks—what is the PPE amount that they've offered?

Miss Monique Taylor: A thousand dollars.

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Ms. Suze Morrison: A thousand dollars isn't going to do anything for the businesses in my community. Sure, it's not a slap in the face, but it might as well be.

Miss Monique Taylor: And criteria.

Ms. Suze Morrison: And there's criteria attached to it.

We need rent relief. We need a commercial eviction ban. Do you know what's going to happen? We have developers sitting, waiting like vultures to pick up all of these shops the second that they close their doors, to parcel the land into condo developments. We are going to have nothing left of our cultural main street on Church Street, when this is all said and done. When this government failed to step in and protect these small businesses, and we have nothing but a condo on every single corner—not a main street, not a local business in sight.

We need rent relief and a commercial eviction ban, not platitudes.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Beaches—East York.

Ms. Rima Berns-McGown: I want to thank my colleague for her comments. What was so beautiful about it was the way that you described the character of a neighbourhood, of a riding that comes from the local businesses and the ambience that they create, the personal relationships that they build with the neighbours. That is exactly the same in Beaches—East York. It is exactly the same, I'm sure, in every city and town and neighbourhood across the province.

It feels, to me, like by ignoring—it's not that red tape isn't an issue; it's that if you don't pay the rent now, the red tape issues will not matter. And as you point out, PPE is neither here nor there. It's not nothing, but it isn't what is fundamentally needed.

I wonder if you could speak to the character shift that is going to happen in cities and towns and neighbourhoods across Ontario if we lose the lion's share or a great many of our small businesses.

Ms. Suze Morrison: Thank you so much to the member for Beaches—East York.

You're so right: We are going to see a character shift in our communities. My biggest fear—and this is why I stood here and told the story of the history of queer and trans liberation that is tied to what most people look at Church Street at Halloween and see as just a party. Our history, the history of queer and trans liberation, is tied to the small businesses in our community. It's not just a character shift that happens in our communities when these businesses eventually close. When this government does nothing to support them, we're going to lose our history. Who becomes the keeper of these stories and these histories when no one tells those stories anymore, when we can't point to the places where things happened because they're gone?

Our history, queer and trans history, is too important to have literally scrubbed from the street signs of our main street.

Please, to the government members: We need commercial rent subsidies. We need a commercial eviction ban. We need more support for our small businesses. You cannot let this happen.

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

Mr. Aris Babikian: I'm listening to my colleague on the opposite side. The way she frames the whole dis-

cussion, it's either/or. She's mocking the \$1,000 contribution that we provided to businesses—saying that nothing will help.

Businesses in my own riding, at the beginning of this pandemic, couldn't afford to buy PPE—they couldn't find it, not that they couldn't afford it. So I provided lots of PPE and hand sanitizer to them, and they were very appreciative.

We know there are so many needs, but to sit down and do nothing unless we solve or address the issues that the opposition is presenting is irresponsible.

My question is, why don't you appreciate whatever help we are providing to the small businesses?

Ms. Suze Morrison: Thank you to the member from Scarborough—Agincourt for the question.

As I said to one of the previous members, I don't object to the \$1,000 you want to give out to businesses for PPE, but the reason they can't afford it is not because PPE is expensive. They can't afford it because they have no income coming in the door, and they can't afford to pay their rent.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Ms. Doly Begum: Mr. Speaker, I would like to first point out that as opposition members, one of the things I have tried and my colleagues have tried throughout the past two years, as well as especially during this pandemic, is to make sure that we support the bills that are good, that are supporting Ontarians—and there have been very few of these—and make sure that we propose amendments, we propose ideas.

When I look at Bill 215, the Main Street Recovery Act, this was one of those moments where this bill has—and we will support it. I will support the bill, and I want to make this very clear. I'm not standing up here to just oppose. That's not what we do. We oppose, but we also propose. It's very important for me to be crystal clear about this because, time and time again, we hear the government members tell us that we're just opposing them.

I want to tell you that I will support this because there are bits and pieces that my colleague from Toronto Centre very eloquently talked about—that there are some components of it, like the \$1,000, but it barely does enough. So it's not that we're going to oppose these little measures that you have put forward.

I appreciate the time that I have to speak on behalf of my constituents, the good people of Scarborough Southwest, to point out some of the things that they have asked for when we talk about main street recovery.

I would like to first start by saying that small businesses across this province are in trouble. Earlier this week, I stood here to seek accountability from the government for why big box stores like Walmart, like Costco, are allowed to be open, and why small, independent businesses are being forced to shut down. I completely understand that it is extremely important that we prioritize public health and safety measures, and I will abide by the recommendations of our public health officials. The question here is, we need to understand why and how these rules are made that

favour the big box businesses against the small business owners, who are in trouble right now.

As of right now, when we look at the employees, we know that in this bill, for example, there are no accommodations made for women, no training programs for women. There is no rent relief. One of the things that I feel like I'm a broken record now or—what's the phrase that my good friend from Timiskaming—Cochrane always uses? I can go on until the cows come home, but this government won't listen.

We have talked about rent relief over and over and over again. I don't even know how many different ways we can talk about it. That's one of the primary tools that small businesses need to save their businesses, to save this entity that they pulled together. We know what goes behind building a business, sustaining one, and keeping the doors open.

So this plan does nothing for rent relief. We know what the problems were when we looked at the federal rent relief program—how it left out so many businesses that did not qualify for rent relief.

There's also no financial support for struggling businesses. The funding available right now is heavily means-tested and inaccessible to most of the businesses struggling in my riding of Scarborough Southwest.

I want to give some examples of the businesses that have reached out. I have spoken with a lot of business owners, and I have talked about many of them in this House, as well, from restaurants to travel agencies to dance studios—all sorts of businesses that we have raised concerns about.

One of the businesses I want to talk about is Skymark Travel. I have talked about Rinkee Ahmed in the past. Rinkee Ahmed founded Skymark Travel, and I think she has been running this business for the last eight or nine years. This is a female entrepreneur from my riding who put everything she had into building a successful business, and she's now doing the right thing by closing her doors and prioritizing public health. I think we should congratulate her for that and thank all the small business owners who are listening to public health guidelines. Instead of punishing them, we should support them. What happens to small business owners like her when they do close their doors and now have to lose their business and their income? Why don't we have any support programs geared towards entrepreneurs who have put their businesses on hold?

1550

Two nights ago, when I spoke with Rinkee at the Dentonia Park strike for tenants, I was surprised. I said, "Rinkee, why are you here?" She said, "I'm worried about my rent. I might be on the list soon." I was surprised, because I was talking to her earlier about commercial rent relief, and now she's worried as a tenant as well.

