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Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Estimates

Cabinet Office

Office of the Premier

Comité permanent des finances et des affaires économiques

Budget des dépenses

Bureau du Conseil des ministres

Cabinet du premier ministre

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Monday 24 June 2024

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43^e législature

Lundi 24 juin 2024

Chair: Ernie Hardeman
Clerk: Vanessa Kattar

Président : Ernie Hardeman
Greffière : Vanessa Kattar

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Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS**

Monday 24 June 2024

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DES FINANCES
ET DES AFFAIRES ÉCONOMIQUES**

Lundi 24 juin 2024

The committee met at 1001 in room 151.

The Clerk pro tem (Mr. Christopher Tyrell): Good morning, honourable members. In the absence of the Chair and Vice-Chair, it is my duty to call upon you to elect an Acting Chair. Are there any nominations? MPP Bouma.

Mr. Will Bouma: I'll nominate member Babikian.

The Clerk pro tem (Mr. Christopher Tyrell): MPP Babikian, do you accept the nomination?

Mr. Aris Babikian: Yes, I do.

The Clerk pro tem (Mr. Christopher Tyrell): Are there any further nominations?

There being no further nominations, I declare the nominations closed and MPP Babikian elected Acting Chair of the committee.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good morning, colleagues. Thank you for your vote of confidence in me, but I have to put you on notice that you have to bear with me; I don't have my reading glasses. Thank you to our colleague Christine for lending me her glasses. I will do my best.

ESTIMATES

CABINET OFFICE

OFFICE OF THE PREMIER

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Good morning, everyone. The Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs will now come to order. The committee will now begin consideration of the estimates of the Cabinet Office and Office of the Premier for a total of two hours. Pursuant to standing order 63(d)(ii), the estimates of the Office of the Premier and the estimates of the Cabinet Office shall be allotted time jointly and shall be considered concurrently.

As a reminder, we kindly ask all members and ministry staff to not interfere with the mikes on the table. Broadcast and recording services will control the mike once you have been recognized by the Chair. Are there any questions from members before we start?

Seeing none, I am now required to call vote 401 and vote 2401, which sets the review process in motion.

We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the government House leader. MPP Clark, the floor is yours. Thank you.

Mr. Steve Clark: Good morning, everyone. Minister Harris and I are pleased to be here today with our staff to

present to you details on how our government continues to take bold action for delivering for the people of the province. So, on behalf of Premier Ford, I'll present a comprehensive overview of the work that's being done by both the Office of the Premier and by Cabinet Office as they support the Office of the Premier to deliver on our government's mandate.

Chair, through you to members, the Office of the Premier provides direction to the ministers' offices on key government priorities. The Office of the Premier also calls on the expertise of various ministries, soliciting their advice and recommendations to ensure that government messaging is well integrated and distinct, ensuring that details of programs and services are communicated clearly to the public. The duties carried out by the Office of the Premier are essential to the government in achieving its goals of building Ontario both today and in the future. The Office of the Premier is committed to enacting measures that will strengthen our economy, invest in Ontario jobs and workers, build and expand critical infrastructure and lower the cost of living for all Ontarians. Our successes to date on these fronts have been historic. But, Chair, there's much, much more we need to do as a government.

In March of this year, our colleague the Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy, Ontario's Minister of Finance, introduced our 2024 Ontario budget, Building a Better Ontario. It is the Office of the Premier, working in collaboration with Cabinet Office, that holds both the ministries and the larger provincial government accountable for honouring those commitments that we've made to Ontarians through that most recent budget. The Office of the Premier provides centralized direction to ministers' offices which then guide the individual ministries with their responsibilities and undertakings. This approach ensures a unified approach to government communications. The Office of the Premier stands as a model of fiscal prudence, leading by example across government for responsible budgeting and resource management while maintaining a high standard of delivery with a very efficient roster of merely 75 staff members.

I want to take an opportunity, committee members, to talk about the services provided by Cabinet Office. Cabinet Office, as I think most of you if not all of you know, is considered the Premier's ministry, and it acts as the central agency across other provincial ministries. Under the direction of the Office of the Premier, the neutral and non-partisan professional civil servants of Cabinet Office

perform tasks that are fundamental to the implementation of government policy and government priorities. Cabinet Office is home to the secretary of cabinet, who is the head of the Ontario public service and clerk of the executive council and serves as the deputy minister to the Premier. In this role, the secretary ensures that the Ontario public service operates in a fiscally considerate manner while delivering provincial programs at the highest standard. The secretary is the source of independent non-partisan advice to both the Premier on government policies and communications and with the public and candidates for ministerial/deputy minister roles.

Cabinet Office's policy and delivery division works with ministries and provides objective and strategic advice on both short-term and long-term policy to the Office of the Premier. That advice will then support the process of cabinet decision-making, including the operation of cabinet and also cabinet committees. This division is also responsible for the operational support in terms of what has been named and talked about as the "machinery of government," such as the swearing in of cabinet, liaising with legislative affairs and facilitating the relationship between the Ontario public service and Office of the Lieutenant Governor. Another important aspect of this division is assessing potential risks related to key government activities and informing government on possible problems in advance.

Cabinet Office communication is the division tasked with providing strategic advice, support and analysis to both the Office of the Premier and the secretary of cabinet, as well as managing communications between the Premier's office and individual ministries. Services offered by this division range from drafting and publishing communications products such as enterprise marketing material and digital items, ensuring the functionality and maintenance of our government's flagship website at ontario.ca and also the Ontario Newsroom website for media communications and managing the government's social media channels and coordinating strategic communications through several channels.

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These communications also entail initiatives to build teams, keep them informed, cultivate a positive, inclusive culture across the broader OPS. Cabinet Office connects teams and liaises with the media via our new state-of-the-art communications centre for press conferences and delivers daily monitoring and analysis of media coverage on the government and of other relevant issues.

Additionally, Cabinet Office oversees the review and response to freedom-of-information requests, responds to correspondence from the public and the organization of events with the Premier and other government officials, both on site and across the province.

Cabinet Office's strategy and innovation branch, or SIB, merges public sector innovation consulting, behavioural science, product management and data analytics, and visualization to assist ministries in creating different models.

During the previous fiscal year, the SIB aided ministries in tracking and reporting their work on behalf of Ontarians, including a renewed focus on major projects and service delivery. The SIB team also helped the government and public service respond to recommendations made by the Auditor General by updating key decision-making documents and developing a guide for public engagement.

The SIB's internal consulting services help governments save more than \$7 million in hiring external vendors. These internal services included work on more than 60 projects ranging from engaging the energy sector on the long-term vision with the Electrification and Energy Transition Panel, supporting the new provincial oversight regime for towing and storage and helping more apprentices get access to grants for tools to help them complete their training and seek employment in their trade.

I'd now like to highlight an important component of the policy and delivery team. Since joining the policy and delivery division of Cabinet Office in 2021, the lean and continuous improvements office has successfully spread the adoption and the integration of team principles in support of government priorities. The office provides leadership on applying lean and continuous improvement to processes across the Ontario public service. The offices trained more than 10,000 OPS staff since September 2021, and in 2023-24 alone, partnered with 25 ministries to streamline and improve services with the result in over \$26 million in savings once all of the recommendations are implemented. A lean executive champion has also been established in every ministry across the government to continue to expand this and the efficiencies achieved through lean methodology.

In addition, two integral ministries operate within Cabinet Office. The first is the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction, which leads our government's efforts to meaningfully reduce red tape, streamline and simplify provincial rules wherever possible and construct a modern and reasonable regulatory environment where both businesses and people can thrive. This ministry is responsible for creating red tape reduction packages designed to improve services for people, reduce costs for businesses and make it easier to work with government.

The ministry also promotes economic opportunity while shrinking or eliminating unnecessary burdens for the citizens and the businesses of Ontario. These red tape reduction packages also demonstrate that the government of Ontario is continuing to blaze a trail forward and set an example in the modernization of regulations to address the economy of today and tomorrow while taking a common-sense approach to easing the process of conducting business in our province.

Since 2018, our government has reduced Ontario's total regulatory burden by approximately 6%. We've eliminated more than 14,600 individual regulatory compliance requirements and, building on that, Bill 185 further proposes changes to save people, businesses, non-profit or-

ganizations and the broader public service more time and money.

Once implemented and combined with our provincial burden reduction measures, our estimate is to save more than 1.5 million hours and \$1.2 billion per year in gross annual regulatory compliance cost.

Cabinet Office also includes the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs which supports the Premier in his interactions with other levels of government both domestic and international. And it's through the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs that the Premier receives jurisdictional intelligence, policy analysis, advice to partner ministries, protocol briefings and operational support.

The ministry also supports the Premier in recurring interactions with provincial, territorial and federal governments, such as the first ministers' meeting and the Council of the Federation. In addition, the ministry assists various other ministries whose officials are undertaking missions abroad or when they are representing Ontario on their visits with foreign government representatives. To maintain its indispensable work, Cabinet Office has a planned expenditure of over \$61.7 million for 2024-25. The funding will allow Cabinet Office to continue to perform these multiple and vital functions. The Office of the Premier and Cabinet Office have been and will continue to be central to our government's efforts to advance our mandate and the honour that has been trusted upon us by the people of Ontario.

Members of the committee, our economic growth in 2024 is expected to slow due to numerous macroeconomic factors beyond our government's control. Despite this possible slowdown, we remain on a path to eventual balance. In 2023, Ontario experienced better-than-expected job numbers, posting above-average employment growth. We added 183,200 net new jobs to the economy, an increase of 2.4%. Ontario's unemployment rate in 2023 climbed at a modest pace to 5.7%. That figure is still low when comparing it to its historical average. For 2023-24, the province is projecting a deficit of \$3 billion over the medium term. We're projecting deficits of \$9.8 billion in 2024-25 and \$4.6 billion in 2025-26 and are projecting a surplus of \$500 million for 2026-27. So even with factors like persistent inflation and the ongoing higher interest rates set by the Bank of Canada, Ontario's economy has shown remarkable resiliency and strength necessary to weather any further challenges that may lie ahead of us.

