

Provincial Legislature Question Period Transcript - Monday, March 27, 2017

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Transcript of Provincial Question Period
41st Parliament, 2nd Session
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The following is a partially edited transcript of Question Period.

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MPP Brown to Premier Wynne (Thibeault) Re: Hydro Rate Reduction Plan

>> PC Leader Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier. According to government-commissioned polling, in December of 2013, electricity was the government's worst performing policy. Some three years later the government decides to act. For three years, families struggled to pay their bills. For three years families sat in the dark. For three years seniors had to choose between heating and eating, and for three years the government did nothing. Mr. Speaker, will the Premier just admit the only reason -- Action is because it's now affecting the Liberal party fortunes. Self-interest. That's all it is today.

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, you know, I thank the member opposite for the question, and I acknowledge that the 25% reduction is very important, Mr. Speaker, that it is the most significant thing we can do to reduce people's electricity bills, Mr. Speaker. But let me just go through the fact of the time line in terms of the work that we've been doing and our recognition that this was an issue, Mr. Speaker. So in December of 2013, we deferred the construction of two nuclear reactors, Mr. Speaker, at Darlington avoiding \$15 billion in new construction costs. In June of 2013, Mr. Speaker, we renegotiated the green energy investment agreement with Samsung reducing contract costs by \$3.7 billion, Mr. Speaker. Also in December 2013, Mr. Speaker, we reduced feed-in tariff prices through annual reviews, saving ratepayers at least \$1.9 billion, Mr. Speaker. I'll continue the work that.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, back to the Premier. For three years, people struggle today pay their hydro bills, but for three years Liberal friends got rich off more bad contracts. And we know according to Allison Jones from the Canadian press that it was Liberal polling firms Pollara and Gandalf that received large cheques to tell the government their policy wasn't working. Mr. Speaker, how much did the government pay these Liberal friends and the Liberals' campaign manager over those three years only to ignore that advice?

>> Premier Wynne: Mr. Speaker, we were -- as I've said, we have made a very significant move in terms of removing 25% of people's electricity bills, Mr. Speaker. They will see those changes in the summer. But, Mr. Speaker, we were very aware that there was a need to take costs out of the system and to reduce people's bills, Mr. Speaker, long before we made the move on the 25%. So let me continue. In April of 2014, Mr. Speaker, we removed the debt retirement charge from people's bills saving the average family \$70 a year on their bills, Mr. Speaker. In March of 2015, Speaker, we introduced. That was a direct recognition that people were paying too much on their electricity bills. And a direct support for people who were paying too much on their electricity bills, particularly low-income families, Mr. Speaker .

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier. We know David Hurley from the Gandalf group Liberals' campaign manager received at least \$3 million in contracts. Despite getting advice this electricity policy was very unpopular, Minister of Finance saying in the legislature his hydro bill was going down. We had the Minister of Energy saying there was absolutely no crisis. So we're paying millions for research that government ignores that research. So my question, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier -- if you're paying the Liberal campaign millions for research, ignoring that research three years ago is just -- is this just thanking Liberal friends with taxpayer dollars once again?

>> Premier Wynne: Minister of Energy.

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Pleased to rise and talk about the fair hydro plan, Mr. Speaker, in which all families will be getting a 25% reduction, you know, as well as businesses and farms, Mr. Speaker. But when it comes to -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. But when it comes to removing costs from the system, you know our government has demonstrated that very clearly, Mr. Speaker. For years and years, Mr. Speaker, we've been pulling costs out of the system. Since the 2010 long-term energy plan, Mr. Speaker, we've been pulling costs out, Mr. Speaker. You

can start talking about, you know, deferred nuclear plants, the renegotiated Samsung agreement, the competitive L.R.P. Process. Mr. Speaker. Again \$1.5 billion, Mr. Speaker, that we've pulled out of the system to ensure that the system that we've built, the system that we had to rebuild after they left it in Tatters, Mr. Speaker, the cost of \$50 billion to make sure we find ways to pull costs out of the system, Mr. Speaker, and we know we have more work to do, Mr. Speaker, and that's what the fair hydro --

MPP Brown to Premier Wynne (Hunter) Re: Education Funding

>> PC Leader Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, to the Premier. Since I can't get an answer on the \$3 million in contracts to Liberal friends, I'll try a different question. In early February, a 6-year-old was handcuffed in a Mississauga school. More than half of Ontario principals have had to ask parents to keep a child home because of violence -- violent, disruptive behaviour. Now some children are flagged with evacuation orders if they start to act out and the room is cleared. Mr. Speaker, news talk 1010 had a shocking weeklong report that detailed the state of violence in our system that is putting students and educators at risk. The Liberals may laugh at this. This is a very serious matter. So I ask the Premier, is this the education system that our last two so-called education Premiers envisioned for Ontario? Please take this seriously. It is not a laughing matter.