These are the moments, these are the trickle-down effects that we have with this pandemic—but also the lack of support that we have from our government. And it's not just this government. I do understand that there is a shared

responsibility between the federal government and the provincial government.

Rinkee is one of the examples of a successful small business that needs support right now, and this bill does not do anything to support her.

I also want to talk about Victorian Monkey. This is a really heartbreaking example. Victorian Monkey was a popular local restaurant at the heart of my riding of Scarborough Southwest. If you go down Kingston Road, you see the large sign for Victorian Monkey. It was a hub for the community to socialize with friends and families, and recently they had to close their doors. You can just go on social media and talk to the owners. You can see the sentiment we had in our local community when Victorian Monkey closed up.

After a few months of trying their best to keep their business going through the pandemic—they tried all sorts of different ways to keep going, and, really, without a dime from this government or understanding how they could manage in terms of the regulations. They couldn't do a patio because they were too close to residential homes. I know that the Associate Minister of Small Business and Red Tape Reduction knows this because he visited Victorian Monkey but failed to do much to actually support Victorian Monkey and other restaurants and businesses like that. So Victorian Monkey had to close down. This is just one example of businesses that we have lost across Scarborough.

Next, I want to talk about another business that I know. When they opened up, a lot of folks like me were very excited because it was a really interesting concept they had. It's owned by a good friend of mine, Mehnaaz Bholat, another female entrepreneur in my riding, whose work was dedicated to serving parents and families and our little ones across the city. In 2019, right before the pandemic, she started a small business called Snuggles n Bubbles. This year, Mehnaaz and her partner, as well as three other young women who founded this company, were about to open up; this was Toronto's first ever baby spa that was going to open up. These are young women entrepreneurs who had a vision to support their community, but with rent close to about \$5,000 a month and no support from the government, their venture was well on its way to go bankrupt even before they opened.

I have the letter that I wrote to the Minister of Finance asking for support because, for Mehnaaz, CEBA, CECRA, the wage subsidy—none of these could she qualify for, but she had the rent, she had the bills that she had to pay.

And not only was all of this crashing down, but I felt like these women who put their dreams and all their savings together were crashing down. It was heartbreaking because she was trying really hard.

They qualified for everything—but it was just the fact that they didn't have the month right. What they had done was chosen the fiscal year to be from April 1 to March 30, which, unfortunately, meant that the CRA counts the period from July 15, 2019, to March 31, 2020—so at the 2020 tax year-end, which makes them ineligible for CEBA funding as they do not have a 2019 tax return. For

businesses that started last year, if they decided to have their fiscal year end in the calendar year of 2020, they were ineligible for CEBA even though they were not operational last year. To me, that sounds absurd, because it's just a small technicality that is causing so much grief for a business like Mehnaaz's, for Snuggles n Bubbles. Even though they actually qualified for all of it—just for one technicality they were not able to qualify for the relief. To get the CEBA government support, they needed to show that they paid \$50,000 payroll in 2019, which is impossible for a business that just started.

When I look at Bill 215, this bill, I'm looking at all of these businesses and I'm talking to all of these business owners and we don't have—there is nothing in this bill that provides support for folks like Mehnaaz or Victorian Monkey or Rinkee, even though this is supposed to be the Main Street Recovery Act. When our government fails to provide support for small businesses and entrepreneurs, when they fail to support places that capture our community spirit, it makes it difficult to have the Ontario spirit and to actually get through this pandemic. That is why it's really important that we propose certain solutions.

When I started speaking, I talked about the fact that I will support this, because it does provide a little bit of help, but I want to be very clear that this is an opportunity for us to do much more. We have the money sitting there with this government right now to provide that support. It's just a matter of being a little bit more ambitious to actually do the right thing.

I want to give a few suggestions that will provide help for businesses like the ones that I have talked about. Let me give very clear instructions for folks that we can help, to keep workers on the payroll. There are a few things you can do to help to keep workers on the payroll, and that means you're actually helping people who are struggling with their rent, who are struggling to go put food on the table, who are struggling to buy their medicine—and that will help the economy, as well.

One of the first things we need to do is put a ban on all evictions, commercial and residential. It's a common-sense thing that we need to do. We cannot afford to have people on the streets. The massive amount of homelessness that we're going to face, when it comes to residential evictions—just imagine what that does not only for those people but also for public health.

Going back to the commercial evictions: My colleague right before me talked about the fact that there are developers—and she used the word “vultures.” I think that captures the idea really well, because that's what is happening right now: We have big developers that are waiting for small businesses to close down and they will just take over. That means we'll lose so many mom-and-pop shops.

The next thing that we can do to keep workers on the payroll is a utility payment freeze. This is something we have talked about over and over again. My colleague from Humber River–Black Creek also talked about how that will support small and medium-sized businesses.

The next one is a stand-alone emergency 75% commercial rent subsidy up to \$10,000. We're not saying to give one amount to all types of businesses; we're just saying, let's be a little bit more reasonable. I'm sure you would agree with me that we need to be reasonable with the different types of businesses that we have in our communities.

The next proposal I want to make to the government is a fund for businesses that face historic barriers. We know that not all businesses have the same sorts of opportunities. When we look at our BIPOC community, for example—and we recently visited Black-owned businesses. It's just a way to understand how the community is surviving and how different businesses, different business owners, need different types of support.

1600

Now I want to go into how you can keep workers safe. A safe reopening and remote work set-up fund will help with that. We have the \$1,000 that is going to go to support businesses with PPE, but is that really enough? Is that really what will make sure that these businesses keep their workers safe? I don't think so. I think we need to look a little bit deeper.

I want to talk about something that I've talked about in this House over and over again, which is building a she-covery. This one is a little bit more comprehensive, but this recovery, or she-covery, does need to be comprehensive:

- putting a cap on class sizes at 15, capping school bus capacity, and making sure that kids, moms and dads are safe in our province. It is connected to businesses. It is connected to the way we make sure that our province is kept safe.

- making sure that we create more and safer not-for-profit public child care spaces. I don't think I need to say more about child care. I've talked about this over and over again. We need to make sure that we create safe spaces in child care and that there are enough staff in our child care spaces. You're not supporting 51% of the population in Ontario, the women in our province, if you don't provide affordable, accessible, safe child care for Ontarians;

- creating a dedicated retraining fund and an office to advance women's apprenticeships. This one is clear.

As I am running out of time, I just want to point out two more proposals that we have.

Stopping insurance-gouging—that's very clear:

- making sure that we institute an auto insurance grace period for taxis and car-sharing drivers;

- stopping insurance-gouging, and stopping insurance corporations from denying coverage based on COVID-19, and stopping insurance companies from denying business interruption claims; and

- mandating commercial vehicle insurance rebates.