The following points represent our government's priorities; I'm going to outline to you those now. The staff members of the Office of the Premier and Cabinet Office ensure that the Premier of Ontario's directions on these matters are carried out efficiently and effectively. And, members of the committee, we're achieving our mandate by expanding our mining and manufacturing sectors through targeted supports, attracting record levels of domestic and international investments over the past four years. The success on this file so far has been immense. We are helping to unite the two industries like never before by forging a dependent, stable, end-to-end supply chain that will connect Ontario's vast mineral resources in

the north to the manufacturing know-how and infrastructure of the south, positioning our province, Ontario, as the world's top jurisdiction on the planet for producing electric vehicles.

Global automakers are showing their faith in Ontario with over \$46 billion in investments in their Canadian operations in the auto, electric vehicle battery and battery component manufacturing sectors. We know that one of the top expenses that are incurred by the manufacturers is power. We are moving to relieve some of that financial burden by deploying new technologies for the low-emission generation, storage and transmission of electricity. This investment in power infrastructure will result in lower electricity prices for businesses and for households alike.

In renovating and refurbishing Ontario's nuclear plant network, such as the work that's being done now in both Bruce and Darlington, we're aiming to generate greater and cheaper supply of green energy, while also enabling the production of life-saving nuclear isotopes used in medical procedures.

We have shovels in the ground on the largest capital plan in Ontario's history, focusing on partnering with municipalities to build homes and critical infrastructure and to build it faster. This past year, we dispersed funds from our three-year \$1.2-billion Building Faster Fund to municipalities to incentivize them to meet provincial targets for new housing starts. Adding to this funding is \$1.8 billion to support housing-enabling infrastructure projects as announced in our 2024 budget, something our municipal partners are overwhelmingly in favour of. Thanks to these initiatives, Ontario reached 99% of its target of 110,000 new home starts, additional residential units and new and upgraded long-term-care beds for 2023.

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We're expanding our provincial health care and transportation networks, including the creation of new hospitals, roads, highways—including Highway 413 and the Bradford Bypass—as well as leading the largest expansion of public transit in North America. Work on these projects will move ahead at a rapid pace. Work for contracts on Highway 413 has been awarded earlier this year. Metrolinx is adding more than 300 trips per week on the Milton, Lakeshore West, Lakeshore East, Kitchener and Stouffville GO train lines, a 15% increase in weekly trips.

We're investing nearly \$50 billion in health infrastructure, including close to \$36 billion in capital grants, supporting more than 50 hospital projects all across our province. Right now, shovels are in the ground of the \$1.3-billion Gilgan Family Queensway Health Centre expansion in Etobicoke—Canada's largest health infrastructure renewal project of all time.

We're also investing in workers, proactively addressing a real shortage of tradespeople and skilled labour across the province by supporting training, apprenticeship and co-op programs. These programs are designed to help young people and women acquire hands-on experience in key areas like the trades and in health care. And by

investing in Ontario's labour pool and equipping our workforce for the market needs of both today and tomorrow, we'll deliver more good-paying jobs for Ontarians who are looking for new and rewarding careers.

Through our skilled trades strategy, our government has invested more than \$1.5 billion in skilled trades instruction and apprenticeships since 2020. In 2024-25, our government is investing an additional \$100 million in the Skills Development Fund Training program—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Two minutes, Minister.

Mr. Steve Clark: Thank you, Chair—bringing a total of over \$960 million in funding that will continue to support innovative programs that help job seekers get the skills and the training that they need to find good jobs.

Chair, since 2021, the Skills Development Fund has supported close to 600 training projects, it's helped more than 520,000 workers move forward in their careers—additionally, Chair, we've fast-tracked students from secondary schools interested in learning the skilled trades into gaining live, hands-on experience in the trades.

We're determined to keep household costs down for the people whenever and wherever possible as a government. We've demonstrated that philosophy, Chair—in my few remaining minutes—by lifting road tolls and proposing the extension of tax cuts on essential services, things like gas and fuel. We froze tuition at Ontario's post-secondary institutions. We froze fees to obtain and renew a driver's licence or a photo ID card.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Mr. Steve Clark: We've reduced public transit costs. We've aided low-income seniors in accessing financial assistance. And our current push to permanently freeze fees for increases for driver's licence photo cards would save drivers an estimated \$66 million over the next five years.

We're improving the safety and security of our communities to support victims of crime through investments in police services, innovative law enforcement programs, programs to support front-line officers, their families and all of those that are impacted by crime. We're renovating and modernizing correctional and courthouse facilities. We're undertaking measures to combat crime, especially when it comes to the scourge of auto theft.

One of the measures that we've undertaken, Chair, to deliver on auto theft is proposing legislation that, if passed, would see drivers' licences for people—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, Minister. The time is up.

As a reminder, I will allow members to ask a wide range of questions pertaining to the estimates before the committee. However, it must be noted that the onus is on the members asking the questions to make sure the question is relevant to the estimates under consideration.

The Office of the Premier and Cabinet Office are required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address. If you wish, you may, at the end of your appearance, verify the questions and issues being tracked with the research office.

For any staff appearing today, when you are called to speak, please give your name and your title so that we may accurately record in Hansard who we have.

We will now begin questions and answers in rotations of 20 minutes for the official opposition members of the committee, 10 minutes for the independent member of the committee and 20 minutes for the government members of the committee for the remainder of the allotted time.

I will start with the official opposition for 20 minutes. MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Chair, and thank you for stepping in today.

I'm grateful for all of you being here. We have some pointed questions, obviously, on the Premier's office and cabinet.

To the House leader: How many people are employed directly in the Office of the Premier—a number?

Mr. Steve Clark: Yes, the Office of the Premier: It's not the largest Office of the Premier that has—

Ms. Catherine Fife: How many people are employed in the Office of the Premier? Please, just a number.

Mr. Steve Clark: As I said in the record, 75. The largest number of staffers in the Premier's office under Premier Ford's leadership was 79 in 2022, comparing to Premier McGuinty with 82 and Premier Bob Rae with 110.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Can the ministry confirm that just over \$2 million, which is on page 18 of the estimates book, is the total amount of salaries expected for the entire staff complement in the Office of the Premier?

Mr. Steve Clark: You have to understand—Chair, through you to MPP Fife—that it has been a long-standing practice that in addition to the staff that you would have seen on the sunshine list, for example, other staff are apportioned to the ministries that they serve. So, for example, when I was Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, there were ministry staff who worked with Premier staff, and some of those salaries were apportioned to that ministry. This is a long-standing practice that probably has gone on for at least over a decade and is—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay. How many staff in the Premier's office are on the sunshine list, in total?

Mr. Steve Clark: That's a public document. You can access—

Ms. Catherine Fife: I'm asking you the number.

Mr. Steve Clark: You can access it yourself. It's a public number.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Chair, I'm asking the House leader to answer a very simple question: How many employees and staff in the Premier's office are currently on the sunshine list? I just want a number, please.

Mr. Steve Clark: Chair, the sunshine list is a public document—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay. You'll know, Chair—

Mr. Steve Clark: Chair, can we answer the question?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Fife, let the minister answer the question.

Mr. Steve Clark: The question was asked.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Yes, go ahead.

Ms. Supriya Mahimkar-Patrick: I'm Supriya Mahimkar-Patrick, I'm the chief administrative officer. There are 48 employees—

Ms. Catherine Fife: It's 48? Thank you.

Global News reported that according to the sunshine list, as of 2023, there are 48 staff working in the Office of the Premier currently on the sunshine list, with a total salary of \$6.9 million, yet the interim actuals for salaries covered in that time span is \$2 million. Can you explain that? And where are the other staffing lines contained within estimates?

Mr. Steve Clark: Again, I'll start. As I said a few minutes earlier—

Ms. Catherine Fife: I know—a long-standing practice.

Mr. Steve Clark: Yes, so you're aware that some of those salaries are apportioned to the different ministries.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Where are they apportioned to? How do we track that?

Mr. Steve Clark: When you're in the other ministries' estimates, you can ask each individual ministry—

Ms. Catherine Fife: That's actually not accurate. In these other lines—if you're telling me that you have staff from other ministries working in the Premier's office, it is not clearly articulated in the estimates briefing book. It doesn't say, "Staff A works in housing, Premier's office, Cabinet Office." They're located under one ministry.

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Ms. Supriya Mahimkar-Patrick: The funding model has been in place, as the leader said. The charges are incurred by the ministries that the services are provided to, and it is in their main office. The main office vote item is where it would be reflected.

Ms. Catherine Fife: So the actuals, though, for 2022-23—which is what we're looking at—were just over \$2 million. Combined two years of salaries, reported here, is just over \$4 million if you added up those two years. Yet on the sunshine list, just for the one year, the salaries in the Premier's office total \$6.9 million.

I would like the ministry to be able to explain which vote item would see the rest of these salaries reflected.

Ms. Supriya Mahimkar-Patrick: The \$2 million, as you mentioned, is for the core team. It's for the Premier's staff.

Ms. Catherine Fife: How many staff would that core team be?

Ms. Supriya Mahimkar-Patrick: Approximately 11 at this time. It's chief of staff, deputy chiefs of staff, executive directors and key staff. It's an approximate number, whereas the remaining of the 75 provide services to the different ministries. As the leader mentioned earlier, they help for tours, for communication, for issues management, for public appointments. Based on those expenditures, the ministries are the ones who incur the expenditures and have the allocation, and so those expenditures will be shown in public accounts too.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Actually, according to public accounts—we do know that these staffing positions are already reported on the sunshine list for the employees of cabinet as well, so I'm going to move onto cabinet in a

second. If they are coming out of the cabinet line, which you're suggesting, should they not be reported as cabinet staff? Why is there such a grey area for mobility of staff between the Premier's office, Cabinet Office and other ministries?

Mr. Steve Clark: Again, there are different priorities for the government as they implement their agenda—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Well, our priority is to follow the money.

Mr. Steve Clark: As the chief said, you've got policy, issues management, communications, tour—there are different branches within the Premier's office. Again, it's been a long-standing practice that, for staff that are providing direct services to those ministries, those ministries would pick up the cost.

As somebody who had a short period of time in a ministry, I can attest that you're always dealing with the Premier's office, as I stated earlier in my remarks, to implement the government's agenda.

Ms. Catherine Fife: To the House leader, Chair: Do you not understand the need for some transparency around staff in the Premier's office, especially given what we've learned through FOIs around certain staff using personal emails, using their personal phone lines to conduct government business? There is a need for greater transparency, particularly in the Office of the Premier—I would say particularly this Premier—to have some transparency about who is intersecting in that office and who is paying the bill, which ministry is paying the bill, and how much those folks are getting paid.