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Certainly it's not. It is certainly important that we understand how critical it is that we have the resources in our schools that allow kids to have the experience that they deserve, that every child in our system has the supports that will allow them to flourish, Mr. Speaker. That's why education funding in this province has increased every year, Mr. Speaker, year over year since we have been in office, there are more support workers. There are more teachers in our schools, Mr. Speaker. There are more people with better training to help deal with classrooms that are integrated, Mr. Speaker. There are kids with a whole range of abilities in our classrooms and so it's really important that we have the right personnel in those classrooms, Mr. Speaker, and that those people all have the right training. That's the work that we've been doing, Mr. Speaker. Where there are exceptional circumstances, obviously those need to be dealt with, Mr. Speaker.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, back to the Premier. The Premier and her predecessor were supposed to be education Premiers but it certainly doesn't seem that way. They are collecting key information dealing with a student displaying disruptive, aggressive or violent tendencies. There are no consistent standards across the province. Mr. Speaker, as newstalk 1010 asked, is violence in the classroom even on the ministry's radar? Or are they ignoring the data so they can ignore the shocking results?

>> Premier Wynne: Minister of education.

>> Minister Mitzi Hunter: Thank you, Speaker. I want to thank the member for this question because, Mr. Speaker, any incident of violence that occurs in our school is not acceptable, Mr. Speaker, for any reason. We want to ensure that students, teachers, education workers, everyone in our school environment is safe, Mr. Speaker. And that's the focus and when an incident does occur, Mr. Speaker, we want to ensure school boards have appropriate protocols and procedures in place to deal with that situation. Mr. Speaker, we're working with our education partners to ensure that the school environment has a safe school culture, and we have a provincial health and safety working group. That meets, Mr. Speaker. Ensure that is being followed.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, back to the Premier. They're working with education partners? Is that by closing schools, pulling E.A.S out of the classroom, by cutting special needs funding? There is another aspect here that's at risk. The Liberal government attack on autism services have reached a breaking point. The report on violence in the classroom has revealed students with autism are being left behind. Those children aren't receiving the specialized help they need in overcrowded classrooms with overworked teachers. It's not fair to teachers. It's certainly not fair to students. Mr. Speaker, will the Premier finally stop ignoring what is now being called Ontario's dirty little secret? Will the Premier do something to empower educators, support educators and help students with

autism?

>> Mr. Speaker, so here is what we are doing. Mr. Speaker, our government has increased funding for special education by 70% since 2003 to \$2.7 billion. As well, Mr. Speaker, we have increased the number of E.A.S, educational assistants, by 37%. 6,300 E.A.S since 2013 to support students with special education needs. Mr. Speaker, here is what we are not doing. We are not doing what that party opposite planned to do during --

>> Mr. Speaker, here's what we're not doing. The P.C. Plan wanted to slash 2,000 teachers, 5,000 E.C.E. Workers and 10,000 support staff, Mr. Speaker, a plan in fact supported by the parties opposite to slash 100,000 workers. Which included firing teachers. Mr. Speaker, we are not doing that. We continue to invest in our education system to ensure students receive the best support possible.

