

CO Provincial Legislature Question Period Transcript - Thursday, March 30, 2017

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Please see attached Cabinet Office's Transcript of Provincial Question Period for Wednesday, March 30, 2017.

MIT did not receive any questions of interest.

MCI did not receive any questions of interest.

MSW did not receive any questions of interest.

There was a question of MSA relevance.

NDP MPP Peter Tabuns asked a question about what the government was doing to protect seniors from rent control increases. Housing Min. Chris Ballard said the government is developing plans to address this issue. As example he mentioned working with municipal partners to have more secondary suites, inclusionary zoning and the freezing of municipal property taxes.

Energy questions dominated Question Period today, with emphasis on Hydro One executive salaries as well as questions about electricity costs and hydro rebate advertising.

The official Hansard will be available later today by clicking on the link below.

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From: Electronic Media
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Transcript of Provincial Question Period

41st Parliament, 2nd Session

Thursday, March 30, 2017

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MPP Smith to Minister Matthews Re: Hydro One Executive Salary

>>MPP Todd Smith: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Good morning. My question this morning is for the Deputy Premier, and my question for the Deputy Premier is should the C.E.O. Of Hydro One have been paid \$4.5 million last year?

>> Minister Deb Matthews: Well, thank you, Speaker. Good morning. I'm happy to have the opportunity to talk about executive compensation, Speaker. This is something we take very seriously on this side of the House. As the member well knows or should know, compensation disclosure is -- is no longer required at Hydro One because they are now a company that discloses information through the stock exchange requirement, Speaker. So the reason you know is because it is disclosed not through the sunshine list but through other disclosures to shareholders.

>> MPP Smith: Well, that's the whole point, Mr. Speaker, is that the sunshine list doesn't include Hydro One employees any more and the only reason we know about the massive increase to the Hydro One C.E.O. Salary is because of the salary disclosures for the securities commission that are required there. But the disrespect that's been shown when it comes to huge raises for executive salaries is typical of what the Deputy Premier said last night on the radio. She said so be it. There's no respect for taxpayers' dollars according to the Deputy Premier. So be it. Whatever will be will be. Live and let live was her approach last night on newstalk 1010. But that's the whole point. You can't live and let live in the Liberals' Ontario because it's too expensive to heat your home. So people are choosing between heating and eating now. So, Speaker, can the Deputy Premier justify the outrageous increased salaries to the C.E.O. Of Hydro One?

>> Minister Matthews: Speaker, we acknowledge that these salaries are far, far higher than other Ontarians'. We get that. We also get that electricity prices have become too high for people to afford. And that's exactly why we're bringing down the price of hydro by an average of 25%, Speaker. And more for people who live in rural, remote areas, for people in low income. My question, though, is, Speaker, we have a plan. We're implementing our plan. Where is your plan?

>> MPP Smith: Step one, Mr. Speaker, and we've talked about it over and over again, stop the sale of Hydro One, but stop the exorbitant salary increases that we're seeing with the executives at Hydro One.

[Applause] Six times the salary of the previous C.E.O. I don't know how the Deputy Premier can justify that when we are seeing tens of thousands of Hydro One customers disconnected last year. Hundreds of thousands are behind on their electricity bills. This he's in here arrears because of the exorbitant cost by the malfeasance and disrespect of this government. Yes. The Hydro One C.E.O. Made \$4.5 million last year. That is an unbelievable amount. So, Speaker, my question to the Deputy Minister is -- Will she rein in executive compensation at Hydro One?

>> Minister Matthews: Well, Speaker, it has been 29 days since the leader of the opposition told us that his plan to reduce hydro prices was only days away. 29 days. Only days away. On March 2nd, the leader said his party would announce their plan in the coming weeks. The next day he told the Barrie examiner his hydro announcement would be coming very shortly. And then, on March 9th, he told reporters he would outline his plan in the near future. And yesterday, Speaker, I thought yesterday would be the big reveal. I thought yesterday, at the speech at the Cambridge club, Speaker, the leader of the opposition would outline his plan to reduce hydro prices. and the member from Prince Edward- Hastings, I thought, would use his --

MPP Smith to Minister Matthews Re: Hydro One Executive Salaries

>>MPP Smith: Thank you. Thank you, Speaker. Now back to the Deputy Premier. A couple of numbers for you. The C.E.O. Of B.C. Hydro is paid \$490,000. The C.E.O. Of saskpower made \$454,000. Manitoba hydro's top dog, just shy of \$500,000. C.E.O. Of hydro-quebec \$480,000. The C.E.O. Of Hydro One here

in Ontario, \$4.5 million, Mr. Speaker. Why? My question is why? Why is the salary so out of touch compared to the rest of the provinces in Canada? Sounds to me like the opposition has a one-point plan to bring down hydro prices, and that is focus -- compensation. I think the real issue is, Speaker, that hydro rates are who-too-high, that we are implement ago plan that responds to the issues that have been brought to this legislature. It has been 29 days. We're waiting for your plan to bring down hydro prices. We're moving forward on ours. Sure would like to see yours.

>> Minister Matthews: Sounds to me like the opposition has a one-point plan to bring down hydro prices, and that is focus -- compensation. I think the real issue is, Speaker, that hydro rates are who-too-high, that we are implement ago plan that responds to the issues that have been brought to this legislature. It has been 29 days. We're waiting for your plan to bring down hydro prices. We're moving forward on ours. Sure would like to see yours.