I will say, you mentioned policy direction. Of those core 11 people who are in the Premier's office, what is the average salary for a policy director in the Premier's office?

Mr. Steve Clark: First of all, Chair—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Can you answer that question directly?

Mr. Steve Clark: First of all, Chair, the member made a comment about transparency. Under the leadership of Premier Ford—he's the most transparent of any Premier in the history of this province. Most people have his personal phone number. He's accessible—

Ms. Catherine Fife: This is not up for debate, Chair. We are not debating government policy around whether or not it's okay to use a personal phone to conduct government business—

Mr. Steve Clark: Chair, with all due respect, I'm not the one who questioned the Premier's transparency.

Ms. Catherine Fife: We're not playing that game. We're not.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Can I have a comment on the procedure for the rest of the day? I kindly ask the members, as they are allowed to ask questions, let's give the witnesses the opportunity to answer the questions without interrupting. And also—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you very much, Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): I didn't finish yet.

And also, I would like the committee members to tie their questions to the estimates only. Thank you very much.

Go ahead, MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you. These questions pertain to vote item 401.

And, Chair, just out of respect: I don't expect government members to filibuster their answers. We have limited time. I just want them to answer the questions that I put.

I'm actually going to move on. I've asked a question—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Fife, we should give them the opportunity, the courtesy to answer the questions that you put.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I'm trying to get answers here.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Okay.

Ms. Catherine Fife: So I'm asking a question: What is the average salary for a policy director in the Premier's office? It's a simple question.

Mr. Steve Clark: You can access the salaries on the sunshine list. I'm going to talk in general terms; I'm obviously not going to talk in specific terms. The average salary in the Premier's office, I understand, is about \$118,000, so that's as most detailed as I can be.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you for the answer.

The Narwhal reported that policy directors in the Premier's office average about \$112,000—so thank you for the update; then it's more—for a full year's work. But after Jae Truesdell's resignation following the Vegas scandal, he was paid \$144,000, despite resigning 70% of the way into the year, and 70% of the average salary for that position at that time would have just been under \$80,000.

Is it common for severance packages, upon resignation, to total nearly a year's salary in the Premier's office, and does the ministry budget for these severances in the upcoming estimates? This is pertaining to, obviously, the estimates and vote item 401.

Mr. Steve Clark: Chair, again, at the end of the year, the member can review the public accounts on how, year over year, the office has spent. We've provided estimates to operate both the Premier's office and Cabinet Office. It's impossible for me, as a non-cabinet person, to answer a question with those specifics. I'm not privy to the HR decisions that were done.

I can speak to the estimates that are provided as a forward-facing document. That's why we're here.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I just want to be clear, though, Chair: I'm not asking about individual employees' salaries. We are asking if the request that this government is making to this Legislature for spending authority accurately reflects the cost of staffing in the Premier's office. That is the whole goal of this committee.

The government has put forward some budget items to staff and operationalize the Premier's office and the Cabinet Office. There's a discrepancy here between what the Premier's office is requesting of the Legislature to operationalize this office and what's actually on the sunshine list. That discrepancy is concerning for many people, and this discrepancy appears between the public disclosures in the sunshine list and the numbers that the Office of the Premier is reporting in their estimates.

I take your point, though, that you are not in cabinet and you cannot answer that question—

Mr. Steve Clark: But I also can't—just to add a little more detail on your question, as well, any individual ministry can ask for a supplementary estimate. I can't predict what any ministry—

Ms. Catherine Fife: No, and we're not asking you to predict. I was asking for you to explain the discrepancy between what is publicly reported on the sunshine list and what's actually happening in the Premier's office.

What I have heard today is that there is a long-standing tradition of having a grey area, but what I would say to you, as the new House leader—congratulations on that—is that this grey area is causing a lot of concern for the people of this province from an accountability and transparency perspective. And it goes to, what are the deliverables, according to vote item 401, that staff in the Premier's office provide to caucus and to ministers?

You had mentioned in your opening comments that this is a model of fiscal prudence, and I want to say, from a transparency perspective, there are some outstanding questions that the public has around what happens in the Premier's office, particularly as it relates to the mandate letters.

Now, just before we left—we left a week early; we can't come back until October 21—there was a new cabinet shuffle, and so there will, I assume, be more mandate letters produced. Will any staff time outlined in vote item 2401 be used for the creation of mandate letters? What staff support is used to ensure that action items outlined in the mandate letters are followed up on?

And I want to say, Chair, why I'm raising this issue is that, in the past mandate letters—we know that staff time is used for this, we just don't know how much and how much is budgeted to do that. And are there any politically sensitive matters that staff employed in the Premier's office are expected to implement this upcoming year?

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Mr. Steve Clark: Thanks for the question.

In terms of that question, since I'm not in cabinet, there are obviously cabinet documents that I'm not privy to.

What I can say to you, as I said in my opening statement, is that the Premier's office and Cabinet Office work with individual ministries to deliver on the strategic direction of the government of the day. The government will have its priorities. I outlined many of the priorities that our government has been successful in getting, whether it be in red tape reduction or whether it be building highways or building hospitals or delivering—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Okay, thank you very much—

Mr. Steve Clark: Their support to individual ministries to deliver on the priorities is vital to the government's success.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I recognize, Chair, that I'm not going to be getting an answer on why the Office of the Premier's staff are not reported under these budget lines. I understand that now. I don't think that it's acceptable, but I understand it.

I'm going to pass it over now to my colleague MPP Kernaghan.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: My questions will be with regard to Cabinet Office. It was announced last week that the government has the largest cabinet in Ontario's history and that there are 36 members; that's 45% of the Ontario PC caucus. Does Cabinet Office expect they will need additional resources in order to support this substantial growth in cabinet?

Mr. Steve Clark: The Premier announced the new cabinet team. We've got a number of new members—exciting to deal with people like Minister Harris, who represents the Kitchener-Waterloo area in a really exemplary manner, so great to have him in cabinet.

I think the Premier's philosophy is he puts together a team, and whether you're in cabinet or not or whether you're a parliamentary assistant or a committee Chair, all of the government's team is there ready to advance their priorities, whether it be to build highways, build transit, public infrastructure, new hospitals. The fact that we've received a record—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you, House leader. I'll move on to my next question.

Mr. Steve Clark: —\$46 billion of EV investments in our province—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Chair, I'm going to be reclaiming my time.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you very much, House leader.

I noticed that salaries in Cabinet Office are projected to increase by about \$7 million, or by 17%. With respect to your comments about fiscal transparency, I did want to ask, this increase—is it a reflection of wage increases or an increased staff complement?

Mr. Steve Clark: The estimates set out for our discussion today are both the operating and the capital spending needs of the ministries and the legislative offices for the year. As we've outlined in some of the previous questions from MPP Fife, this isn't the largest Premier's office in the history of Ontario. I think the top seven highest-paid chiefs of staff were part of a previous Liberal government. And, again, there were 110 staff in the Premier's office when Bob Rae was Premier—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you, House leader, but I think it is important to note that it is the largest cabinet in Ontario's history. I think it's important that we underscore that.

We did have some concerns in last year's public accounts when it was revealed that PC caucus services paid former principal secretary Amin Massoudi \$237,000 to provide communications support, a service that he had previously provided in his role as principal secretary at a much reduced rate.

Vote item 401-1 sees an increase in services of just over \$350,000. What sorts of services are provided within these budget lines?

Mr. Steve Clark: So, again, Chair, the member is correct: This is a forward-facing document for the next year. Basically, Cabinet Office and the Premier's office are set up to implement the policies and priorities of the government in consultation with the line ministries. Again, this is why we're here today: to draw the line between government priorities and implementing through the Premier's office.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you, House leader.

I want to look to page 19, where Cabinet Office outlines the percentage of FOI requests that are responded to within the legislated timelines. Before this government, cabinet indicates that 100% of requests were responded to within this period, but as of March of this year, the percentage dropped to 95%. The cabinet lists their target for 2025 to be even lower at 90%. Why would the ministry target and budget for a reduction in responses—responses which the timeline is mandated by the legislation? Is it not an indication that Cabinet Office may need more FOI coordinator funding to ensure that these timelines are abided by?

Mr. Steve Clark: I acknowledge there has been a significant increase in freedom-of-information requests. I think it's about 85%. I think it's also important for the committee to understand the process that Cabinet Office takes for freedom-of-information—perhaps you can outline that process?

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: I'd be happy to do that. Good morning. My name is Alexandra Sutton. I'm the deputy minister of communications and intergovernmental affairs in Cabinet Office.

In terms of our roles and responsibilities under freedom of information, we take our role of ensuring access to transparent information for the public in Ontario in accordance with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. So there is a team within the Cabinet Office that works on freedom-of-information requests. As noted, there has been an increase to those requests in 2023. That number was to 233. I would note, however, that 96% of those requests were completed within legally extended timelines; 75% were completed within the 30-day timeline. So that shows some improvement year over year in terms of our adherence to those timelines. So we're doing a number of things to ensure that we do that well—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much. The time is up.

We move now to the independent member. MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: Good morning, everyone. Thank you for coming in and taking us through your budget line items.

I want to focus on your conversation regarding the deficit that you've mentioned. You quoted that \$9.8-billion deficit that we're in in 2024-25, and then you also mentioned a \$4.6-billion deficit in 2025-26. What piqued my curiosity is the projection of 2026-27. There's going to

be a surplus of \$0.5 billion. I'm just wondering, what would be cut for this government to get into a surplus when it's carrying that much deficit, as per your mentioning this morning?

Mr. Steve Clark: As I mentioned, the Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy, Ontario's Minister of Finance, when he presented our budget 2024, he was very clear about the government's commitment to balance. However, there's obviously a number of forces that are affecting the government, forces that—some are outside of our control. You can take two paths, right? You can stop the process that we've been able to have as a government, where we've been able to build new highways, where we've been able to invest in new school construction, where we're able to invest in significant hospital infrastructure expansion, where we're able to increase primary health care teams. We can take that or we can go back.

The reference to the commitment to balance but at the same time the policies and priorities of our government—we have to continue to move forward. We're at the cusp of being the world leader in electric vehicle manufacturing and components. We've created, and will continue, 700,000 jobs as opposed to the previous government, which I'm sure you're aware of—

MPP Andrea Hazell: We're challenged—I'm going to take back some time here—

Mr. Steve Clark: We had 300,000 manufacturing jobs leave our province. We don't want to go back to that.