MPP Horwath to Premier Wynne (Thibeault) (Hoskins) Re: Hospitals and Hydro Rates

>> NDP Leader Andrea Horwath: Thank you, Speaker. My question's to the Premier. After 15 years of skyrocketing hydro costs, the Premier told Ontarians she finally understood. But last week, the Minister of health turned that right around and said hydro costs were no big deal. There was only a few million dollars to a hospital budget. Only a few percent. Maybe to the Premier and her Minister s, Speaker, \$1 million might not be a big deal. But in a hospital budget, that's a big number. Did the Minister of health not see the Premier's polling? Or did he not get the memo that this is all about politics for the Premier and her Liberal party?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think that the leader of the third party knows that what this is about is making sure that people in the province can pay their electricity bills. We've been very clear about that. As I said to the leader of the opposition, we actually start today look for ways to reduce electricity costs in 2013, which is the year that I became Premier, Mr. Speaker. So, Mr. Speaker, I believe and I know that the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care is going to want to comment on this, but I believe the context in which he was putting his comments was that there is about a 1% cost associated with electricity for hospitals and, Mr. Speaker, the operating dollars that we have put into hospitals have actually far surpassed that, and so I think the point that was being made is that there is more money going into hospitals. We recognize that there's more to be done, Mr. Speaker. We recognize that hospitals. Have been working under some constraints. But that's exactly why we've been putting funding into hospitals..At a greater rate than the member was --

>> Andrea Horwath: Speaker in fact this Premier and her government froze hospital operating budgets for four years straight. Speaker. The Premier and her Minister of health have ignored concerns from hospitals about their skyrocketing hydro bills, telling this House that we haven't heard any. That's just not the case. Officials at Hamilton health sciences talked about the problem publicly just last week. They said and I quote -- it's not like you can just shut the lights off when you've got patients in the building. We've got less money to do other things because we're spending more money on electricity, end quote. How can the Premier and her Minister seriously hear statements like this one and yet offer no real concrete solution for hospitals whose bills are skyrocketing because of the Liberals' hydro mess?

>> Premier Wynne: Minister of energy.

>>Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Very pleased to rise and respond in relation to what we're doing for specifically hospitals when it comes to electricity bills, Mr. Speaker. On top of the fair hydro plan, Mr. Speaker, which is going to help every family, small business and farm in Ontario by reducing their bills 25%, there is going to be a modest decrease between 2 and 4% for hospitals. But on top of that, Mr. Speaker, on top of that is the save on energy program, Mr. Speaker. The save on energy program has helped many, many, many hospitals in this province, Mr. Speaker. So much so, Mr. Speaker, the independent electricity system operator has phoned us up and has told us to make sure that we let everyone know that these hospitals have actually seen \$20 million invested,

Mr. Speaker, by the way, to make sure they can reduce their consumption and at the same time -- excuse me, Mr. Speaker. At the same time save their bills. Sudbury for example is saving \$275,000 to \$500,000 a year, Mr. Speaker.

>> Andrea Horwath: Speaker, hospitals like everybody else are doing everything they can to reduce their consumption, but the bills keep going up. That's the problem with this government has not figured out after a number of years messing up our electricity system. Look, municipalities are also stepping up to the plate, Speaker, to try to get this government to understand the magnitude of the problem. Last week North Bay city council actually passed a motion, a resolution. They voted to ask the Premier to help their hospital because they said Ontario hospitals are not currently eligible for any hydro relief, and the government is quote-unquote creating a situation where rising hydro costs can potentially impact health care. That is what the hospital said. They're -- their back of the napkin response is a phantom plan that lines the bankers and denies hospitals the funding they need. When will they finally admit that there's a problem?

>> Minister Eric Hoskins: Mr. Speaker, we increased the budget of North Bay regional health centre by almost \$4 million or 2.1% last year. We increased the budget of Hamilton health sciences 3.6% last year. Almost 30 million new dollars. But I can understand the challenge that the member opposite -- the leader of the opposition is facing because every time she mentioned the hospital, that hospital comes out and either explains the innovations that they've adopted. In fact the member, my Colleague from Sudbury had referenced some of those programs that resulted in reduced consumption or in the case of Sault Ste. Marie where the C.E.O. Had to publicly rebuke and refute the claims made by the leader of the third party saying those increases in electricity have not result under layoffs at the hospital. The hospital has not made decisions directly tied to the increase of electricity rates and there are no planned layoffs of frontline staff. There are challenges with our hospitals, Mr. Speaker. But as you can see from -- and I did this last week. I'm prepared to do it. Increase after increase.