>> MPP Smith: The plan of the Liberals is nothing but a shell game and does not address the underlying problems that they've created in the electricity sector. There's a reason why people are falling behind on their electricity bills. They're the reason why businesses businesses are leaving for other low-cost energy jurisdictions. But back to the issue of the day. This just exemplifies the disrespect for the taxpayers of Ontario. \$4.5 million is out of control. Look at the people who run lifesaving hospitals. The president at sunnysbrook 700,000. C.E.O. Of St. Joe's health care, about the same. And this government hands out \$4.5 million. To Hydro One. Speaker, it doesn't make any sense. Will the Liberals slash these out-of-control salary increases at Hydro One?

>>Minister Matthews: The member opposite is making my point. They are really good at criticizing us. They are really, really good at criticizing. They have no plan. We're waiting for the plan. All they can do --

>> I am hopeful that today in Milton the leader of the opposition will be unveiling the P.C. Plan to bring down hydro rates. I'm looking forward. We're waiting, Speaker. Maybe this afternoon we'll get the answer.

>> MPP Smith: Premier. This just shows the flippant attitude, the disrespectful attitude of this government when it comes to executive compensation. They clearly don't get it. When we brought up Hydro One compensation back in 2015, the Minister of energy, at the time, had this to say -- when we looked at comparable Toronto stock exchange companies, the pay will actually be set at the medium to low range with some incentives. Speaker, is \$4.5 million medium to low range to this Liberal government that has driven the cost of electricity out of control? Is \$4.5 million for the C.E.O. At Hydro One, in a medium to low range? If it is, we've got a bigger problem than we thought. Thank you.

>> Minister Matthews: revealing their plan to bring down hydro prices. We have the first point. The first point is executive compensation. That's not going to get us to where we need to go. I hate to break it to you. So again, Speaker, it's been 29 days. Lots and lots of criticism. We have had not one idea, one idea to bring down compensation, and that will, as the opposition knows, have virtually no impact whatsoever on hydro rates for the people of this province. We are taking real action, Speaker. The member opposite's saying so be it. He knows politics, Speaker. What they don't know is how to bring down hydro prices. We do and we're doing it.

MPP Horwath to Minister Matthews Re: Hydro One Executive Salaries

>> MPP Andrea Horwath: Speaker. Speaker, my question's for the acting Premier. The current Hydro One C.E.O. is being paid over 500% more than his predecessor. His predecessor ran Hydro One when it was under public control. Now that it's in private hands, rather, the salary is quite a bit steeper. Account acting Premier tell us, Speaker, is it simply a coincidence that this ridiculous pay increase occurred at the same time as the Liberal government turned Hydro One over to the private sector?

>> Minister Deb Matthews: Well, Speaker, at least the MPP has released a plan. It's not a very good plan, but at least they have released a plan. Speaker, we are implementing a significant reduction in hydro prices. We are making it more affordable for businesses, for individuals, for farms. We are making it significantly more affordable for people who live in rural and remote parts of the province. We're making it significantly more affordable for people who are in low income, Speaker. We have \$200 million available for people who want to make investments that will reduce their electricity prices. We have a solid, well thought out plan that we are implementing, Speaker. And that's what the people of this province expect us to do.

>> Andrea Horwath: Liberal government has put its stamp of approval on a 500% increase for the Hydro One C.E.O. Ontarians are understandably frustrated by the fact that the C.E.O. is making almost \$4.5 million while entire communities are struggling to pay their hydro bills. Even more so is the fact that the Premier has allowed a 500% salary increase for the Hydro One C.E.O. At the same time as she and her party have allowed a 300% increase in hydro rates for the people of this province since they formed government. When will the acting Premier and the Liberal government take the hydro crisis that they have helped create seriously and stop the wrong-headed sell-off of Hydro One?

>> Minister Matthews: Well, Speaker, I know that these salaries are unimaginable for virtually everyone in this province. We get that, Speaker. Our focus is on bringing down hydro rates. The third party has offered a plan, as I have acknowledged, but part of their plan is to spend \$4 billion to buy back shares in Hydro One. That's \$4 billion that has to come from somewhere, most likely from health and from education because that's where the bulk of spending is. So we are moving forward, Speaker. We are reducing hydro rates, because we heard loud and clear in this House and in our communities that electricity rates have risen too fast, too high, and that's why we're bringing those rates down. We have a credible plan. We're implementing that plan, Speaker. And that's what the -- of people in government.

>> Andrea Horwath: Speaker, it is no coincidence that the executive compensation of Hydro One jumped by over 500% while the Liberals started selling it off. This ludicrous pay increase, Speaker, is an insult to the many thousands of Ontario families and businesses who are struggling just to keep up with their hydro bills. When will the acting Premier realize that the people of this province are fed up? They are frustrated and thirsty for some real action on the part of the Liberal government to reduce hydro rates and do what the people want. 80%, over 80% of the people of this province want to, to stop selling off Hydro One. When are they going to do that?