MPP Andrea Hazell: We're still challenged with the phase of economic downturn in this country, in Ontario. It hasn't been positively going up. I'm asking you for the deficit that we're carrying in 2024—

Mr. Will Bouma: Point of order, Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bouma.

Mr. Will Bouma: I believe we're covering off estimates for Cabinet Office and the Premier's office. I think we already had opportunity in the Legislature to debate the budget and we don't need to rehash those issues here, and our path to balance. So I was wondering if you could direct the member to talk about the issues of the day.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you, MPP. As a—

MPP Andrea Hazell: Yes. So, Chair, I'm going after his comment that he also talked about the previous government. That's debating.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Let me rule on the point of order. The member raised a point of order and I need to rule on it, and I need to answer the point of order. After that, you can continue your questioning.

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As a general rule, we need to tie and focus tying the questions to the estimates on hand which we are discussing today, so please take that under consideration.

You have the floor, MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I'm going to ask again where the surplus is going to be coming from in 2026-27. Can you detail that for us?

Mr. Steve Clark: Chair, through you to MPP Hazell: I highlighted simply the philosophy that Minister Bethlenfalvy

had when he presented our 2024 budget. He was transparent and open with the people of Ontario on our fiscal health, and he laid it right on the table that there were literally two paths: We could continue with the investments that we'd made, investments that provide better schools, better health care, more construction in transit and transportation, or we could go back to a time that MPP Hazell knows well, where we had literally hundreds of thousands of jobs leave this province.

I remember a time when—

MPP Andrea Hazell: That's not answering my question.

Mr. Steve Clark: Well, it is answering your question, because it fundamentally talks about the philosophy of the government and the fact that while we're talking today about the estimates of the Premier's office and of Cabinet Office, it speaks very clearly of the difference between your government, when we lost manufacturing jobs, and our government, when we increased manufacturing jobs. You can't exclusively talk about the numbers that are in Minister Bethlenfalvy's budget and not talk about the why, and the why is simply to continue those public investments that we made as a government.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I asked a specific question, and I'm getting general answers.

Mr. Steve Clark: I'm giving you a specific answer, a very specific answer.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I'm finished with my time, Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): You're finished your time?

MPP Andrea Hazell: Yes.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Thank you very much.

We move to the government side now. You have 20 minutes. MPP Hogarth, the floor is yours.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you both, Minister and House leader, for being here today and sharing your point of view on the estimates.

I'm going to actually give our House leader a little break. I want to ask the new minister—congratulations, Minister Harris, on your role. I've had the pleasure of serving as the parliamentary assistant for the last little bit, where this ministry has grown, but it has grown because it is crucial. This ministry serves as a pivotal hub of excellence to reduce regulatory burden. We have saved people, businesses and the broader public service 1.5 million hours and \$1.2 billion every year. Since 2018, when our government took over, we have taken over 500 actions to reduce regulatory burdens in this province, which is absolutely amazing, because we need to look after our small businesses and, of course, save money for the people.

Now, I wonder if you can give us a little overview about this ministry and explain how your new ministry plans to allocate the \$8.5-million budget that it has. Thank you.

Hon. Mike Harris: That's great. Thank you very much, MPP Hogarth. I just wanted to note as well that I am joined today by my deputy minister, Maud Murray, who is just

sitting behind us, and my colleagues in the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction.

As I reiterate, I do want to say I appreciate having the opportunity today to tell you a little bit more about what our ministry is doing and a little bit more background. When we first formed government in 2018, Ontario had a reputation for being the most over-regulated province in the country. We acknowledge that regulation serves as a necessary tool to achieve important goals such as maintaining safe workplaces, protecting the health of Ontarians and preserving, of course, the environment. But left unchecked, regulations have the tendency to grow larger, which we have seen. They stray away from their original purpose and increase both time and cost to comply with, which you highlighted earlier. So, early on, we made a commitment to the people of Ontario to ease this burden by modernizing or eliminating outdated, redundant or ineffective regulations, ones that no longer serve the purpose they were created for.

Regulatory burdens hurt our province's productivity, innovation competitiveness and talent, and the costs of failing to act are high. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business estimated that red tape cost small businesses in Canada approximately \$11 billion a year. Thankfully, our government is making significant progress in reducing Ontario's regulatory burden, helping to make life easier and more affordable for people and businesses.

Working across government and in consultation with stakeholders, the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction has focused on changes to improve government services and make it easier to invest and build in Ontario. Since 2018, the government has taken over 500 burden-reducing actions, like you had mentioned, and reduced Ontario's total regulatory burden—and I think this is an important number to highlight—by more than 6%. The impact of our changes speak for themselves. We have eliminated more than \$1.2 billion in compliance costs for regulated entities and have saved 1.5 million hours since June 2018.

We have achieved these savings by making practical changes that serve both people and businesses time and money, changes like:

- simplifying housing construction regulations to expedite groundbreaking to meet Ontario's housing needs faster;

- empowering pharmacists to prescribe medication for 13 common ailments, reducing wait times for minor medical issues—and I can say, as a father of five, that I certainly appreciate that measure;

- collaborating with regulatory bodies to streamline processes for internationally educated health care professionals, facilitating quicker integration into hospitals, clinics and care homes;

- mandating ministries to establish and publicly disclose service standards for permits and licenses, supported by an online tracker for effective application monitoring;

- updating legislation to streamline resolution of property boundary disputes, benefiting property owners and

municipalities through enhanced use of modern communication tools; and

- introducing legislation under the At Your Service Act, 2022, that requires ministries to develop service standards for permits and licence services delivered to business and to report publicly on those service standards.

I can say we are incredibly proud of our progress, but our work on this file is not yet done. That's why we continue to look for ways to reduce regulatory burden to support the province's economy and encourage new investment and opportunity in our province.

To date, this government has implemented 13 regulatory modernization packages and passed 12 high-impact pieces of red tape reduction legislation in the last five years, including the recently passed Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Act, 2024. This legislation, part of our spring red tape package, introduced regulatory amendments and policy changes aimed at achieving a shared objective of cutting bureaucratic hurdles. These measures are designed to enhance service delivery, foster business growth and preserve Ontarians' most precious commodity, their time.

Our ministry remains committed to collaborating with other Ontario ministries to address ongoing regulatory challenges through comprehensive red tape reduction initiatives. While our ministry takes pride in leading the government's burden reduction efforts, every minister and ministry involved in government services or regulatory oversight plays a crucial role in advancing the whole of government endeavour.

This initiative extends beyond the typical bills and packages introduced by our ministry, demonstrating our dedication to sustained efficiency and effectiveness across Ontario's regulatory landscape. We collaborate with partner ministries across the government to ensure ongoing compliance with Ontario's burden reduction directive and the Modernizing Ontario for People and Businesses Act. Together, we've created an inventory of ideas that are continually being assessed and that are driving current and future red tape reduction actions.

Through our red tape reduction portal, the ministry is working alongside business, non-profits and communities across the province to identify red tape that is duplicative, outdated, unclear, overly prescriptive, poorly designed or generates unnecessary burdens or costs. Every single idea submitted through the portal is reviewed by the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction and shared with the responsible ministry. This process is crucial because it has revealed real opportunities for us to streamline processes and modernize outdated practices across multiple areas of government and multiple sectors of Ontario's economy.

The data gathered from these efforts enables the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction to monitor and report on the government's progress in reducing burdens for businesses and individuals. This is done primarily through the burden reduction report, which is released before September 30 of each year. The report highlights initiatives undertaken by ministries to modernize our regulatory system, reduce costs and enhance service delivery, published annually to

ensure transparency in our progress. We collaborate closely with external stakeholders, including through consultation groups and sector-specific engagements, to identify red tape and innovative opportunities for future red tape reduction packages.

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Working in tandem with partner ministries, we champion a unified approach to significant red tape reduction efforts. Through ongoing partnerships with businesses and industry groups, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, we gather valuable feedback on regulatory challenges via our digital platform to inform future priorities. This collaborative approach aims to streamline regulations, simplify processes and remove unnecessary burdens, while ensuring essential protection for Ontarians. These efforts are crucial in advancing our commitment to delivering improved services for Ontarians and reinforcing Ontario's competitiveness in the North American and global economies both now and, of course, into the future.

Our government and this ministry will always support the people and businesses of Ontario by reducing red tape, and we will always do so while protecting people's health and safety and the environment. I know you did ask a little bit about our budget allocation and where that \$8 million is going to be spent over the next little while. I'll give you a snapshot in time as to what that looks like.

So the budget allocation for the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction for 2024-25 is as follows: Salaries and wages make up \$7.4 million, which is about 87%; employee benefits are about \$68 million; and transportation and communications costs are roughly \$1 million. And then, the list goes on into services, supplies and equipment, which makes up a much smaller number. But I would dare to say in the roughly three weeks that I've been minister of this ministry—it's been great getting up to speed, and I want to thank my team for all the work that they have done and all the hard work that they have put in getting me there and, of course, making sure that we're prepared to answer as many questions as we can here for estimates today—that with a relatively small budget, we have seen a true impact to Ontarians.

When you talk about 1.5 million hours saved—and as a former small business owner, I can tell you one of the things that creates a lot of challenges for SMEs is that paperwork, that time. You're coming in to open your business, and you're spending the first few hours of your day just filling out paperwork. Oftentimes, that's taking away from duties that you should be doing to get your store ready to open for the day or making sure that you're able to get home for school pick-up or making sure that you're able to make sure you're there for those milestones or soccer practice. Being able to save that much time for the people of Ontario is phenomenal. Looking at it from a dollars' perspective, the way that that translates into that \$1.2 billion, this is real savings.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Hogarth, go ahead.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you very much, Minister, for that thorough answer. You may have touched on this

in your statement, but I just want to clarify. Over the last couple of weeks, or maybe the last month, we've had some meetings with stakeholders to look at cutting red tape. We actually met in this amazing communication centre in the Whitney Block; I have to say, the government was sorely in need of the space. So congratulations to the team on putting this room together. It's actually probably the "coolest" room in the place because it actually has air conditioning.