These were some of the main ideas that were given by business owners when they came to give deputations at committee hearings and talked about the ways that you can provide support for these businesses. We had hundreds of pages of recommendations. Some of the ideas that I'm telling you right here come from what businesses have told

us. These plans that we put together are all coming from actual business owners who are experiencing difficulties in our province right now.

Keeping restaurant jobs afloat—and that's by limiting food delivery fees and making sure that we are providing some of the support that I talked about earlier, to allow businesses like restaurants to survive throughout this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, these are all the plans that we have highlighted enough times, that are detailed, that are costed and that will actually help Ontarians from small and medium-sized mom-and-pop shops to stay open and to survive throughout this pandemic. Not only do we need to make sure that we are stopping the spread of this virus, but we also need to make sure that we are doing enough to help this economy survive.

I will end by saying that I will support this bill, but I wish that it had done enough to propose some of the things that we have in this plan. I hope that our government will listen to the people, listen to the businesses across this province that need our support right now—because it will be too late. We're already in the second wave right now, and we have had a lot of businesses close across the province. Let's not let any more businesses shut down.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions to the member for Scarborough Southwest?

Miss Christina Maria Mitas: The member opposite and her colleagues keep talking about their party's great ideas. Ideas are great, but you have to have the means to implement them. The opposition, the party that made a \$1.4-billion costing error in the last election, certainly, unfortunately, does not understand this. This is why we are on this side of the House.

We are doing everything that we possibly can to help Ontario's businesses with the resources available. We understand how to govern in the real world. That is governing. Assistance and commitment to small businesses is not a slap in the face, and anyone who says that is politically grandstanding and is being flippant.

So will the member, for the record, politics aside, be very clear and tell us: Are you going to support this recovery plan and help us assist the small businesses that are in dire need here in Ontario?

Ms. Doly Begum: It's very interesting that the member is saying this, because I started my speech by saying I will support this bill and I ended my speech by saying I will support this bill. I will once again repeat and say that I will support this bill. Some of the proposals I have made—I stick by those.

I also want to point out that I actually have businesses from Scarborough Centre, which is the member's riding—they're suffering. I've talked about Cosmetica, where workers are unsafe. The member has failed and this government has failed to support the 180 workers who were recently fired. It's very unfortunate. There are women, constituents from her riding, who have come to our office because they could not get hold of her.

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Order.

The next question?

Ms. Rima Berns-McGown: I want to thank the member for Scarborough Southwest for that really thoughtful discussion, because it's so—

Interjection.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member for Scarborough Centre will come to order.

Sorry to interrupt.

Ms. Rima Berns-McGown: Thank you. It's so important to understand that all of these pieces are connected.

I was at the same rally at Dentonia Park, and I remember meeting Rinkee. There was another young woman named Zinnat, who was about to deal with her eviction hearing the next day because she can't afford to pay rent, given that the restaurant she works at isn't making enough money. Now she has arrears that she can't pay, and she is being forced onto the street. If she can't find anywhere to live—I want the members opposite to understand that it costs the city of Toronto \$6,600 per month to shelter somebody in a pandemic. It would cost much less to pay her rent, which is under \$1,000 a month.

So it is fiscally, as well as in humanitarian terms, irresponsible not to help businesses and individuals through this pandemic. I wonder if the member could comment on that.

Ms. Doly Begum: I want to thank the member from Beaches—East York for her question—and rightfully so. We were there at Dentonia Park. Zinnat Jahan, the constituent you're talking about from Crescent Town—it's heartbreaking what she's facing. I think it really drives home this whole argument in the sense that we're actually paying right now for all of this. All the proposals we're talking about, all these ideas, we're paying for them. That more than \$6,000 that we're paying, we're paying for poverty. Poverty is extremely expensive. So why not use the money wisely and support people so they don't end up on the streets?

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions?

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I appreciate the speech from the member opposite. I want to just encourage her to also ensure that she's working collaboratively with all members in this House. Of course, when constituents from other ridings reach out, I think it's important that, as members of the same chamber, we work together, and I hope the member did reach out to the member from Scarborough Centre if that was in fact a concern.

I want to ask about the industrial rate relief. I think this is a key piece to ensuring that we have a healthy manufacturing sector here in Ontario. Does the member believe that this will have a positive impact for businesses across the province?

Ms. Doly Begum: It's really interesting; during this crisis, we have seen a lot of confusion in terms of the way the government has categorized a lot of the industries and a lot of the guidelines for—and I'm not quite clear, because I couldn't hear the middle part of the question. When I talked about the member for Scarborough Centre, the factory that I'm talking about—I have talked about it many, many times in this House—is Cosmetics. It's a company that is not related to making anything that was

essential. It was a factory that was made essential according to the guidelines. When we contacted the city of Toronto, they said that according to provincial guidelines it's essential because it's a laboratory that makes makeup. To me, that's just not right. Making makeup is not essential, and yet we have these workers who are really, really scared, who were forced to go to work, and then after they were taken advantage of, they were fired—a lot of them, 180 of them. Now they don't have any support. I will continue talking about these women workers until they get support. I will continue to do that because that's my job.

1610

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Questions?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I want to echo the sentiment I'm hearing from small business that they're just struggling to survive and having a very difficult time trying to manage the criteria, the application forms and the processes around applying for some kind of subsidy from the government. Most of that subsidy is federal, so they have the problem as well. They say they just can't do it.

I'm wondering if the member would comment on the kinds of things that we could probably do to simplify the processes.

Ms. Doly Begum: I do appreciate the member's question.

One of the main things that we talked about in terms of support is rent relief. When the federal government did provide the support, it was through the landlords, and that criteria made it limited for a lot of small businesses that did not qualify. What we saw is that when landlords did not want to support their commercial tenants, it meant that those commercial tenants did not get any support. So one of the things they could have done is provide direct support to the commercial tenants, to the businesses themselves instead of landlords.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The member from Mississauga East—Cooksville.

Mr. Kaleed Rasheed: Thank you to the member opposite for her remarks. I was listening to her remarks and she was very passionately speaking about small businesses in her riding.

There was a bill that was introduced just this afternoon by the Associate Minister of Small Business and Red Tape Reduction, Minister Sarkaria, and then the independent member opposite requested unanimous consent just to pass that bill as quickly as possible, so that starting as soon as we get royal assent, we can look into the price-gouging. But yet, the member opposite and her colleagues said no to that unanimous consent request.

My question is, will they be supporting the request for unanimous consent, if this is brought forward, just to expedite the process?