>> Minister Matthews: Well, Speaker, we are taking action. We are reducing the price of hydro in this province. People have already seen an 8% reduction in their bills, and come this summer, Speaker, they will see an additional 17% on average. It will be more, Speaker, significantly more for those who are having the hardest time paying their bills. We have moved forward with a plan that actually is working. We've made fundamental changes to the hydro pricing, Speaker, so that we can bring down those prices because we know hydro costs have been too expensive. They have been unaffordable, Speaker. We take that responsible very seriously, and that's why we are acting.

MPP Horwath to Minister Hoskins Re: Hydro One Executive Salaries

>> MPP Andrea Horwath: Thank you, Speaker. Thank you for the acting Premier as well. The university health network in Toronto has seen its hydro bills increase by \$6 million in the past two years. \$6 million could have gone to hiring 60 additional nurses instead, Speaker. Does the acting Premier think that paying for soaring hydro bills is a better use of \$6 million than hiring 60 more nurses to help people who need care at U.H.N?

>> Minister Eric Hoskins: Well, Mr. Speaker, I look forward to having this exchange with the leader of the third party for perhaps the third time. Mr. Speaker, with university health network, we've provided them with an increase to their operating budget last year of just under \$10 million. 10 million new dollars in addition to the existing operating funding. But I have to say, and whether it's Sault Ste. Marie or comments about Hamilton health sciences or other -- Windsor hospital, St. Joe's in Hamilton, it has come to the point where, one by one, these hospital administrators, C.E.O.S feel compelled to come out publicly following her declarations to refute them, Mr. Speaker, and to point not only to the fact that they are able to sustain the highest quality of care despite electricity costs being. 100% of that total budget but they've made incredible innovations to help sustain electricity costs as well.

>> Andrea Horwath: Speaker, no matter what this health Minister says, every single person in this province realizes that every extra dollar that's being spent on hydro bills that are soaring at hospitals is a dollar that's not being spent on health care for the people of Ontario. Simple logic. The hydro bill at London health science versus gone up nearly \$2 million under the Liberal government. Will the acting Premier agree that 20 more nurses would have been a better way for the hospital to use its already shrinking budget than paying skyrocketing hydro bills?

>> Minister Hoskins: Happy to report that London health sciences centre, their budget is doing anything but what the Minister -- sorry, the member opposite alleges. In fact their operating budget increased by 2.4% last year, by almost \$18 million. But, Mr. Speaker, one by one the member opposite continues to make these allegations and one by one and no doubt London health sciences will be next. One by one these hospital officials, administrators and C.E.O.S come out, as they did in Peterborough, as they did in Sault Ste. Marie, to indicate that the member opposite, the leader of the third party, is incorrect, that they are able to sustain the high quality of care, recognizing -- and it is an important component, but it's approximately 1% of the overall operating budget of a hospital that goes towards electricity costs. And I spoke about-- Hospitals like Markham stouffville that have done incredible innovations, or health sciences north in Sudbury.

>> Andrea Horwath: This Liberal government froze hospital budgets for four years and also provided less than inflationary increases after that. They have been starving the hospital system for years.

[Applause] The Liberal government is still planning to continue the sell-off of Hydro One, a disastrous idea, a disastrous plan. They're defending the ludicrously high salaries of the new C.E.O. At Hydro One, and they refuse to admit, they refuse to admit what is plainly obvious, Speaker, that hospitals could be using money that they are forced to spend on rising hydro bills to improve patient care. When will this acting Premier admit the obvious facts, at that her party has made a mistake with their hydro sell-off and put an end to it before it's too late?

>> Minister Hoskins: So, Mr. Speaker, so the president of the Ontario council of hospital unions just yesterday, when is ochu, part of Cupe, Mr. Speaker, said it's unfair of Ontario opposition MPP S to blame

significant care and staffing cuts at our hospitals on high hydro rates, according to the president. To suggest the route of yearly budget deficits and -- following high hydro costs is to mislead the public, Mr. Speaker. So the president went on to say the communities know where the Liberals stand on hospital funding, but where do P.C.S and the NDP Stand? It would appear from their public comments hospitals could expect relief in their relatively small hydro budgets.

MPP MacLeod to Minister Sandals Re: Hydro Advertising

>>MPP Lisa MacLeod: Thanks, Speaker. My question is to the president of the treasury board. Last night, in an interview on newstalk 1010 the rush, I heard the hype -- Last night, in an interview on newstalk 1010's the rush, I heard the hype of Liberal arrogance. When asked if the clearly partisan hydro ads made the Liberals look good, the Deputy Premier responded -- so be it. So be it, Mr. Speaker. That's what the Deputy Premier of this province had to say about using taxpayer dollars to run Liberal vanity ads. Mr. Speaker, through you -- how account president of the treasury board allow these tax dollar-funded ads to continue, or does she just say so be it?

>> Minister Liz Sandals: Yes. Thank you very much. And I'd like to remind everyone, Speaker, that Ontario is the only jurisdiction in Canada that actually has a government advertising ad, and the ads in question, just like any other ads we run, comply with that government advertising act, and you yourself have ruled that they're not -- not an offence to the legislature. So we're actually very proud that we're able to tell the people of Ontario that we will have 25% off. And we think that people need to know that, that that is useful information for the public of Ontario to understand. Just like we think it's useful information for public to know about flu vaccines. Useful information for the public to know about sex education and what's really in the curriculum as opposed to a bunch of numbers.