But we talked about saving hours. You talked about saving billions of dollars. We're talking about bureaucratic hurdles and streamlining processes, enhancing efficiencies and productivity for businesses and citizens, which are all important, and these were all things that we ran on as a government. But can you tell me, as the minister, what ways does the government communicate and demonstrate its progress so the people out there know, so businesses know, so people know, what's actually happening and the accomplishments and the savings that are taking place. I think that's important for them to know.

Hon. Mike Harris: Yes, absolutely. There are some regulatory pieces and compliance pieces. In particular, I'm going to focus my comments on the Modernizing Ontario for People and Businesses Act, or MOPBA, as it is more colloquially known. It really is our reporting mechanism to be able to not only report back to the Legislature and legislators, but also the people of Ontario.

I'll just highlight a few of the pieces. It has recognized national and international standards that should be adopted. It provides information for less onerous compliance requirements being able to be available for large and small businesses. This is something that's done once a year, as I had alluded to in your opening question. It looks at ways that regulated entities demonstrate excellence, compliance and should be recognized for that. It also looks at unnecessary reporting, to reduce burdens.

I think that when we look at all of those consultations that you had mentioned, all of that feeds into a larger system that eventually becomes part of those—we talked about, I think it was, 500 regulatory pieces that we have reduced. That consultation then feeds into the reporting mechanism of the MOPBA, that we can then go ahead and make sure that we're communicating, like I had said, to legislators and the people of Ontario.

Ms. Christine Hogarth: Thank you very much, Minister, and best wishes in your new role.

Hon. Mike Harris: I appreciate it. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Hamid, the floor is yours.

MPP Zee Hamid: Thank you, Minister, for your detailed responses. Congratulations, by the way.

Hon. Mike Harris: Thank you.

MPP Zee Hamid: Minister, could you elaborate to the committee on the critical importance of reducing regulatory burdens for individuals and businesses in Ontario? And also, how can cutting red tape restore Ontario's leadership in competitiveness and prosperity?

Hon. Mike Harris: We had heard from the House leader earlier about the roughly 300,000 jobs that were, quite

frankly, chased out of the province under the previous government, and I think it's important to highlight that we now have 700,000 more people working in the province of Ontario.

I can tell you from a local Waterloo region perspective that we had roughly 13,000 manufacturing jobs leave the province—some went to the United States, some went to Mexico and, of course, overseas. So to be able to look at that and what that meant, one of the challenges we had and that I heard time and time again was that these organizations left because it was too difficult to do business in Ontario. We were one of the most highly regulated places in North America—certainly, I think, in the neighbourhood of double or triple the nearest jurisdiction, which was British Columbia, in Canada.

So being able to look at ways that we can streamline regulation, that we can reduce burden on business—you've seen, since 2018, what that has meant. In particular, since 2022, since this ministry was created, being able to have a really true, concerted focus on removing those regulatory burdens—of course, in collaboration with other ministries—there's been a lot that we've done to really spur on economic growth in the province. I think the total—the House leader can correct me if I'm wrong—is somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$7 billion that we've been able to save business through not only reducing regulatory burden, but also taxation pieces, and being able to see manufacturing equipment be depreciated in year 1 rather than having to see it roll out over multiple years. All of these things have brought that business back to Ontario.

So I'm very proud to be able to lead the team at the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction and I'm very encouraged to see the good work that has already been done, and looking forward to continue that over the next few years.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): MPP Bouma.

Mr. Will Bouma: Chair, through you to the Minister of Red Tape Reduction—very good to see you in the chair there today, sir.

Hon. Mike Harris: Thank you.

Mr. Will Bouma: It has been a long time coming, and congratulations.

I hear from stakeholders in my riding on the business side that they can really tell now that it is easier to do business in the province of Ontario, and the difference that that makes to their productivity. Even just to see some of the red tape eliminated—we've even spoken before of if we need to put more red tape in, then we are also saying you need to take more than that red tape back out, and how important that is.

I was just curious—and you've spoken about that already, but just to dive in a little bit more—what does it look like to go out and do that stakeholder consultation? How is your ministry actively engaging with different stakeholders in different places? How is that input then being taken back and brought into the pieces of legislation that the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction comes out with twice a year in order to make it easier to do business in the province of Ontario?

Hon. Mike Harris: It's a great question, and I touched on a few pieces of it earlier. But I think one of the things I'd like to do is highlight some of the work that my parliamentary assistant, Christine Hogarth, the MPP for Etobicoke–Lakeshore, has done over the last few months. She has done some extensive consultations around some of the pieces that went into Bill 185, and also looking at ways that we can not just streamline things for business, but also municipalities in the province, which I think is very important.

We have to remember that there are multiple levels of government that businesses have to interact with, so if we're able to look at ways to streamline that interaction not only with the provincial government, but also with municipal governments as well, which we've done, it makes a big impact to those businesses. So thank you, MPP Hogarth, for leading some of those consultations, and I know that we're going to be doing a lot more over the summer.

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It's important, too, not to just focus on one certain industry group. Obviously, with Bill 185, we're very focused on our mandate to build 1.5 million homes, which I think we can all agree is something that's extremely important. Time and time again, when we're out door-knocking or leading those consultations, or just hearing feedback into our offices, that really is top of mind for people right now, especially for younger folks who want to be able to either move into their first home or someone who has a growing family and might need that little bit more space—certainly, things that are very important to folks in the community.

But there are the consultations with businesses, of course, which we lead through different stakeholder relations groups. CFIB is a big one; the Canadian Federation of Independent Business obviously is one of the folks who we interact with on a regular basis. But I did highlight in some remarks earlier that we also have an online portal, which is a great opportunity for people in the community—the average Joe, so to speak—to submit ideas, and we've actually seen some of those ideas come to fruition which has been amazing.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): One minute.

Hon. Mike Harris: And I can tell you, as we move forward, that there will be a bit of a renewed focus on making sure that we're communicating that to the general public, so that they know it's not just about business entities; it's also about them and that they can submit their ideas, as well, which theoretically can save time and money for people all across Ontario.

Mr. Will Bouma: Thank you. I appreciate that.

How much time?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Just a few seconds.

Mr. Will Bouma: Just to burn through those last few seconds: again, a very good answer and I appreciate seeing that, but I think the best part remains that I hear it on the ground from small businesses who are finding it easier to do business in the province of Ontario. So even though

you're new in the role, thank you for your ministry's work, sir.

Hon. Mike Harris: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Aris Babikian): Colleagues, before we move to the second round of questioning, since the permanent Chair is here, allow us a few seconds just to switch and let him assume his duties as the permanent Chair of the committee. Thank you very much for your patience.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much, Aris, for so capably running the meeting this morning, and I apologize to the committee for my misunderstanding of what time I was supposed to be here.

With that, we'll start the next round with MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Chair. You must have driven very quickly to get here.

I'm just reflecting on the first round of questions that we had with the House leader. I must tell you, because we both served together under the former Liberal government and we had lots of critique of that government, that there were some commonalities, one would say. I'm just reflecting on the fact that 48 staff are listed on the sunshine list—and remember that the sunshine list actually was brought in under the so-called Common Sense Revolution—which was meant to disclose annually the names, positions, salaries and total taxable benefits of employees paid \$100,000 or more.

In the questioning to the House leader and through some staff clarification, we've just heard that this is a long-standing practice. So you are basically doing what the Liberals did, and you have 11 core people in the Premier's office who are paid some \$118,000, if not more, and then you have another 37 of those staffers who are listed on the sunshine list as working in the Premier's office, but they are not contained within the estimates. I think personally that the Integrity Commissioner, the Financial Accountability Officer and perhaps the privacy commissioner may be interested in this information, given the fact that there had been so many problems coming out of the Premier's office around the lack of transparency and accountability, around the protocol and procedures around record-keeping, around privacy and around who has access to the Premier.

Particularly with this Premier—Premier Ford, in particular—given the fact that there is an active RCMP investigation ongoing, I would imagine that this complicates that investigation, given that you have staff rotating in and out of the Premier's office, being paid on other budget lines that we can't track.

Can you at least acknowledge that the lack of transparency in the funding of the staff directly in the Premier's office—that you may have found that problematic if the Liberals were doing it?

Mr. Steve Clark: MPP Fife, this is a standard accounting practice, as I said earlier, that has been operating by numerous governments. It's a similar accounting practice to the way we apportion our IT resources to various ministries. It's the same standard accounting practice that

apportions legal services from other ministries. It's been going on for a number of years.

As I said, when you set government priorities, given the Premier's staff, you need to apportion some of those expenditures to the ministries that are receiving the services, whether it be IT or government lawyers. This is a practice that's been going on for many, many years.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I would just clarify though, Chair, that the RCMP is not investigating IT or legal services in this Legislature, and that the Office of the Premier is the highest office in this province and should be meeting the highest transparency and accountability benchmark, I think. I find it very interesting how the lens around the importance of transparency sometimes changes around here.

Speaking of changes, I do want to move on to Cabinet Office, please. As my colleague mentioned earlier in the first 20 minutes, it was announced that the government has the largest cabinet in Ontario's history, growing to 36 members. This is a 45% increase of the Ontario PC caucus. You answered, in some manner, some of questions around the resources for that. But I want to point out that, in your opening comments, you said that Cabinet Office is a "model of fiscal prudence." You mentioned that every ministry has a so-called "lean executive champion," that this is "lean and continuous improvement," and that there's an extreme level of efficiency and streamlining. You got all those good words into your opening comments, I'll give you that.

But the Canadian Taxpayers Federation—and I'll read directly from their press release—said, "Ford's Bloated Cabinet Reflects an Embrace of Big Government." It goes on to say, the appointment of "the largest cabinet in the province's history." They go on to actually clarify that this is the largest cabinet in any province in Canada currently, right now. They actually go on to say that, "Ford's cabinet is almost as large as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's, despite serving less than half the population." Mr. Trudeau has a cabinet of 40 and, of course, we have a cabinet here in Ontario of 36. And then almost everybody and their aunt got an associate minister position.

The Canadian Taxpayers Federation goes on to say that, "This Progressive Conservative government, elected to restrain the size of government after years of Liberal largesse, is unrecognizable from the government that took office back in 2018." At that point, you'll remember—because you were a minister, I believe—cabinet had 21 members, in 2018.

In addition, the taxpayer federation goes on to say that, over the last six years, this government "has increased Ontario's debt by \$86 billion. Annual spending is up by \$55 billion. And the bloat at Queen's Park has never been larger.