Ms. Doly Begum: One of the things my mom taught me growing up is that you never agree or disagree with anything that you don't know. If the government doesn't co-operate and doesn't actually provide the information to me and my colleagues properly in time, then it's very difficult for me to just agree on anything.

I have a huge responsibility. I represent over 110,000 good people in Scarborough Southwest. I cannot just say yea or nay to anything that I don't know. If you had the right intention to be able to say, "Here is something we will bring forward. Here is enough time for you to go in your community and talk about it"—then we can actually debate this. But you cannot bring a unanimous consent motion and just in minutes expect everyone in the House to act collaboratively. And you're speaking for another member.

I hope that clarifies my answer.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I don't think there's enough time to have another question and a response.

Further debate? Further debate?

Mr. Sarkaria has moved third reading of Bill 215, An Act to amend various statutes with respect to the economic recovery of Ontario and to make other amendments.

Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? Carried.

Be it resolved that the bill do now pass and be entitled as in the motion.

Third reading agreed to.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Point of order.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Point of order, the government House leader.

Hon. Paul Calandra: On a point of order—7(e). I'm just wishing to inform the House that there will be no late sitting tonight. I know everybody is disappointed.

If you seek it, I'm sure you'll find unanimous consent to see the clock at 6.

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

The government House leader is seeking the unanimous consent of the House to see the clock at 6. Agreed? Agreed.

Private members' public business will commence.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BUSINESS

BROADBAND IS AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE ACT, 2020

LOI DE 2020 DÉCLARANT QUE LE SERVICE À LARGE BANDE EST UN SERVICE ESSENTIEL

Mr. Vanthof moved second reading of the following bill:

Bill 226, An Act to enact the Broadband is an Essential Service Act, 2020 / Projet de loi 226, Loi édictant la Loi de 2020 déclarant que le service à large bande est un service essentiel.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 101, the member has 12 minutes for his presentation.

Mr. John Vanthof: I would like to begin by quickly reading the explanatory note, then go to how we got here and why I think we need to go here.

What this bill does: "The bill enacts the Broadband is an Essential Service Act, 2020, which requires the Minister of Infrastructure to develop a broadband connectivity strategy that aims to deliver high-speed Internet connectivity to 95% of Ontarians by 2026 and to all Ontarians by 2030. The minister is required to update the strategy at specified intervals and undertake certain consultations in developing or updating the strategy."

I'm old enough to remember, and a few of us here are old enough to remember, when the Internet first came out and when we heard the dial tone. I remember distinctly. This was going to level the playing field for rural Ontario. No longer did you have to be in a big city to work in an office; you could do this over the Internet. We all believed—and, for most of us, it never happened in rural Ontario.

One of the reasons it didn't happen in rural Ontario is because the Internet is provided—the vast majority—by private companies. I'm not against private companies, but for this, they need to make a profit. So they concentrated on areas where there's a high population. It makes total sense, because it costs a lot more to deliver the Internet to sparsely populated areas. All levels of government recognize this.

I started being focused on this in 2018. I moved a motion in this House, on behalf of the NDP, that the government should implement an Internet strategy so that all Ontarians could have Internet over 10 years, and that they finance that with \$100 million a year for those 10 years, so \$1 billion. The government agreed; it was agreed to unanimously. The government responded by announcing—I believe it was \$340 million over 10 years. It might not get the job done, but it was a commendable start. I would say that everyone in rural Ontario was happy with that. It was money on the table, announcements on the table.

When I started looking at this bill seriously again was in 2019-20: In the budget, there was over \$30 million allocated to rural infrastructure—\$30 million of that \$300 million or \$350 million. Actually, it was allocated in the budget, but according to the Financial Accountability Officer—I know independent officers are having a rough time lately with the Premier—none of that money flowed. So that told me that just announcing the money doesn't actually get the money on the ground, and that's when we started developing the bill.

1620

Then COVID-19 hit. The lack of Internet went from an irritant in rural Ontario—and in some parts of urban Ontario—to a crisis. As we've often all discussed, everything moved online, and when everything is online and you're not, you can no longer participate in modern society. Virtual doctors' appointments—all those things are gone if you're not part of the system. The government recognized this, and they announced another \$650 million. Go, government. The federal government has also announced funding. But there's no one, at the end of the day, saying that when this funding is done, everyone is going to have accessible broadband. They're making

announcements—and I am not against the announcements. This isn't a partisan thing.

I've talked to the Minister of Infrastructure about these issues. At the end of the day, the simple announcement doesn't necessarily solve the problem, because everyone is still going to concentrate on where they can get the best bang for their buck. I understand that. But in parts of rural Ontario, it might never make financial sense for a provider to provide Internet.

For my farm—when I milk cows and when my cows did come home—it maybe never made sense to provide hydro because there's a mile of posts, but the economic activity that I provided because of that hydro helped the economy greatly. And Internet is the same thing.

We want to have a strategy that the government develops and that they report on regularly: "We're announcing this money, but here's how far we are to providing usable Internet to all the people of Ontario by 2030."

It's not going to be easy. I've done pretty extensive touring. There is a dead zone in the Sobeys parking lot in Picton. Coming from northern Ontario, I didn't think a place like Picton would have a problem. There are lots of places in southern Ontario that have a problem, too. We're not saying that this is going to be easy.

One of the biggest issues for the north is the cost of backhaul. When you want to hook up to the major trunk lines, the major players who control those trunk lines, for a small town in northern Ontario—Smooth Rock Falls—to hook up to the line: 20 grand a month. That knocks it right out of the park, and the subsidy isn't going to help. It's not just throwing money at this issue. That has to be looked at.

I talked to another major Internet provider, and one of their hurdles is access to Ontario hydro poles. Again, that's something that a strategy should be able to look at. It's not just money; there has to be a strategy, a provincial goal to provide service to everyone.

The only partisan shot I'm going to take in this: The only government mistake that was really made was made by the Liberal government when they sold a fibre optic trunk line that the Ontario government, through the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission, spent big dollars on because they realized we needed fibre optics. They put it into northeastern Ontario, and when the government tried to divest ONTC, they basically gave it to Bell. That's the only really huge setback that a government of any stripe has made.

Governments are all trying, but unless we have a goal—and it's not all doom and gloom. There are some success stories here, so a provincial Internet broadband strategy doesn't have to reinvent the wheel. One of them is the Eastern Ontario Regional Network. I spoke to Jim Pine, and they have done great things in eastern Ontario by getting the players together and making it work. It's the same with Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology. I spoke to Barry Field, and they have done great things in southwestern Ontario. So there is light at the end of the tunnel. In our area, one of our local mayors, Dan O'Mara,

is working on trying to get a more regional approach to broadband Internet. Those are all worthy goals.