>>MPP MacLeod: During revolution, the queen once uttered -- let them eat cake. And now our modern-day Marie Antoinette, the Deputy Premier of this province, tells the people of Ontario "So be it." Well, Mr. Speaker, you can't just say "So be it" to those people who are struggling to pay their bills. You can't just say "So be it" to people, particularly seniors, struggling between heating and eating. Mr. Speaker, will the president of the treasury board stand in her place and apologize on behalf of the Deputy Premier

>>Minister Sandals: Anyway, what I was going to say is what we wanted to say to the people of Ontario was who will you help? When we ran -- Our message to the people of Ontario was who will you help? When we ran our advertising campaign about sexual violence and sexual assault and sexual harassment. And not only did people in Ontario see it. 85 million people all over the world looked at that advertising. When witnessing sexual violence. 83% understood that if they went --

MPP Taylor to Minister Naqvi (Hunter) Re: Motherisk Advertising

>>MPP Monique Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the acting Premier. Children were removed from their families based on the results of faulty testing done by motherisk going back to 2005. It's not difficult to understand how deeply emotional it is to be taken from your family in the first place. Yet the ministry recently ordered insensitive posters to be distributed widely in schools, suggesting to children that their removal from their family may have been unjustified, leading to panic and embarrassment for families. The provincial advocate for children and youth has said, quote -- on 100 levels, these posters are potentially damaging to vulnerable children, end of quote. Can the acting Premier tell us if she thinks that

this is appropriate? And explain how in the world this was allowed to happen?

>>Minister Yasir Naqvi: Thank you very much, Speaker. And thank the member opposite for asking a very important question. Speaker, our government is very much committed to protecting young people and doing what's best for them. We recently became aware of the motherrisk commission posters, Speaker. We understand the concerns that have been raised by young people in schools and by the provincial advocate for children and youth. As a result, Speaker, my understanding is Minister of education is advising school board principals and staff to have the posters and materials removed from schools immediately. Speaker, we understand some students may have been negatively affected by these posters and may require additional supports and it is also my understanding, Speaker, the ministry of education has asked school boards to alert their mental health lead and guidance staff to be available to support students. If any student. In our schools have concerns about the motherrisk posters, Mr. Speaker, we encourage them to speak to school staff for support.

>> MPP Taylor: Back to the acting Premier, Speaker. The flawed motherrisk program has caused unbelievable damage to children and families across Ontario and beyond. These inappropriate posters place under schools across the province have only served to incite fear and panic and make things worse for vulnerable kids. One mother described the impact on her adopted children as a punch in the stomach. She talked about children being scared, that they would be asked questions by their peers and their teachers. The co-operation council of Ontario is asking where the consultation was with adoptive families before these damaging posters were put up. Will the acting Premier explain why the government distributed these damaging posters and requested them to be put into schools?

>>Minister Mitzi Hunter: Speaker, I'm committed to ensuring the safety and the well-being of all students in this province, and I understand the concerns that were raised by students, by parents, by the community, by the provincial advocate for children. I've been in touch with him, Mr. Speaker, and we have requested that schools remove the materials from schools, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we regret the distribution of the motherrisk posters has caused concerns for students, and we have provided direction to the school boards to ensure that mental health leads are aware of this situation and that any student that needs additional supports will receive that additional support, Mr. Speaker. It's important that, if people have concerns, I want to ensure that they have the supports in place to --

MPP Des Rosiers to Minister Ballard Re: Youth Poverty Reduction

>>MPP Nathalie Des Rosiers: Voice of Translator: Thank you. My question is for the Minister responsible for the poverty reduction strategy., Mr. Speaker, are you -- is one of our main re-- our youth is one of our main resources in Ontario. Make sure they can become the person that they want to be and that they should be. Our future depends on ensuring that the talents of all the young people of Ontario are allowed to flourish. However there are often obstacles to this path of success. One of them is poverty. Monsieur president, I'm very proud we have targets to reduce child poverty. This commitment is to reduce child poverty by 25% in five years. This would make a huge difference in the life of many children. Would the ministry inform the House about Ontario's progress in meeting this target?

>> Minister Chris Ballard: member from Ottawa- Vanier for that question, which is so close to my own heart. Mr. Speaker, last week the province released its annual poverty reduction strategy report highlighting the progress made in 2016. Here are a few highlights. We're increasing the monthly income of almost 19,000 families by fully exempting child support payments from social assistance benefit calculations. We're providing healthy meals and snacks every year to more than 896,000 children and

youth during the course of the school year. We're delivering child-centered learning to 260,000 4- and 5-year-olds through full-day kindergarten. We're helping over 115,000 Households that are at risk of homelessness to remain housed. And, Mr. Speaker, Ontario has now reduced child poverty by over 20%. Lifting over 100,000 children out of poverty across the province.

>>MPP Des Rosiers: Voice of Translator: Thank you, Minister. It is very encouraging to see all the progress that has been made on this file. That concerns me. According to the children's hospital of eastern Ontario, 38,500 Ottawa residents, including 15,000 children, visit food banks each month. For these individuals and families, the inability to access sufficient, affordable nutritious food is a core symptom of poverty. In the early years of a children's life and sufficient nutrition impact their ability to learn and to grow. Through you, Mr. Speaker, could Minister explain how Ontario plans to tackle the growing problem of food insecurity?