"Ford's June cabinet shuffle expanded the size of the provincial cabinet to no less than 36 members. That's a 71% increase in a span of six years." That's a 71% increase. "Ford's cabinet now includes positions he's created out of thin air.

“There are eight associate ministers” now that report to senior ministers and serve “within that senior minister’s ministry,” which, of course, will obviously also have additional staffing. I’m going to get the red tape minister to get on Cabinet Office, actually.

But it goes on to say—the same press release from the Canadian Taxpayers Federation—“Other ministries that poofed into existence this month include rural affairs, which was separated out of agriculture and rural affairs, and sport, which was separated out of tourism and sport.”

This is a far cry from a lean, mean “model of fiscal prudence” kind of government, so I wanted to give the Minister of Red Tape Reduction an opportunity to comment on this massive government and the critique that quite rightly is coming from taxpayers and the concerns that Ontarians have about the growing cabinet. Minister Harris?

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Hon. Mike Harris: Thank you. I appreciate the question. Through you, Chair, I think it’s also important to realize that we now make up roughly 50% of the population of Canada, and when you look at a comparison between the federal government to the provincial government, it really, truly is apples to oranges, because if you look at the way that it’s all mandated, we have to deliver most of the services. We deliver health care. We deliver education. We deliver social services. So I think it’s incumbent to realize that when you look at the makeup of cabinet, it really does represent, truly, the priorities of the people of Ontario. I think that when you observe it from that perspective, it lends a little bit more credence to what we’re trying to do here.

I did want to pass it to the House leader to elaborate a little bit further.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Are you really going to defend 36 cabinet ministers for Ontario, which is just four less than the federal cabinet has for the entire country? Please say no, Steve. Come on.

Mr. Steve Clark: Listen, we’re going to continue the investments we’ve made in Ontario. We’ve received, now, commitments for \$43 billion in EV manufacturing. We want to continue to be the global leader in electric vehicles. And the Premier is going to assemble a team around him to implement the priorities of our government, whether it be to build more hospitals, to build more critical infrastructure, to support municipalities with building homes and the importance of services that they provide, by giving 700,000 people, as Minister Harris said, the opportunity to have a job, as opposed to under the Liberals’ watch, which, quite frankly, had the most expensive Premier’s office ever in the history of Ontario, where they drove 300,000 manufacturing jobs, when they stopped investing in rural Ontario, to speak to your reference to the Ministry of Rural Affairs—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Chair, I’m going to reclaim my time.

Listen, if you’re going to talk about rural Ontario, let’s talk about the 1,198 emergency room closures. That’s not supporting rural Ontario, especially if you talk about the importance of social infrastructure to draw investment into the province—I’m sorry.

And I have to say that the fact that the Canadian Taxpayers Federation has quite rightly written down this pattern of behaviour of the Ford government whereby they say that they’re going to streamline and reduce government and then they increase their own size of their cabinet, giving, obviously, financial compensation to several members of cabinet and then, of course, the corresponding staff—this is an out-of-touch move by this government given how people are hurting in Ontario, and I absolutely need to get this on the record. This is not fiscal prudence. It isn’t fiscal responsibility. It is a government looking to keep people within your own cabinet and within your own caucus given the state of affairs of what’s happening around this place.

And I will say—I know that you disagree, and I disagree with you, and I disagree that having a cabinet of 36 and then new associate ministers—which the Canadian Taxpayers Federation has said just “poofed into existence.” I mean, this is a cutting—these are your people; the Canadian Taxpayers Federation are your people, and they are calling your government out for waste. And it was sort of tongue-in-cheek to my colleague from Waterloo who’s now the Minister of Red Tape Reduction, but I mean, sometimes you’ve got to look at your own house and get your own house in order before you can actually enact policies and procedures that will meet the needs of the people that we’re elected to serve.

I’m going to go back to estimates, Chair. On page 19, the Cabinet Office outlines the percentage of FOI requests that are responded to within the legislated timelines. We all know that there are laws of this place that demand that any government of any stripe, when they receive a freedom-of-information request—which, I will admit, this government has now—I think you’ve broken some kind of record for all the FOIs that have come into this government. But prior to this government, the cabinet indicates that 100% of the requests were responded to within this period—my colleague mentioned that—but as of March this year, it’s down to 95%, and then you have set a target of 90%. So you are actively targeting and now setting a funding allocation for a level of response around freedom-of-information requests that is in contravention to your own law. You are budgeting to break your own law around FOI requests.

How is this justifiable, given the lack of transparency and scandal and chaos that’s happening in Cabinet Office and in the Premier’s office? Why are you budgeting to break your own law?

Mr. Steve Clark: First of all, Chair, I can’t let the comment go by, by the member from Waterloo, about our government and being cognizant that people are feeling the pinch. This is a government that fought the carbon tax all the way to the Supreme Court. We’ve never increased a tax. We’ve helped people with their fees. Low-income Ontarians receive up to \$850 back on their income tax. We continue to not increase fees, not increase taxes to Ontarians, and we’re going to continue to do that under the leadership of Premier Ford—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Chair, I have asked a specific question around freedom-of-information requests.

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

Mr. Steve Clark: So onto your specific question, we are going to continue to improve and modernize the FOI service through the implementation of new processes. The deputy talked about some of the success that we've had and, unfortunately, we were cut off on time on Mr. Kernaghan's questions, so I think we want to go back and make sure that you realize that there are some improvements that we're putting forward into the system.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Why are you setting it at 90%, the FOI target?

Ms. Alexandra Sutton: In terms of improvements in freedom-of-information requests, there has been an 85% increase since 2020, and I am actually happy to report that we did manage, with legally extended timelines, to get to a 96% achievement rating in 2023. That's an increase of 3.2% over 2022, so that does actually show that we have increased our response rate and we are making progress. In addition, despite that large increase of 85% since 2020, 75% of those were actually answered within a 30-day time frame.

We are implementing a number of modernization initiatives around freedom of information that allow for file sharing and the use of Adobe plug-in software, which allows for conversion and expediting the records. So there are a number of improvements that we expect will be beneficial in terms of ensuring that we get the right information to the public in terms of government records.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I appreciate that answer, I really do. But you must understand that the reason that we're asking is because there's been such an increase in FOI requests because of a direct lack of transparency of this government. And the FOI has been crucial to understanding government decisions. It was the FOI that led to an RCMP investigation into this government's conduct in the greenbelt scandal. It was the FOI process that revealed that members in the Office of the Premier and other senior government staffers were using personal emails, code words and altering records relating to the greenbelt, such as this G*.

And so, I have to ask: Why is Cabinet Office seeking to fulfill fewer FOI requests within the legislative time frame because you have not budgeted to meet your own law?

Mr. Steve Clark: I think, again, the deputy has outlined the improvements that we have put in place, recognizing that, since 2020, we've had that significant increase of 85%. We're going to continue to put new systems and tools in place to continuously improve the response time, but I am very pleased with the amount of progress that the office has been able to accomplish with the new resources that they have been provided. The office has received a lot more, but as per the statistics that have been read into record, there are improvements. We're continuing to improve and continuing to make progress.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Through you, Chair, to the House leader, I think the improvement would come where people wouldn't have to file a freedom-of-information request,

that the government would actually be transparent and demonstrate in real time what the goals—for instance, on the greenbelt scandal, what was the order of events that happened? Why were decisions made? I mean, it's true that the Premier offered an apology, but that apology was not because he felt he made a mistake; it was because he got caught. These are serious issues that are impacting the confidence that people of this province have with this government.

1130

And I do want to say, the government House leader has referenced the increase in resources, and I assume that he's talking about the Premier's office and the increase in the staff. But I will note that when this Premier first took office back in 2018, there were 20 staffers in the Premier's office that made more than \$100,000. Now, we have 48 making over \$100,000. So, are these the extra resources? Because this is a growing cabinet roster and staff that correspond with it, and as the Canadian Taxpayers Federation have said, "For six years, Ford has talked the talk of fiscal responsibility but failed to walk the walk."

This is why estimates matter, right? It's an opportunity for us to actually follow the money in real time. The fact is that we've learned today that the Premier's office has a cycle of staffers that are going through them, that are paid from other lines but still are on the sunshine list, still making over \$100,000. And the Minister of Red Tape Reduction, new to the role as you may be, you can understand how ironic it is that we have a Minister of Red Tape Reduction and then we have a Cabinet Office and a Premier's office that continue to grow out of control and is bloated, and the return on investment to the people of this province is not apparent to them, especially given the health care file, the education file.

Do you have any comments on that?

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

Mr. Steve Clark: I want to reiterate that under Dalton McGuinty, there were significantly more resources attributed to the Premier's office. Bob Rae had 110 staff.

Again, you talk about investment. Just look at the investment of \$43 billion in the electric vehicle supply chain that's coming to Ontario. I think that's a fantastic return on investment. The 700,000 people—

Ms. Catherine Fife: And we're looking at the closures of hospitals across the province.

Mr. Steve Clark: —who can go to a job—

Ms. Catherine Fife: It shouldn't be an either/or situation in this province.

Mr. Steve Clark: I think that 700,000—

Ms. Catherine Fife: It should not be an either/or situation. And it's the same thing with the carbon tax, honestly. You have a made-in-Ontario carbon tax that's called the industrial compliance fee. It totals \$2.2 billion over the next eight years. Where is that money going? Why is that money not going back into the sector to help them green their industries?

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): That concludes the time for that question.

We'll now go to the independent. MPP Hazell.

MPP Andrea Hazell: In my first question, first round, I stated—just reiterating what you’ve said: \$9.8-billion deficit for 2024-25; \$4.6-billion deficit, 2025-26. My question was around one year after, you’re going to be in a \$0.5-billion surplus. I’m just trying to figure out where this funding is going to be coming from exactly. What are the areas that we’re going to be cutting to come up with that surplus?

Hon. Mike Harris: Through you, Chair, to MPP Hazell, I think it’s important to know that a track record of Progressive Conservative governments has always had a path to balance in mind.

When you look at the last Progressive Conservative government that we had here in Ontario, we inherited an \$11-billion deficit from the then Bob Rae NDP. We were able to balance that budget. We inherited an even larger deficit from the previous government which you and your party represent. And we are now, despite going through a worldwide pandemic, back on a path to balance. I think it’s extremely important that we highlight that.