MPP Horwath to Minister Thibeault Re: Hydro Rate Reduction Plan

>> NDP Leader Andrea Horwath: My next question's also for the Premier. Hospitals are having a tough time, whether the Minister of health tends to agree or not. But so are families, Speaker, and so are businesses. Families like the campbells in Sault Ste. Marie. A senior couple on a fixed income with a hydro bill so high that they're actually scared to open their hydro bill each and every month. Or Jamie. Jamie lives in the Sault with her 3-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son. Both have special needs. Jamie's hydro bill was \$1,200 a month. It got so expensive that she had to turn off the baseboard heaters and now she uses propane instead, Speaker, because it's all she can afford to heat the House for her and her two kids. When will the Premier finally offer some -- To people who are suffering and release the details of her phantom plan?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Minister of energy.

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In relation to our plan, I would suggest that the leader of the third party talk to her Colleague, who is the critic for energy in. Because he was at the technical briefing and he would know that this plan, the Ontario fair hydro plan and all of the information that was in there, is going to be reducing rates for families like the family mentioned by 25%, and not knowing the specifics of the individual family in the individual case, Mr. Speaker, but if they're actually in Sault Ste. Marie and part of the outlying areas, if they're a Hydro One customer, if they're an Algoma power customer. Even if they're out chapeau way, their distribution rate is going to be going down as well significantly, Mr. Speaker. And that means that seniors and families of low-income individuals, Mr. Speaker, they can save between 40 and 50%, Mr. Speaker. That's significant. On top of the Ontario electricity support program. We actually heard, listened and acted.

>> Andrea Horwath: Speaker, the Liberals have not released publicly one scrap of paper that details their plan, and we deserve to have that plan tabled, whether it be here in the legislature or publicly through the media. A few weeks ago I met with a guy named Jerry in Thunder Bay. Jerry owns a j.'s

trading post, a great restaurant and a store just outside of the city of Thunder Bay. It was also Jerry's dream to use a.j.'s as a stepping stone to his next business venture, Mr. Speaker, but his hydro bills now account for almost 60% of his overhead, making it impossible for him to realize that dream of expansion. Will this Premier offer business owners like Jerry some certainty right now and tell us which businesses will qualify for relief under her \$40 billion phantom plan?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again we've provided a deck to her critic so she may want to speak to that because, again, all of the details were outlined in that -- all of those pieces of paper, Mr. Speaker. But also let's talk about where the Premier visited recently when we're talking about businesses. So we have here the Guelph hydro bill of the book shelf, the bookstore that the Premier visited. Mr. Speaker, again this business, they're going to be saving \$500 a month, Mr. Speaker. \$500 a month when it comes to the fair hydro plan. The Premier also visited Matilda, a restaurant in Guelph, Mr. Speaker. This place, this facility, Mr. Speaker, they're going to save \$700 a month on average when it comes to their bill, Mr. Speaker. Those are significant savings for small businesses, Mr. Speaker. 500,000, Mr. Speaker. Small businesses and farms will qualify for the 25% reduction, Mr. Speaker. We've heard small businesses, Mr. Speaker, and we acted.

>> Andrea Horwath: Unbelievable that the very top issue of the day is not being given the decency by this government to provide a public plan that's open and transparent and the people can read and look at. I find it unbelievable that this government is being so irresponsible to the people of Ontario. Hospitals are integral to -- integral to communities. Businesses are integral to communities. Families are the heart of communities, and this Premier doesn't seem to get that this phantom plan that's propped up by press releases and P.R. is not enough to ensure the long-term prosperity of communities in Ontario. When is this Premier going to stop putting her interests and her political party's interests first? When is she going to stop benefitting her friends and -- On Bay Street and instead put forward a plan that really sticks with her hydro system and addresses the concerns of families, businesses, hospitals, industries?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We'll make sure the leader of the third party gets a copy of the deck, Mr. Speaker, so she can see for herself. But also, Mr. Speaker, when talking about who actually is in support of this fair hydro plan, Mr. Speaker, let me quote Francesca Dobben, the executive director of United Way Bruce-Grey, Mr. Speaker. This shows that is Kathleen Wynne's government is listening to people. With these positive changes our rural community will now truly benefit from the low-cost power it produces. What about Ontario regional chief Isidor Day, Mr. Speaker? The elimination of the delivery charge will assist our citizens by reducing energy poverty in our communities. It also represents recognition for the use of the land and development and expansion of the provincial energy grid. Today's commitment by the Ontario government is commendable and allows a path forward for greater quality of life. First Nations in Ontario, Mr. Speaker. We listened -- like Chief Day. We listened to people like Francesca Dobben and we acted, Mr. Speaker.