But at the end of the day, the worst thing that can happen is that, when 80% or 90% of the people have it and this is no longer an issue for those 80 or 90%—do you know what? Those 10% are going to be lost. And where that truly came to me is when the Timiskaming Health Unit contacted me about the digital divide, about how people who are in lower-income brackets are challenged and can't afford it. Even in towns where you can get it, they can't afford it, and they are being excluded from modern society and excluded from bettering themselves because they're being left out.

What's going to happen unless we have an overall plan and an overall goal is that there are going to be big portions of the province left out. While everyone is patting themselves on the back about how great a job we've done getting Internet to the majority, that minority's voice is going to be much, much less pronounced, and at the end of the day, they're not going to get service. They will be left behind. For instance, if 10% of the people are left behind, that is so much—if you look at it from a pure economic argument, that is going to be a huge economic anchor on this province. Unless we're all able to access modern technology in a modern society, we won't all be able to drive the economy. It's that simple.

This isn't about knocking anybody about not putting funds on the table; this is about working together and showing us a plan. The Minister of Infrastructure shows us a plan, and do you know what? The plan is going to have to change. We know that. This is a very technological—it changes daily. Right now, we've got low-orbiting satellites that could change the whole world vision on the Internet, but in the country, we've been promised that before, with satellite Internet, and it didn't work. So we need a plan. We need to make sure that, by 2030, everyone in this great province has access to broadband infrastructure so they can all contribute and all live the way we should in our modern society.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Mr. Billy Pang: I'm happy to have the opportunity to rise in the House today to speak to the importance of broadband and connectivity in the province of Ontario. As we've all experienced, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how we live our lives day to day.

For example, in my riding of Markham—Unionville, a constituent connected with me at my office to voice her worries and thoughts on broadband. While broadband is accessible in the area where she resides, she voiced concerns that in that area she does not have the suitable speed to accommodate the level of service she requires to ensure service to a number of devices using the service at the same time. This lack of quality service is especially true during this time when, like many of us, my constituent and all members of her family are trying to stay home to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

Evidently, this connectivity is important to our daily lives. With everyone living, learning and working from home, the need for reliable broadband to thrive in the 21st

century is undeniable. We need to make sure that everyone can take part in today's digital economy.

1630

Mr. Speaker, I want to remind the member opposite that broadband is a federally regulated industry. The CRTC is responsible for determining the rates and speed.

However, our government is committed to improving broadband. In July 2019, we unveiled our strategy to help close the digital divide, Up to Speed. And we didn't stop there.

This June, we took another step to deliver on our strategy and commitment to connect more Ontarians to broadband. We launched Improving Connectivity in Ontario, or ICON. ICON is our new Ontario-designed, \$150-million broadband and cellular infrastructure funding program that will urgently address the need for reliable Internet and cellular service access in underserved and unserved communities across Ontario.

Earlier this month, we doubled the value of ICON, bringing the program to \$300 million, which will fund more projects and get more people connected to reliable broadband sooner. This program is available to for-profit organizations, Indigenous communities, municipalities and not-for-profit organizations with experience in building, owning or operating broadband or cellular infrastructure across Ontario.

Our progress is promising. While we know that more needs to be done, Ontario can't do it alone. That's why we continue to urge the federal government to properly fund access to reliable broadband, and I strongly suggest the members opposite do the same. As we all know, Ontario just can't wait any longer. No one should be left behind in the 21st-century digital economy.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Ms. Judith Monteith-Farrell: I'm very pleased to be able to stand and speak to this motion and support it—because this is something that comes to our office on a regular basis. We hear it at the Rural Ontario Municipal Association every single time we meet. We hear it from municipal councillors. We hear it from companies. We hear it from mining companies that want to develop. We hear that this lack of resources for northern Ontario in the form of infrastructure for reliable high-speed Internet is a real problem. We have people who are telling us to fix it.

I want to thank the government for their announcements and the federal government for their announcements about supporting this. But there is a lack of a concrete plan, and I agree with my colleague that that is what is needed. We need to have a goal, because we're never going to get there if we don't have a goal at the end of it. What is the strategy? How are we going to accomplish this?

I reached out to our local Internet provider, a local company that actually gives part of the profits to our municipality. I said, "Why aren't we moving faster? You've received grants. What's happening here?" They said it was because it's not profitable. They go into an area and they say, "There are just not enough people to make this profitable for us to undertake." They're hopeful that by next year, the city of Thunder Bay will actually have

reliable Internet throughout the city—and the outskirts perhaps in five years, if they can get the co-operation of Ontario Hydro to access poles.

In the more remote areas, it's more of a problem. People who want to work in those areas are having a very difficult time. They're calling me and they're saying, "I'm staying at home. My kids need to stay at home, and I can't work, and my kids can't go to school, so we have to find other ways." Or they're forced to go into schools—and when they weren't, people were driving lesson plans many kilometres to try to get these kids an education.

It's a real problem in my riding and across northern Ontario, and I think there is a solution in my discussion with that company: the low-orbiting satellite. That would be costly, but it's required in some areas, because northern Ontario is very vast.

I would like to thank my colleague for bringing this forward, and I hope we can all support it so that we have a concrete plan to bring Internet to people in northern Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Mr. Mike Schreiner: It's a real honour to rise and speak in favour of Bill 226. I want to thank the member from Timiskaming-Cochrane for bringing this important bill forward. I support it, because in the 21st century, high-speed, reliable broadband is an essential service. It's a long-sought-after goal of people who live in rural and remote communities to have access to high-speed, reliable broadband.

Speaker, the reality is that Ontario has a digital divide, with people in cities for the most part enjoying access to broadband Internet services, and most people in rural and remote areas not having access to that service. I believe this bill will help to close that connectivity gap.

Over the summer, I had the opportunity and the privilege of serving on the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, and we heard from so many people in rural and remote communities—in some cases, communities only an hour's drive from Toronto.

As a matter of fact, I think I heard a podcast this morning about your riding, Speaker, not having access to reliable broadband, even though it's only an hour's drive from Toronto. So this is an issue that affects people all over this province.

I can't tell you how many people came to committee and said that broadband should be an essential service—the importance of declaring it an essential service—and just how essential it is to ensure that we have a plan to deliver rural broadband service all across this province.

I think the pandemic, in particular, has highlighted the digital divide that exists in Ontario. It's pretty hard to study from home if you can't access the Internet. It's pretty hard to digitize your business if you can't access reliable broadband Internet. It's pretty hard if you're a farmer wanting to implement the latest technologies if you can't access broadband Internet. I would argue that access to reliable, high-speed Internet is not a luxury in today's world; it's a necessity, and if we're going to ensure that communities across this province recover and strengthen

our economy coming out of COVID-19, they need access to reliable, high-speed broadband Internet.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): In rotation, the next speaker will be the member for Ottawa West–Nepean.