>> Minister Ballard: Thank you, Speaker. Thanks again to the member for Ottawa- Vanier for her question. Speaker, when I was appointed Minister responsible for the poverty reduction strategy, a key item in my mandate was to develop a food security strategy. As a father of three, I certainly know the importance of nutritious food and the role it plays in helping to grow strong and healthy children. I can only imagine the worry that parents who have a tight food budget to face in making sure their children grow up healthy and strong. It's for these Ontarians, Mr. Speaker, that we're working to create Ontario's very first food security strategy, building on our work to reduce poverty across the province. Our aim, Speaker, is to ensure every Ontarian has sufficient physical and economic access to affordable nutritious food. Including most first

nation communities. Speaker, this is important work and I look forward to reporting back to the House on our progress.

MPP Fedeli to Minister Matthews (Sousa) Re: Hydro One Executive Salary

>> MPP Vic Fedeli: Thank you and good morning, speaker. My question is to the deputy premier. The last year, hydro one employees appeared on the sunshine list, there were over 4,200 names. Their compensations had grown by over 14% from the previous year. This year, we only get to see five names, and the c.e.o.'s salary is up almost 600% from the last sunshine list appearance. The government is still the majority shareholder. So my question is -- why won't the government disclose all eligible hydro one salaries on the sunshine list?

>>Minister Deb Matthews: Well, speaker, we've seen some interesting deflecting over on the other side, speaker. They have no plan when it comes to reducing -- They have no plan to bring down hydro prices, speaker, and that's why they're talking about other elements, but we have no plan. 29 days and counting. Speaker, they're diverting news in things like -- they're actually totally misquoted in the -- I did not say what they said I said in the interview. I just had another review of it, speaker. They're making it up. They're making it up because they have no plan to bring down hydro rates. 29 days. We're awaiting, speaker.

>> MPP Fedeli: Back to the deputy premier. You know, speaker, people in Ontario don't appreciate this kind of dodging of the questions. Only in liberal Ontario would cutting off 60,000 customers earn you a 600% raise. The government is still the majority shareholders. The liberals get a say in compensation pay. Will this government put hydro back -- hydro one back on the sunshine list? Or do they think the hydro one millionaires club should get a free pass in a year when they cut 60,000 people back who had to go home to a dark house?

>>Minister Charles Sousa: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question. We all share with the well-being of the ratepayers and the people of Ontario. It is one of the reasons why we took the steps to make a more productive, more efficient organization to deliver those services. And they're outperforming, Mr. Speaker. And as a result -- and it was very clearly stated out in the prospectus what the executives would be paid and it would be made public. That has been done. Of course the executives are being paid based on their bonuses and the ability to deliver for the people of Ontario. And that is happening. It is why we are reducing rates by 25% why we've taken the extraordinary opportunity to further help those in rural communities. That is helping. It is why the company's being more responsive to consumers to ensure they don't get cut off, especially when there's all at the Nate means to support them. It is why they are communicating to the people of Ontario and to the ratepayers what the opposition hasn't been doing, Mr. Speaker.

MPP Tabuns to Minister Ballard Re: Rent Control

>>MPP Peter Tabuns; Thank you, Speaker. Speaker, my question's to the acting Premier. During a town hall meeting that I held this week in my riding, I met a couple who told me they were living on a senior's pension of \$1,400 a month. Their rent is \$1,000 a month. They're terrified that their landlord will seek an above-guideline rent increase that will make it impossible for them to live in their unit or make it impossible for them to buy food. They were told they'd have to wait 10 to 15 years for an affordable housing unit. It's not clear they're going to live another 10 to 15 years. So after 14 years of Liberal governments, why do seniors still live in fear that they may lose their homes because of an unfair, unreasonable, unaffordable rent increase?

>> Minister Chris Ballard:Well, thank you, Speaker. Thank you for that important question. And it certainly is top of mind for many of us living in Ontario. And I can say, Speaker, that it's absolutely unacceptable that so many Ontarians are faced with housing costs that are rising so dramatically, and there is real anxiety within that market. You know, families on tight budgets such as seniors really are feeling the pinch of a rental market that is struggling to keep up with demand. So we're developing, as I've said before in this House, we are developing a number of plans to address both the anxiety in the rental market and housing affordability as well, Mr. Speaker. You know we're working with our municipal partners to make secondary suites more readily available. We've passed inclusionary zoning. We have frozen the municipal property tax. So in short, Mr. Speaker, we understand the anxiety.

>>MPP Tabuns: Thank you, Speaker. Back to the acting Premier. The NDP Brought in real rent control when it was in government. The P.C. Government killed it. And it has stayed killed under the Liberal government. Before the 2003 election, Liberals described the loss of rent control as, quote, a betrayal of tenants. Unquote. They promised real rent protection for tenants. But after winning the election, the Liberals decided to keep betraying tenants for another 14 years. Why should struggling tenants in Ontario believe that the Premier or this government will protect them from unfair, unreasonable, unaffordable rent increases?

>> Minister Ballard:Again thank you to the member for the third party for the question. As I said before I appreciate the focus the -- Welcome them joining in the focus. What we have said on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, is that we will be looking at expanding rent control. We will be bringing in a suite of legislation that addresses more than rent controls. You know we've been studying this issue. We've been working on this issue. We have been travelling across the province talking about the R.T.A. To a wide variety of stakeholders so that we can get it right, so that we can bring legislation forward that deals with rent control, that deals with expanding rent control and a whole host of other issues around that fact. Mr. Speaker -- We get it. We're working on it.