We talked about how we have not raised fees for the people of Ontario. We have talked about how we have not raised taxes for the people of Ontario. We’ve taken away licence plate renewal fees. We froze fees on fishing licences. We froze fees on other various things that people use in their day-to-day life. I know the MPP for Durham and the MPP for Whitby are very excited to see road tolls taken off in his area. These are all things that the people of Ontario are looking for and want to see.

But we’re able to do all of those things by generating more revenue into government, which we have done which, unfortunately, the previous government did not and chased away 300,000 jobs from the province.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I’m only concerned because we’ve got budget pressures to hospitals, to schools, to daycares, to everything that you think that is working. There are budget pressures; I hear it. I’m just saying, to go from a \$4.6-billion deficit, we’re going to still have budget pressures to these organizations. And to be in a surplus of \$0.5 billion, I’m hoping that there will not be more budget pressures added to the institutions that I just mentioned.

Mr. Steve Clark: Through you, Chair, to MPP Hazell: Minister Harris talked about some of the investments that we made. I talked about the expansion of transit that we’ve been able to accomplish under our watch.

But I remember a time when I was first in this place—where the Americans were coming across the bridge basically trying to entice industry to move from Ontario to northern New York state. It happened and was widely reported many, many times. We’re not seeing that now because we’ve put the fundamentals, whether it be red tape reduction, whether it be the commitment to balance in a fiscally prudent role—we’re starting to see those jobs repatriate back into Ontario. We’ve seen it with our electric vehicle manufacturing. We’ve been able to invest in our transportation networks. We’ve been able to support our municipal partners. There is a lot of investments that were able to be accomplished because of all of that work we’ve done as a province. We don’t want to go back.

So, yes, Minister Bethlenfalvy, in the 2024 budget, committed to the path to balance but did so in a responsible way so that it doesn’t affect our commitments to education or health care or economic development.

We’re in a good spot in terms of being the North American and probably the world leader in EV expenditures. We want to continue down that path. We don’t want the US coming across the border at Ogdensburg coming to my riding trying to steal jobs. We want to grow industrial jobs. We want to make sure people have a meaningful job moving forward, and we can do that at the same time as having that path to balance, as Minister Bethlenfalvy outlined in budget 2024.

MPP Andrea Hazell: I have no more questions.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): We’ll then go to the government. MPP Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Chair, and through you to the Minister of Red Tape Reduction: Welcome, Minister, and a welcome to the House leader.

Mr. Steve Clark: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Lorne Coe: You’ll know from your background as a successful small business person how important it is to monitor progress in a broad sense of the term but as it relates to a reduction of red tape and regulatory burdens for small businesses. In Whitby, we probably have close to 3,000 small businesses.

So I’d like you to expand on some of your earlier comments, Minister, and explain to the committee, please, how the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction monitors progress in reducing regulatory burdens for small businesses and other regulated entities.

Hon. Mike Harris: Thank you very much, MPP Coe. I’d be happy to answer this question for you. There are several mechanisms that we used. We highlighted them earlier. Some are legislated requirements.

But I think one way that we’re able to highlight a lot of the progress we’ve made is to actually talk about it during debate. When we have our red tape packages in front of the House, it gives this government and the MPPs of the chamber an excellent opportunity to speak to some of those things in their riding. I know that’s something that you often do, and it’s always a pleasure to hear you bring those conversations back to your riding. But we’re able to celebrate the \$1.2 billion in compliance costs for businesses that we’ve saved, we’re able to talk about those 1.5 million hours saved to business, and I had talked a little bit earlier how that, I think, almost is more important from a numbers perspective than the actual dollar value itself.

We’ve got opportunities through the MOPBA. Maybe I can have our deputy minister speak a little bit more about some of those regulatory pieces where we are able to get the word out, if you will, on the great work the ministry is doing.

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Ms. Maud Murray: Thank you, Minister. Maud Murray, deputy minister, Ministry of Red Tape Reduction.

Just to add to what the minister has already said, one of the ways that we communicate the great work that we’re doing at the ministry is through our annual burden reduction

report. This is a report that comes out usually around the end of September. It's actually legislated to be tabled in the Legislature by September 30.

And so, in this report, we will highlight all the work that's been done for the previous year. That will include things like the items that are in our red tape reduction packages, the bills, and others that are outside of the bill. We also highlight work that wasn't regulatory amendments in nature but we were able to show the great work that ministries are doing to reduce red tape, whether it's through their processes, streamlining or modernizing the processes that they have in place. So the burden reduction report, on an annual basis, is one of the key ways that we're able to highlight the work that we're doing.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Chair. To my colleagues, please. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Barnes.

Ms. Patrice Barnes: So I'm going to the House leader, and I have just a question to follow up on budget allocation. We've discussed a lot about the allocation of the budget within the Premier's office. I want to ask you to just expand a little bit on that around what this budget has accomplished within the mandate and what we're looking to accomplish.

Mr. Steve Clark: It's a great question, MPP Barnes, because as I said in my opening comments, the Premier's office works with the line ministries providing that strategic direction to deliver on the policies of the government.

We've had a lot of successes, right? We've talked to all members of the committee this morning about the opportunities that we've had to create jobs and the fact that more and more Ontarians are being given this opportunity through some of the economic development policies of the government. Obviously, Minister Harris plays a key role in that with the Ministry of Red Tape Reduction and has provided a lot of assistance to businesses in our province to relieve those burdens and get them to focus on expanding their businesses.

We've received success; we've had unprecedented success as I talked to many, many times today, about our EV supply chain and electric vehicles, the fact that we've made significant partnerships with a number of companies, providing job opportunities for up to 700,000 Ontarians, unlike the previous government, which drove 300,000 manufacturing jobs out of our province—we're now seeing some hope and opportunity, where people can have a good place to work, a good place to employ their kids and a province that is investment focused.

All of those things are driven from out of the Premier's office, and as we've talked about, there are a number of departments—obviously, policy and issues and media and tour—but it's that core strategic direction that Cabinet Office works with the Premier and his office on delivering on those priorities as a government. And listen, we've got a great team. It's a great team that the government has under the leadership of Premier Ford to deliver on that economic opportunity. We've got great ministers like Minister Harris, who is with me today, to be able to do that

government job-focused opportunity. So I really appreciate the question, MPP Barnes.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Babikian.

Mr. Aris Babikian: My question is to Minister Harris. First of all congratulations on your new portfolio. My question is regarding the Cutting Red Tape to Build More Homes Act, Bill 185. It is evident that our government is steadfast in its commitment to enhancing affordability and ease of life for Ontarians. Could you please update the committee on some of the key initiatives introduced in this latest legislation?

Hon. Mike Harris: Thank you very much, MPP Babikian, for the question and the kind words of congratulations.

I'd like to say, since 2018, even before our ministry was created, in 2022, we have launched an endeavour to have two red tape bills brought forward to the legislative chamber every year—two every year. And the spring initiative, Bill 185, which you had alluded to, focused very specifically on housing. That is certainly something that we as a government want to reaffirm is a priority for us, an effort to build 1.5 million homes, if not more, and one of the ways to do that was really reducing red tape in regard to some of the municipal pieces in different parts of the way that businesses interact with municipalities and businesses interact with government. So if you can indulge me for a minute, I'll highlight some of the key initiatives from that:

- creating a use-it-or-lose-it process for approvals to address stalled development: I think that was something that during debate, in my former capacity as parliamentary assistant to the Premier, sitting on the committee a few weeks ago, we were able to all agree was a good idea;

- enabling municipalities to lower taxes on new purpose-built rentals: Of course, this is something, again, that we all agreed that was needed;

- supporting innovative construction methods such as mass timber;

- exempting publicly assisted universities from the Planning Act to accelerate the building of planned student housing: This is something that colleges already have in place here in the province, so just being able to modernize those requirements for universities, as well;

- requiring ministries to set up and publish service standards for permits and licences with an online tracker for streamlined application monitoring;

- simplifying the registration process to accelerate integration into Ontario's health care system, improving patient access and reducing wait times: I think, again, this is something that we can all rally behind;

- updates to this legislation aim to streamline property boundary dispute resolution, benefiting property owners and municipalities with modern communication tools: This was around the Line Fences Act, which actually was brought up in debate a few times; and

- enhancing Ontario's transfer payment system and making it easier for government to essentially get money out the door to our transfer payment partners.

Those were a couple of the key pieces of Bill 185, and I just want to thank you again for your question.

Mr. Aris Babikian: I pass the floor to my colleague MPP Anand.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Anand.

Mr. Deepak Anand: First of all, I'd like to congratulate both of you on your new roles. You guys have a lot of experience in the past, and I'm looking forward to that experience being utilized further to serve the people of Ontario.

And I'm going to be truthful. I'm a little biased, but I have to tell you I was very excited when I saw House leader Steve Clark's name on the list. Thank you again for your service. My question is actually going to be to you.

I'm going to talk about a vicious cycle. Whether it's a good government, whether it's a good business, whether it is a good community organization, when they do good, they need to communicate. They need to tell the world they're doing good, and the rationale, the reason, is because then more people know about it. And when more people know about it, more people take their service, if it's a community service or business, so they increase their business. Similar to that, the government has done extremely well in the last six years. We have seen revenue going from \$150 billion to \$200 billion, we have seen the number of jobs created—many other milestones. So with that perspective in mind, I'm talking about a vicious cycle of advertising.

My question to you, House leader, is, number one, why is it important to use advertising? And the second question is—as a government, we don't manufacture money. We don't make money; we actually are the guardian of money. How do you make sure that the money being utilized is the money for the people and is used in a non-partisan manner?

Mr. Steve Clark: Chair, through you, I want to thank MPP Anand for the question.

First, I appreciate the kind words about being House leader. Obviously, I had a little bit of experience. On the opposition side, I was opposition House leader for just a little over a year, and I think for five of the eight years I was in opposition, I was the deputy House leader. So it's a position working with the other parties that I'm certainly familiar with.

And your question is really important about advertising not just the need for the government to communicate to citizens about what they're doing in a non-partisan way, but also to have a process, in our case, that's supported by the Office of the Auditor General that reviews those advertisements and ensures that they're non-partisan in nature.

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As well, there's another issue around the pandemic that became evident to us and that was the need for a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week media centre where we can communicate on a moment's notice, but at the same time, given some of the space constraints with the construction in the Macdonald Block, to be able to create a space that govern-

ment across all government was able to use, and we were able to create that space in a new communications centre.