Mr. Jeremy Roberts: It's an honour to rise today and speak to Bill 226, the Broadband is an Essential Service Act, 2020. I will be supporting this bill. I think this is an issue that all of us in this chamber can get behind—the idea of making sure that we expand access to reliable and consistent broadband Internet across the province.

My family is very privileged and fortunate to have a cottage about 45 minutes outside of Ottawa, and I often joke that one of my favourite things about going to the cottage is that there's no cell service and no Internet. Of course, all of us in this chamber know what it's like to have such a busy, hectic day with our phones ringing off the hook. So I love to go to the cottage and be able to disconnect for a little while.

But while I joke about that, this pandemic has brought home what that reality is like for the individuals and businesses and families that are in rural Ontario, particularly in eastern Ontario, closer to home for me. Of course, time and time again over the past 10 months, we have seen this issue rear its head.

We have seen this issue rear its head when it comes to delivery of virtual health care. We want to make sure that patients don't have to go in and be face to face with a doctor or a medical practitioner—being able to provide that virtually would be an asset, would be a benefit. Of course, that is frustrated by a lack of broadband service.

We've seen this issue come to the forefront when it relates to education and the delivery of education virtually, when children can't gather safely in a classroom.

We've seen this issue time and time again when it comes to our business leaders, who want that opportunity to be able to do their business virtually, to have that opportunity to engage in e-commerce, meet with clients virtually—all of those things.

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Of course, the member opposite knows that broadband is a federally regulated industry, and it will be the federal government that is ultimately responsible for deeming broadband an essential service. But I know that we on the government side are committed to working together with everyone in this chamber to ensure that decisive action is taken.

I'm proud that our government is already taking steps forward. One example is the Eastern Ontario Regional Network initiative to address the digital divide in eastern Ontario. This is going to work to eliminate the coverage gaps and increase capacity while creating an estimated 3,000 jobs over the next 10 years in eastern Ontario. Our government has invested \$71 million into this important initiative.

There's lots more work to do. I appreciate the member opposite bringing this forward. I have no doubt that this is something that all of us here in this chamber can get behind and support so that we can deal with this very, very vital issue.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Ms. Marit Stiles: Good afternoon. I'm very pleased, as always, to rise to speak on behalf of the constituents of Davenport.

I want to start by thanking the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane for introducing this important legislation. I think we have all talked here about how this pandemic has made existing inequities more apparent, and this is definitely one such area.

Whether you call it the growing digital divide or the connectivity gap, the lack of access to broadband has long been an irritant outside of major urban centres in Ontario. Affordable, usable broadband has become a necessary—or, really, an essential—service, as the member has said. But Zoom? Zoom might as well be science fiction for many residents of rural Ontario. Indeed, there are currently 1.4 million of us with no high-speed access and many more with access that just doesn't support commonly used platforms.

Before the pandemic, we know that students, families, businesses struggled to find access to broadband to access courses, to connect with medical experts or appointments, to access many of the services we have come to take for granted all around the world. Today, families without broadband are struggling to work from home, to give their kids a chance to be successful in school. Businesses are hurting. Just imagine running a business right now without reliable Internet access, on top of everything else.

We know that the cost of rural Internet solutions can be crushing for families and for small businesses. I think of the many kids who have been told to sit in the parking lot of their schools to use the WiFi—outside the school, in the evening, in the cold, using the WiFi to finish their homework because they don't have reliable Internet access at home. I'm reminded that the member from Algoma–Manitoulin shared with me a story which I raised in this House with the Minister of Education, about how in the community of Goulais River, north of Sault Ste. Marie, parents are still driving their students to the schoolyard, to this day, to access Internet so kids can download their lessons. Imagine how hard that is. We need to change it, and we need to give kids, families and businesses the same chance at success, no matter what part of this great province they're in.

Speaker, I wish I could say that any of this was new or unknown, but the fact is that the Liberals had 15 years to expand affordable broadband to rural and northern Ontario, and they let Ontarians down. Back in 2018, the member for Timiskaming–Cochrane introduced a motion directing the government to create a rural broadband strategy and fund it at \$100 million a year for 10 years, for a total commitment of \$1 billion, and it passed unanimously, I believe. But despite the support for the NDP motion, the government came out with subpar announcements, and then didn't follow through. In fact, in last year's budget, there was over \$30 million allocated for rural broadband, but the Financial Accountability Officer revealed that none of that money was actually invested in rural broadband.

Mr. Speaker, 1.4 million people have no access to usable, affordable, high-speed Internet. They haven't done anything to solve that problem across the aisle. They just make announcements, but they never deliver.

We in the NDP believe that broadband Internet is an essential service. This NDP bill will ensure that 95% of Ontarians have access to high-speed Internet by 2026 and 100% by 2030.

And I love this part: It requires regular progress updates. It ensures accountability and it ensures transparency—something sorely lacking in the plans this government has delivered but failed to act upon.

Mr. Speaker, this is a bill designed to even the playing field so that rural and northern Ontarians can be successful in business and at school, and can stay connected with loved ones. I urge everyone here to support this important legislation. Let's do the right thing and get this done.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Ms. Lindsey Park: It's a pleasure to rise to speak to my colleague's private member's bill, Bill 226. I commend the member for Timiskaming–Cochrane for bringing this important issue once again to the floor of the Legislature for discussion.

I think all members can agree that access to reliable Internet is extremely important and that this has become an even more pressing issue than it was before the pandemic, as so much of the province has pivoted from in-person workplaces and classes to virtual meetings and online learning.

The pandemic has served to “shed light onto both the gaps in coverage and areas plagued by unreliability.” That's a quote from a council motion from the municipality of Clarington in my riding.

In my area, both urban and rural communities exist. In rural areas, such as Scugog, parts of north Oshawa and the north part of Clarington, there are areas where broadband is simply not there, or if it is, it's not reliable.

I want to tell a little story. There's a common spot, when I'm driving from the north part of my riding to the south part of my riding, where, inevitably, I'm on the phone talking to a constituent or a mayor and the call drops. Then I try four or five times to call them back and I can't get through. So that's just an example, and that's just when I'm driving. But for people who are actually trying to work from those places, you can imagine the ongoing challenge that they have.

This has been an issue for years for many of my constituents, who are right now struggling with their current level of broadband service because they happen to live in an area that is underserved. There are lower service speeds, spotty or unreliable service, limited providers, as other members have spoken about, or no service providers at all willing to go to the area—that's where you get these dead zones.