MPP Rinaldi to Minister McGarry Re: Tree Planting Program

>> MPP Lou Rinaldi: Thank you, Speaker. My question to the Minister of natural resources and forestry. Speaker, there's no denying the positive impact trees have on our province. It helps promote clean air and fight climate change, which explains why I've heard member from the my riding Northumberland-quinte west asking me what they can do to get more involved in the greening of our province. I understand the Minister of natural resources and forestry has committed to planting 3 million trees across Ontario in 2017 as part of the 50 million trees program. However, my constituents -- my constituents and I believe there's always more work to be done. Speaker, cot Minister please explain to me how my community can get more involved with the government initiative to plant 50 million trees?

>> Minister Kathryn McGarry: Thank you, Speaker. I'd like to thank the member from Northumberland-quinte west for his question. One of our government's priorities is combating climate change and promoting clean air and a 50 million tree program is part of Ontario's efforts to improve air quality across the province by planting millions of trees each year. These trees will remove approximately 6.6 million tonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere by 2050. The equivalent of taking 1.1 million cars off the road for an entire year. And as part of this initiative, I'm pleased to announce that earlier this week our government launched the green leaf challenge. Ontario's green leaf challenge calls on the public to get involved in making the province a cleaner greener place to live by planting a tree and reporting it on our website. So each year Ontario plants approximately 3 million trees under its 50 million tree program and my government is now challenging the public to match --

>>Minister Rinaldi: Thank you, Speaker. I'm pleased to see that our government's priorities are aligned with my constituents. Minister, in a similar partnership with forest Ontario and the highway of heroes tribute, one tree is being planted along highway 401 between Trenton and Toronto for every soldier who has fallen serving Canada since confederation. A total of 170,000 trees and they have the opportunity to help plant some of those trees. I'm happy to hear that the green leaf challenge will help people to connect with the resources they need to help our environment. Speaker, cot Minister please go into more details about the green leaf challenge work.

>> Minister McGarry: Thank you very much, Speaker. Thank you to the member for his question. His community's leadership and enthusiasm is inspiring. Individuals, organizations and businesses can participate in the green leaf challenge by planting a tree, participating in a community tree planting event, or making a donation to have a tree planted on their behalf. Afterwards, people contract progress at website Greenleaf challenge.ca. This allows people to register their tries on an interactive map, accessing tree planting resources and finding events in their communities. This initiative is supported by forest Ontario in a province that honours Ontario's 150th anniversary. I'd like to thank forest Ontario for being a champion of this cause and the member from Wellington- Halton hills --

[Applause] For his continued efforts to support his residents to get involved and look at funding efforts through the county of Wellington's green legly program. We're proud of our green initiatives on this side of the House.

MPP Jones to Minister Naqvi Re: Political Advertising

>>MPP Sylvia Jones: Thank you, Speaker. My question is to the Deputy Premier. In 2015 the Liberal

government decide today remove the powers of the auditor general and instead turn her office into a rubber staff of partisan government advertising. Since then, this government has spent millions of dollars in partisan ads which the A.G. Would never have approved. It's never too late to do the right thing. Will the Deputy Premier restore our auditor general oversight of government advertising by supporting bill 112 this afternoon?

>> Minister Yasir Naqvi: Thank you very much, Speaker. I stand here as a proud member of this government, which introduced one of the most strict and stringent advertisement of legislation on government advertising, Speaker. Speaker, under our legislative government ads can't include the name, voice or member of the executive council or member of the assembly, directly identify or criticize the recognized member of the party or assembly. Speaker, when it came to voting for that bill in 2004, you would think by listening to the opposition today they must have wholeheartedly endorsed that bill but, Speaker, they did not. In fact in 2004 the official opposition voted against that bill. Members from Simcoe-Grey and York Simcoe, Parry Sound Muskoka, Haldon and Norfolk, Oxford, members today voted

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>> MPP Jones: The Minister seems to enjoy history so let's go back to history when you removed the oversight of the auditor general, and we did not support that. We want to restore the auditor general's oversight and that's what bill 112 would do. Expect their government to respect tax dollars, not spend millions on partisan ads. There was a time when the Deputy Premier believed this as well. Back in 2004, she said it's just outrageous to me that governments spend money on what are in essence political pieces. Why does this government think it's ok to spend tax dollars to prop up the Premier's failing polling numbers?

>> Minister Naqvi: Speaker, the opposition loved the 2004 bill so much that they voted against it. They did not support it even then. In fact, they actually -- old Mike Harris style ads where he used to stroll up on the screen and justify cutting -- closing hospitals, where he used to justify closing schools, where he actually stood there and flicked the lights off Ontario's public services and Ontario's electricity system, which we're still rebuilding in this province. Now they stand up and they said that was a great piece of legislation. Speaker, this is nothing but distraction. It has been 29 days since we put forward our plan to cut hydro rates by 25%. And we still have not --

Heard from the opposition as to what their plan is going to be because they have no plan to help Ontarians

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MPP Sattler to Minister Hoskins Re: London Mental Health Services

>> MPP Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much, Speaker. My question is to the acting Premier. Speaker, this is the third time I have risen in this House to urge this Liberal government to sign off on a project to address London's ongoing mental health crisis, which would allow ambulances to take nonacute mental health patients directly to the crisis centre rather than the hospital's constantly overcrowded E.R. On Monday the health Minister said he is looking at the project. I'm sorry, Speaker, but that's not good enough. This Liberal government has been looking at the project for almost two years. What my community wants to know is not whether but when will this project go ahead?