But the Auditor General process to review and approve advertising spends set out under the Government Advertising Act I think is really critically important. And I value the relationship that the Auditor General has with the government to ensure that those reviews take place. Obviously, there's a reporting function annually where the Office of the Auditor General reports on whether there were any violations, but just the simple fact that there is a rigorous process in place I think is extremely important.

But in terms of the government being able to communicate what it's doing, I think that conversation with Ontarians is critically important. The process allows the government to do the communication, but at the same time, ensures that there are the checks and balances with that independent office that's independent of government.

Mr. Deepak Anand: Thank you, House leader. Talking about the key priorities, what are some of the key priorities that you're going to sort out through the government advertising in the future?

And I have another MPP looking to ask the next question, so be brief, please.

Mr. Steve Clark: I think, under the leadership of Premier Ford, we've got a tremendous story to tell Ontarians. It's not just some of the core infrastructure needs like Highway 413 and the Bradford Bypass, but also just the key infrastructure that we've been able to accomplish.

I talked earlier in my address about major transit infrastructure improvements, the fact that we're building new schools and new hospitals. I think that's very important that the people in our province need to know whether it's that investment in a new school or whether it's that investment in the Ontario Line or increased GO service that the people understand in a non-partisan way that we can tell our story. And as I said, we've got a fantastic story to tell about the economic growth in jobs and economic development. It's very important. Again, it's all about balance.

Mr. Deepak Anand: Chair, how much time do we have?

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): You have 4.4. MPP Hamid.

MPP Zee Hamid: I actually heard about the new regional Ottawa office a couple of months before my by-election. Can the House leader explain the rationale behind the new regional Ottawa office that is, as my understanding is, a very, very important link between the Premier's office and municipal—

Mr. Steve Clark: I'm surprised I haven't had a question about it before, but I'm pleased to ask about it. It's an opportunity for us to talk about the new deal that we've signed with the city of Ottawa: a \$543-million deal over 10 years on a number of priorities, including key infrastructure on things like the upload of the 174—but, also, given the fact that not only is Ottawa our second-largest municipality, it's a very unique municipality because it includes both urban and rural households.

It's important, when we talk infrastructure, it's not just the urban infrastructure. And if the member for Carleton were here, she'd talk about the amount of bridges and road work that need to be done in the rural part of Ottawa. And I think it's a historic opportunity for us too—Mayor Sutcliffe really was supportive. He was probably our biggest champion in terms of the Ottawa office.

Again, as an eastern Ontarian, it's important that there is not just a political component of the office, but also the non-partisan public service part as well working through the Premier's office. There are a lot of good things coming out of that office, and it's very important for us.

And it's not unique. There are other provinces that have offices in the nation's capital: Alberta, Quebec, the Northwest Territories. It's also not uncommon to have an office in the second-largest city. You look at what they do in Manitoba—this office is very close, very similar to the one that they have in Brandon. If you're familiar with Alberta, there's the McDougall building in Calgary. So there are a lot of opportunities. There's a BC office in Vancouver in addition to the capital in Victoria. So you look at other provinces' set-up.

And then the other thing that I think is most important is the fact that you look at that coordination with the federal government, the fact that having boots on the ground who can liaise with the federal government—you want to talk about a return on investment? The Ottawa office is \$1 million, yet our transfers with Ottawa represent 18% of our provincial revenue, so it's critically important for us as a province to have someone there. Other provinces have someone there, and we need to have that relationship not just with the city of Ottawa, but, as well, with the federal government.

I know that the office, although it's only been up since, I think, sometime in April—and, again, it's a \$1-million expenditure, but the return on investment is tremendous, just given that federal revenue figure alone, and then the opportunity for us to have that relationship with the new deal. This is a game-changer, to have a \$543-million commitment to the city over a 10-year period, and to have someone—

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

Mr. Steve Clark: —representing the Premier's office in Ottawa, as an eastern Ontarian, it's something. Listen, there was an Ottawa office for years—I think MPP Hazell knows that MPP Fraser, in his previous days, was the person who ran the office. This wasn't unique. Some of my predecessors—people like Bob Runciman and Norm Sterling—talked about an eastern Ontario secretariat that would have cabinet and ministry resources. So this isn't a new concept. It's not a new office. There was an Ottawa office for a number of years.

But that, coupled with the new deal for Ottawa and the fact that other provinces are there liaising with the federal government, wanting their fair share—Minister Harris talked about our population amongst the Confederation. It's critically important that we have someone there. When other provinces and territories are there, when they're

making those relationships with the federal government, it's critical for us to be there too.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): That concludes the time for that question.

We'll now go to the official opposition. MPP Kernaghan.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: How much time do we have on the clock?

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): It's 6.4.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: A couple of times, I've heard from both the minister and the House leader about the media centre that this government has built. It's yet another example of being reduplicative. It seems this government is recreating the world-class ORs that we have within our publicly funded and publicly delivered health care system in allowing for-profit individuals to begin to open those. It seems that we already have a media studio within the Legislative precinct, and yet this government would rather have one with a teleprompter so that government members won't get caught flat-footed when answering media questions; they will have a staffer feeding them the answers.

I would ask if there was a business case for this or what the return on investment was, but I don't believe that that answer will be forthcoming, so—

Mr. Steve Clark: I'd be pleased to answer about the communications centre if you want.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I think it's important to recognize that the House leader has called this “a comprehensive overview,” “communicated clearly,” and it was the “model of fiscal prudence,” and yet we are seeing—and we've heard from the answers—that other ministry staff are being borrowed for the Premier's office, which is neither accountable nor is it transparent. It seems as though the House leader is comfortable with this request going to the Legislature for spending authority that doesn't accurately reflect the cost of staffing the Premier's office.

My question to the leader and to the ministry: Can the ministry explain the difference between vote item 401-1, the main office, reflected in table C1, and vote item 401-1, sub-item 1, the Cabinet Office, reflected in table C2?

Mr. Steve Clark: I'll ask the CAO to come forward.

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Did you want me to address the communications centre? I'd be happy to, if you'd like.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: No.

Mr. Steve Clark: Because it's a great story.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Just the direct question, please.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Oh, it's a great story, yes. It's a tall tale.

Mr. Steve Clark: Well, it was needed. COVID taught us it was needed.

Ms. Supriya Mahimkar-Patrick: The difference is that for one sub-item, we do not include MRTR. Sub-item 2401-01 in Cabinet Office includes policy and delivery, communication and corporate office.

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Also, I would like an explanation for the increase of \$6.2 million for funding ongoing operations. What operations, and what will that increase be funding?

Ms. Supriya Mahimkar-Patrick: What item are you looking at?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It is 2401-02, I believe.

Ms. Supriya Mahimkar-Patrick: Is that the increase of \$7.8 million—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: It's the \$6.2-million funding for ongoing operations.

Mr. Steve Clark: Was that 2401-02?

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: I believe so.

Actually, in the interest of time, we'll just request a written response.

Ms. Supriya Mahimkar-Patrick: I can briefly go over it for you. The increase was because of red tape. We had the division of red tape that came from MEDJCAT into Cabinet Office, and in order to form a ministry, we needed a deputy minister's office and the minister's office, so that was one. And then, the second increase we had was across the board for salary increases, which was initiated by Treasury Board Secretariat—

Mr. Terence Kernaghan: Thank you very much. Unfortunately, I should pass over my time to MPP Fife. Thank you, though.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): MPP Fife.

Ms. Catherine Fife: I'm going back to the Premier's office because we still have some very legitimate concerns around the staff that's moving in and out of that office. I wanted to know: Is there any ethics training budgeted in estimates for those staff as they cycle and intersect with the Premier's office?

Mr. Steve Clark: There's a lot of training that takes place as part of—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Is it specifically ethics? Could you actually formally send that information back to us in writing? Because I would like to follow up with that.

I also wanted to talk about how earlier today, the House leader referenced how transparent the government is, because the Premier shares his cellphone. This is an interesting concept for us, I have to say. I'm going back to a story by David Moscrop from TVO. He said, "Yes, Someone Should Investigate Doug Ford's Cellphone...."

"Given the Premier's history of mixing government business with his personal phone, the people of Ontario deserve to know how he's been using it."

Now, there have been some changes, I will admit. The Premier did give up that first cellphone. The commentary, though, is that the use of his cellphone is more of a stunt, and it's a terrible way to pretend to run a government.

Do you not see an ethical issue here when the Premier is conducting government business on his personal phone and going through the motions, if you will? Also, he didn't use his government phone for a whole week during the height of the greenbelt scandal. Do you still think that this improves transparency in government, by the Premier

sharing his personal cellphone but also not using his government phone? This is a problem, yes?

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

Mr. Steve Clark: I think the Premier is incredible. The fact that Ontarians can access him in an unprecedented way—I can only speak, Chair, through you to the member, that when I had a short time dealing with Ontario's mayors in municipal affairs, mayors and councils and municipalities loved the fact that they can pick the phone up and that they can get a message to the Premier. In an unprecedented time during the pandemic, he was so accessible—

Ms. Catherine Fife: It comes down to actually who has direct access to the Premier. This is why the RCMP is investigating, and it's definitely problematic. Just the access around the phone and the phone records sort of circles back to the Premier's office—

Mr. Steve Clark: But the fact that you can pick the phone up and call the Premier or text the Premier—

Ms. Catherine Fife: Yes, but we can't get—

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

Mr. Steve Clark: —is amazing. It's amazing.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Excuse me. We can't get access to those records. If you think that that is not a problem, then we have bigger problems here at Queen's Park.

The Chair (Mr. Ernie Hardeman): Thank you very much. That does conclude the time for the presentations.

The time has expired for the committee's consideration of the estimates of Cabinet Office and the Office of the Premier. Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates.

Shall vote 401, Cabinet Office program, carry? All those in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall vote 2401, Office of the Premier, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the 2024-25 estimates of the Cabinet Office carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2024-25 estimates of the Cabinet Office to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the 2024-25 estimates of the Office of the Premier carry? All those in favour? Opposed? The motion is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2024-25 estimates of the Office of the Premier to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? The motion is carried.

The committee is now adjourned until September 10, 2024, at 3 p.m., when we will consider the estimates of the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade.

With that, the committee stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1207.

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