So I think it's clear that broadband is not just a nice-to-have thing anymore, but is, in the 21st century, a necessary piece of modern infrastructure.

I'd be remiss if I did not remind the member opposite and everyone in the chamber that, as my colleague from

Ottawa West–Nepean said, broadband is actually a federally regulated industry. It does not mean the province does not have a role to play. Let me be clear, that's not what I'm saying. But we have to acknowledge that the CRTC, which is overseen by the federal government, is responsible for determining aspects of the service, including rates and speed. They're also responsible for deeming broadband an essential service, as this private member's bill asks for.

That being said, let me assure the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane that our government has been steadfastly committed to improving broadband access. I think I just saw a tweet—we're all on Twitter because you kind of have to be, as a member of provincial Parliament now, whether we like it or not—from the Minister of Finance on this very topic this morning. So all the way through, from every member of our caucus, there is no dispute that this is a priority.

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In my region, I have both the Minister of Finance, who represents the riding of Ajax, and the President of Treasury Board, who represents Pickering–Uxbridge, and this a regular topic of discussion because it's a priority, clearly, for both our President of the Treasury Board and the Minister of Finance.

We have been looking, from the provincial level, at whatever we can do to deliver on improving broadband from our seat administrating the province. As part of that, we're committed to improving broadband access in Ontario, but also to advocating for the federal government's involvement in and funding of that delivery.

If you look up last summer, it's the Up to Speed program that was announced, a \$315-million action plan at the provincial level, and our 2020 budget adds to that. It's a tangible commitment at the provincial level.

I hope all my colleagues will join together, on all sides of the House, to advocate with the federal government to deliver on their commitments, as well.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

Ms. Sara Singh: It's an honour to rise here today and contribute to the debate. I just want to start off by thanking my colleague and seatmate, the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane, for this very important bill, which I think highlights something that is really important not only to urban members but to all members in this House.

We often have some spirited conversations about what that digital divide looks like in the province of Ontario, so I'm really happy to support this bill to help provide broadband and declare this as an essential service not just in rural Ontario but in all of Ontario. While rural Ontario is struggling with access to broadband and Internet service, even in my community of Brampton and the Peel region, we often hear about the lack of access to this very essential service.

I think of our mayor in Caledon, Allan Thompson, who is the chair of the Rural Ontario Municipal Association. He's just a stone's throw away from Brampton. He is always advocating for broadband to be an essential

service, as he describes it as being no different than access to clean drinking water or hydro in this day and age.

As we heard from all of the members who have contributed to this debate today, having access to broadband is vital to be a part of the digital economy, to gain access to information and to ensure that people can be a part of this digital world. We have heard from many people some of the challenges that people are facing, whether that's a student, whether that's a small business, whether that's an arts organization. Folks are struggling to get online, and there are various reasons for that.

I think what the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane has really done here is a plan to call this government to action—but it's actually a plan to help deliver this as an essential service. As the member pointed out, many of the bigger conglomerates really control the market, and that is a huge concern because they don't necessarily see the benefit of providing that to that 10% who don't have access.

What we saw in, for example, northeastern Ontario was that the provincial government had previously owned major fibre optic cables out there, through the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission, but unfortunately the former Liberal government sold that at a major loss to Bell when they divested from the ONTC.

I'll just go back to something that Mayor Thompson has said, and I think it's really important: When we make this service mandatory, we'll bolster economic development and ensure that the kilometres of fibre optic cables that are buried across the province by telecommunications and other private companies could actually be accessed for public use. When you declare this an essential service, you actually open up options for delivery of broadband across the province.

I am happy to support this bill, so that, hopefully, the 1.4 million Ontarians who do not have access to usable, affordable, high-speed Internet will finally have access to this by 2030.

Thank you very much to the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane for advocating on behalf of your community and on behalf of Ontarians everywhere in the province.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Further debate?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I'm pleased to rise today to add my voice in support of the very thoughtful and timely private member's bill tabled by the member from Timiskaming–Cochrane.

Reliable Internet is something that we often take for granted in our province's urban centres. Since the beginning of the pandemic, however, Ontarians have come to rely on it as a necessary tool to safely educate our children, access telemedicine and work from home.

Cependant, des services numériques de plus en plus essentiels, comme la diffusion vidéo en continu—ou video streaming—et l'accès à l'apprentissage en ligne et à la télémédecine, nécessitent beaucoup de bande passante et ne sont pas également accessibles dans toute la province. L'accès à l'Internet à haute vitesse n'est pas un problème

dans des villes comme Ottawa ou Toronto, mais ce n'est pas le cas dans les régions de l'Ontario.

As many Ontarians' jobs, schooling and health care move increasingly online, the time has come to recognize that access to affordable and high-quality broadband is not a luxury, but an essential service that should be equally accessible for all Ontarians, regardless of geography. I heard that plea many, many times over the years as I served as a school trustee, because we have schools in the north that didn't have access.

We know that what gets measured gets done, and the creation of a broadband connectivity strategy under the Ministry of Infrastructure, along with a commitment to achieving universal broadband access in Ontario by 2030, would be an important step to ensure that we finally close the digital divide once and for all in Ontario, and give Ontarians, regardless of geography, the equal ability to access affordable and high-quality Internet services.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): I believe that concludes the time that we have available for the debate on this bill, but the member has two minutes to reply.

I'll recognize again the member for Timiskaming–Cochrane.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to thank all the members who spoke. I really appreciated the tone of the debate, and I think we all learned something.

To deem broadband an essential service is federal, but to regard it as an essential service for your residents and for Ontarians is provincial.

The member from Ottawa West–Nepean brought up—it was interesting, and I share that sentiment—that some of us like to escape being connected, because our job is being connected, but I would like people to picture the other side. I have kids in my riding whose parents have to drive them miles to hook up to WiFi, to steal, to scoff WiFi from the chamber of commerce. Can you imagine? Once in a while we like to escape, but can you imagine having to access the modern world like that?

Why this bill is so important, and why we have to be very cognizant of serving everyone is because after we've served the places that are holes now but are easier to serve, there are going to be people, unless we're careful, who are never going to get it. We're going to say, "Oh, no, that can't happen." Well, do you know what? Right now, there are people in Ontario who don't have clean drinking water, and that is a necessity of modern life, and so is broadband. We need to ensure that everyone has that access and that opportunity and that we don't leave anyone behind.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): The time provided for private members' public business has expired.

Mr. Vanthof has moved second reading of Bill 226, An Act to enact the Broadband is an Essential Service Act, 2020.

Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry? Carried.

Second reading agreed to.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Pursuant to standing order 101(i), the bill is referred to the Committee of the Whole House.