>> Minister Eric Hoskins: Mr. Speaker, I know this is the third time that I've had the opportunity to address

this. So this is a gem out of London from a great organization. I think all of us know the Canadian mental health association, that they have built and are operating a crisis centre that we are funding. We provided \$1.2 million of funding for them to operate a crisis centre. It's great new model, Mr. Speaker. A crisis centre for youth and adults age 16 and up not -- not just for London but for Middlesex county as well. They're doing great work. They're very busy because of the fantastic supports and resources that they provide. They have made a request, Mr. Speaker, for something which does not occur in this province, which is to enable ambulances to -- instead of dropping off a patient -- At hospitals to allow those patients to be taken directly to the crisis centre. The type of structure and governance that exists does not allow that in this province --

>> Minister Hoskins: Thank you, Speaker. People in London cannot wait any longer. The mental health patients who are lined up in hallway stretchers need action from this Liberal government, not more excuses. This project will not alone solve the crisis but it will help. It is desperately needed and it needs to happen now. The Minister of health is using the ambulance act as an excuse for inaction, when it actually has nothing to do with the proposed project. I have another suggestion for the Minister. Will he use his Ministerial authority to immediately recognize London's crisis centre as a designated health facility under reg 552 of the health insurance act so that the ambulance transfer of patients can be funded?

>> Minister Hoskins: Well, Mr. Speaker, these are all interesting suggestions. I would suggest that my ministry, as I've referenced, I'm not prepared to go against the law in Ontario which is the ambulance act that has the requirement that paramedics and E.M.S., that they drop patients off at hospital environments. I'm not sure if she's suggesting we redesignate the crisis centre as a hospital. She knows, we've had discussions about this. We are looking at the proposal. There, to my knowledge, Mr. Speaker, is no other situation in this province similar to that that she is requesting. We have suggested that, should that crisis centre come under the auspices of the hospital, the London health sciences themselves, that that would enable that dispatch and drop-off to take place but it's a complicated history. Regrettably, Mr. Speaker, it's not something that I can sign off on. On a whim notwithstanding how important this is. We have to do the work required.

MPP Qaadri to Minister MacCharles Re: Housing Costs

>>MPP Shafiq Qaadri: Voice of Translator: Thank you. My question is for the Minister of government services. For many Ontarians, the awe as you know, buying a House is the largest single investment they will ever make in their entire lives. A House of course is more than an investment. It's a home, sanctuary, home base for family, children, career and community. ING of course your home should be the place where you feel the most secure. But, Speaker, for some including in my own riding of Etobicoke north, dreams unfortunately have turned into nightmares and I'm concerned when I hear some of those constituents have been left in distress with nowhere really to turn. Tarion provides warranty coverage and other protections to homes in tomorrow. It's an all encompassing mandate creates potential for conflict of interest. Speaker, could Minister explain how our government is improving consumer protection for new home buyers and what our government is doing to change. Structural challenges created by the Conservative government of the time?

>> Minister Tracy MacCharles: Thank you, Speaker. And I want to thank the member from Etobicoke North and for responding to constituents on this important issue. I'm pleased to speak about the great work our government's doing for buyers of new homes in Ontario. As the Minister of government and consumer services, I'm committed to improving the lives of Ontarians by strengthening consumer protection. I've heard from consumers and industry leaders about the warranty dispute resolution process in the new home building sector. While I recognize that the building industry in Ontario produces high-quality housing and most are pleased to call their new place their home, I know there are ways tarion can be improved, and that's why we appointed the Honourable John Douglas Cunningham to conduct a public and independent review of tarion and our new home warranty legislation. This week I publicly reviewed that report and communicated action plan which I'm happy to expand on in supplementary.

>>MPP Qaadri: Thank you, Minister. Of course my constituents and I of Etobicoke North appreciate movement on this file. The benchmarks for modern government is transparency, accountability and oversight have of course evolved over the past 40 years, and more specifically the size and complexity of the building industry has changed dramatically since tarion was conceived in 1976. Since its creation, tarion's governing statute has remained virtually unchanged and somewhat out of step with the time. Giving tarion the responsibility to set the terms and administer the new home warranty plan, regulate builders and vendors whilej also adjudicating disputes between homeowners and builders, of course it is impossible potentially to avoid the potential for perception of our existing conflicts of interest. My question, therefore, Speaker is this, again to Minister maccharles, what is our government doing with the report's recommendations and how are we changing tarion's structure to better protect Ontario consume snrs.