I recognize the member for Timiskaming–Cochrane.

Mr. John Vanthof: I'd like to refer it to the Standing Committee on General Government, please.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott): Is the majority of the House in favour of this bill being referred to the Standing Committee on General Government? Agreed? Agreed.

The bill is therefore referred to the Standing Committee on General Government.

All matters relating to private members' public business having been completed, this House stands adjourned until Monday, November 30, at 9 a.m.

The House adjourned at 1701.

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Smith, Hon. / L'hon. Todd (PC)	Bay of Quinte / Baie de Quinte	Minister of Children, Community and Social Services / Ministre des Services à l'enfance et des Services sociaux et communautaires
Stevens, Jennifer (Jennie) (NDP)	St. Catharines	
Stiles, Marit (NDP)	Davenport	
Surma, Hon. / L'hon. Kinga (PC)	Etobicoke Centre / Etobicoke-Centre	Associate Minister of Transportation (GTA) / Ministre associée des Transports (RGT) Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille
Tabuns, Peter (NDP)	Toronto—Danforth	
Tangri, Nina (PC)	Mississauga—Streetsville	
Taylor, Monique (NDP)	Hamilton Mountain	
Thanigasalam, Vijay (PC)	Scarborough—Rouge Park	
Thompson, Hon. / L'hon. Lisa M. (PC)	Huron—Bruce	Minister of Government and Consumer Services / Ministre des Services gouvernementaux et des Services aux consommateurs
Tibollo, Hon. / L'hon. Michael A. (PC)	Vaughan—Woodbridge	Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions / Ministre associé délégué au dossier de la Santé mentale et de la Lutte contre les dépendances Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille
Triantafilopoulos, Effie J. (PC)	Oakville North—Burlington / Oakville-Nord—Burlington	
Vanthof, John (NDP)	Timiskaming—Cochrane	Deputy Leader, Official Opposition / Chef adjoint de l'opposition officielle
Wai, Daisy (PC)	Richmond Hill	

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
Walker, Hon. / L'hon. Bill (PC)	Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound	Associate Minister of Energy / Ministre associé de l'Énergie Minister Without Portfolio / Ministre sans portefeuille
West, Jamie (NDP)	Sudbury	
Wilson, Jim (IND)	Simcoe—Grey	
Wynne, Kathleen O. (LIB)	Don Valley West / Don Valley-Ouest	
Yakubski, Hon. / L'hon. John (PC)	Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke	Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry / Ministre des Richesses naturelles et des Forêts
Yarde, Kevin (NDP)	Brampton North / Brampton-Nord	
Yurek, Hon. / L'hon. Jeff (PC)	Elgin—Middlesex—London	Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks / Ministre de l'Environnement, de la Protection de la nature et des Parcs

**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: Peter Tabuns
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Wayne Gates
Lorne Coe, Rudy Cuzzetto
Wayne Gates, Randy Hillier
Andrea Khanjin, Jane McKenna
Judith Monteith-Farrell, Michael Parsa
Randy Pettapiece, Donna Skelly
Peter Tabuns
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Thushitha Kobikrishna

**Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs /
Comité permanent des finances et des affaires économiques**

Chair / Président: Amarjot Sandhu
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Jeremy Roberts
Ian Arthur, Stan Cho
Mitzie Hunter, Logan Kanapathi
Sol Mamakwa, David Piccini
Jeremy Roberts, Amarjot Sandhu
Sandy Shaw, Dave Smith
Vijay Thanigasalam
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Julia Douglas

**Standing Committee on General Government / Comité
permanent des affaires gouvernementales**

Chair / Présidente: Goldie Ghamari
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Mike Schreiner
Robert Bailey, Jessica Bell
Goldie Ghamari, Chris Glover
Mike Harris, Daryl Kramp
Sheref Sabawy, Amarjot Sandhu
Mike Schreiner, Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens
Daisy Wai
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Isaiah Thorning

**Standing Committee on Government Agencies / Comité
permanent des organismes gouvernementaux**

Chair / Président: John Vanthof
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Taras Natyshak
Will Bouma, Lorne Coe
Robin Martin, Norman Miller
Taras Natyshak, Rick Nicholls
Billy Pang, Amanda Simard
Marit Stiles, Nina Tangri
John Vanthof
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Julia Douglas

**Standing Committee on Justice Policy / Comité permanent de
la justice**

Chair / Président: Roman Baber
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Roman Baber, Will Bouma
Lucille Collard, Parm Gill
Natalia Kusendova, Suze Morrison
Lindsey Park, Gurratan Singh
Nina Tangri, Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Kevin Yarde
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Thushitha Kobikrishna

**Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly / Comité
permanent de l'Assemblée législative**

Chair / Président: Kaleed Rasheed
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Vijay Thanigasalam
Rima Berns-McGown, Michael Coteau
Faisal Hassan, Logan Kanapathi
Jim McDonell, Christina Maria Mitas
Sam Oosterhoff, Kaleed Rasheed
Sara Singh, Donna Skelly
Vijay Thanigasalam
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tonia Grannum

**Standing Committee on Public Accounts / Comité permanent
des comptes publics**

Chair / Présidente: Catherine Fife
Vice-Chair / Vice-présidente: France Gélinas
Deepak Anand, Jill Andrew
Toby Barrett, Stephen Blais
Stan Cho, Stephen Crawford
Catherine Fife, France Gélinas
Christine Hogarth, Daryl Kramp
Michael Parsa
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell

**Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills / Comité
permanent des règlements et des projets de loi d'intérêt privé**

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Vice-Chair / Vice-président: John Fraser
Deepak Anand, Toby Barrett
Will Bouma, Stephen Crawford
John Fraser, Laura Mae Lindo
Gila Martow, Paul Miller
Billy Pang, Dave Smith
Jamie West
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**Standing Committee on Social Policy / Comité permanent de
la politique sociale**

Chair / Présidente: Natalia Kusendova
Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Aris Babikian
Aris Babikian, Jeff Burch
Amy Fee, Michael Gravelle
Joel Harden, Mike Harris
Christine Hogarth, Belinda C. Karahalios
Terence Kernaghan, Natalia Kusendova
Robin Martin
Committee Clerk / Greffière: Tanzima Khan

**Select Committee on Emergency Management Oversight /
Comité spécial de la surveillance de la gestion des situations
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Vice-Chair / Vice-président: Tom Rakocevic
Robert Bailey, Gilles Bisson
John Fraser, Christine Hogarth
Daryl Kramp, Robin Martin
Sam Oosterhoff, Lindsey Park
Tom Rakocevic, Sara Singh
Effie J. Triantafilopoulos
Committee Clerk / Greffier: Christopher Tyrell