>> Minister McCharles: Thank you, Speaker. So following the report's recommendation, I asked tarion to bring in new deposit protection measures to better reflect today's home prices and deposit requirements. Also we're changing the structure of tarion by giving government responsible to make rules and set standards to improve accountability and transparency. Further we are giving the new home building sector the stand-alone regulator it deserves by separating provider of the new home warranty program from the new home builders regulator. Finally we're making the dispute resolution process easier and fairer for homeowners to understand. I also want to stress, Speaker, the actions that we are taking will not increase the price that Ontarians paid for a new home. I would like to thank the hon rabble justice Cunningham for his report and I look forward to changes we're making to increase the consumer protection --

MPP Pettapiece to Minister Matthews Re: Hydro Rate Reduction Plan

>>MPP Randy Pettapiece: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for Deputy Premier. Conroy shell -- Haas owns the forest motel and woodland retreat outside of Stratford. Conroy has a problem. His hydro bills are out of control and his costs keep going up and up. Last year he paid over \$21,000 for hydro. That's despite investing over \$90,000 in energy efficient upgrades, including almost \$12,000 on the L.E.D. Light bulb retrofit program. My question to the Deputy Premier is -- why is the government paying small business to conserve energy only to push their bills even higher?

>> Minister Deb Matthews: Well, Speaker, I'm sure this constituent will be very happy when he learns about the steps we're taking to take down those electricity costs, Speaker. Because we do know that people across this province are welcoming the changes that we are making, the 25% reduction. So, Speaker, I think just to recap, we reduced bills by 8%. We cut delivery charges to the most rural customers by 20% starting in January 1st. Our new agreement with Québec will reduce electricity system costs for consumers by about \$70 million from previous forecasts, Speaker. We've introduced programs like the Ontario electricity support program. The rural and remote hydro rate protection program. We've suspended the second round of the large renewable procurement process. That saves us up to \$3.8 billion. In costs, Speaker. We reduced feed-in tariff prices through annual price reviews and that's saving ratepayers.

>> MPP Pettapiece: Thank you, Speaker. Mr. Speaker, Conroy isn't alone in paying more for using less hydro. In November I asked the Premier about Mike Carter, owner of Millwood and foodtown. He's paying more she double for the hydro delivery charge because he isn't using enough hydro. It's the same story with Conroy, whose hydro bill has seen a double-digit increase over the last four years while his energy consumption has dropped 9%. That's a 9% energy saving and a double digit increase in hydro costs. Speaker, while we're waiting for an answer to the question -- Speaker, we're still waiting for an answer to the question I asked in November. How can this government justify something so stupid?

>> Speaker, if you think 25% reduction is stupid, I simply beg to disagree, Speaker. I think we are making the important -- taking the important steps to reduce those hydro prices. People across this province are benefiting from that, Speaker, and will continue to benefit from that. Speaker, I guess my question to the member opposite is we are still waiting for your plan. We are still waiting to hear what you would do, what your best advice is. We hear lots of criticism, but 29 days ago your leader said that the plan was only days away. I don't know how many days he was talking about. But 29 days, we're still counting.

MPP Fife to Minister Matthews Re: Hydro Rate Reduction Plan

>>MPP Catherine Fife: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Skyrocketing hydro prices continue to negatively impact the lives of Ontarians and businesses. This is to the acting Premier. The Peterborough examiner" is reporting a popular restaurant Roland's will close in April after a half century in business. Closing after 50 years, Peter burger the owner cited rising hydro costs as part of the reason behind the decision and I quote -- the hydro bill has more than doubled in the last two to three years even with energy consumption going down. Monthly bills went from \$2,500 a month to \$7,000 a month. Speaker, my question is to the acting Premier. Why did your government sit back for four years, according to your own polling, and watch high hydro costs negatively impact businesses and jobs across this great province and do nothing?

>> Minister Deb Matthews: Thank you, Speaker. And once again, we have an example of a business in this province who would benefit from reduced hydro prices. Businesses across this province, farm, residential owners, Speaker, people across this province are already benefitting and will benefit even more, Speaker, from our plan to reduce prices. Our plan provides for fast relief, substantial relief, widespread long lasting relief. Unfortunately the NDP Plan just doesn't pass the test. It is riddled with stats. It is riddled with ambiguity, Speaker. You don't do one thing to take one cent off one bill in this province, Speaker. They want to spend \$4 billion. You don't do one thing to take one cent off one bill in this province, Speaker. They want to spend \$4 billion.

>> MPP Fife: Thank you very much, Speaker. Now we haven't seen this Premier's plan, a plan that they haven't had the decency to introduce in legislation and bring to the people of this province. This Premier's scheme won't save Roland or any of the other businesses that we heard about when the Ontario chamber of commerce was here on Monday. It's too late. Your governments did nothing for too long. The owner of Roland's pointed out that he cooks with natural gas with a high hydro cost for a turning point in his decision to close after 50 years. Speaker, what does this government say to the businesses who can't afford their hydro bills or to the employees who are going to be losing their jobs in this province?

>> Minister Matthews: Speaker, we're saying very, very clearly that hydro rates are coming down in Ontario. They've already come down by 8%. They're coming down to bring the total to an average of 25%, Speaker. More for people in rural and remote areas. More for people with low income, Speaker. We are making substantial changes to the electricity system to provide relief for exactly the kind of people we hear about in this legislature. But the NDP, Speaker, their biggest idea is to spend \$4 billion. That's \$4 billion taking away from schools and hospitals to buy Hydro One shares on the market. That would not take one cent off anyone's bill. Speaker, he has said on March 1st, there's no evidence that keeping it public would make this particular problem any better. Under the NDP Proposal, low-income Ontarians are being asked to wait and see.