MPP McDonnell (Clark) to Minister Hunter Re: School Closures

>>MPP Jim McDonnell: Thank you, Speaker. To the Premier. On Thursday her government's ill conceived funding policy and neglect of rural education and services caused several communities in my riding to lose their excellent rural schools. Roswell secondary, North Stormont public and S.J. Macleod schools are set to close limiting student achievement. Your member's asking. Young entrepreneurs and businesses. By the time education funding review panel starts to work, it will be too late to save the high-quality rural public education for many students across Ontario. This can't be allowed to happen and the Premier must stop procrastinating. Will this Premier show some integrity and some common sense, put immediate moratorium and school closures in Ontario until a full review of all provincial services in small urban Ontario is completed. Including education and the appropriate funding formula.

>>Minister Mitzi Hunter: Thank you, Speaker. I'm very pleased to rise and speak about the investments that we're making in rural schools because, Mr. Speaker, we know that schools play a vital role in the social fabric that ties our communities together, Mr. Speaker. And the member

opposite knows. I've visited a number of schools in his area to talk about this specific issue. We want to ensure that our schools are providing, Mr. Speaker, the best possible education to our students in rural communities. And when school boards have to make a decision that involves the closure of a school, Mr. Speaker, that's a very difficult decision that the school board has to make and they do that with the input from all parts of that school community, Mr. Speaker, including community members. As well as with their local municipality and other organizations in that community, Mr. Speaker. And I will speak very specifically to the area --

>>MPP Steve Clark: Back to the Premier. Speaker, on the eve of closing 7 or one in four elementary schools in Leeds- Grenville, the education Minister told the upper Canada trustees she was proud of them. That's right. I was proud they were about to devastate those who fought so hard to keep those rural schools open. You know who I'm proud of, Speaker ? I'm proud of the parents.

The municipal and community leaders who work tirelessly to put forward ideas to save their schools but they never had a chance. The board was never serious about working with these communities. Speaker, does the Premier agree closing this many schools is bad for rural education and will she now admit that a moratorium is the only way to save rural schools?

>>Minister Hunter: Mr. Speaker, you know an arbitrary moratorium on school closures would not allow our local school boards to make the decisions that they need to make, which is in the best interests of local schools. And, Mr. Speaker, I just want to just correct the information that the member opposite has put forward because, you know, I actually contacted the chair of upper Canada school board, Mr. Speaker, because they were doing leading work to protect students against opioid issues in their local communities, Mr. Speaker. And I feel that that work that they were doing with public health officials was protecting our students, Mr. Speaker, and keeping them safe and keeping them healthy. And that's why we have to support our locally elected school officials to act and to do what they know is. In the best interests of their students, Mr. Speaker, and that includes decisions around the school configuration, Mr. Speaker. I trust our local trustees to do the best --

MPP Fife to Minister Leal Re: Small Business Hydro Costs

>> MPP Catherine Fife: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Premier. Ontario's small businesses have lost confidence in this government. A recent Ontario chamber of commerce report found that a full 78% of small businesses are not confident in the province's economic -- confident in the province's economic outlook. These are the real job creators in the province of Ontario. They don't believe that the government this -- direction this government is taking the economy will help their business. In fact they believe this government will only make things worse. With runaway hydro costs it's easy to see why businesses cannot trust the choices this government makes. Why doesn't this Premier think that the confidence of Ontario's businesses are important?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Minister of small business.

>> Minister Jeff Leal: To respond to the Honourable member this morning. I just, in fact, had a meeting with small business officials at 8:30 A.M. This morning, and indicated to me that up to 1,000 small and medium sized businesses and C.M.S will soon be available for the industrial conservation I.C.I., saving about one third on their current bills. Similar to home customers, an 8% rebate for small businesses is now being provided. This is in addition to the H.S.T. Input tax credit many small businesses are eligible to claim. Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to say that the small business tax rate in Ontario is among the lowest in North America.

>> MPP Fife: Thank you very much. Back to the Premier. Skyrocketing hydro prices are threatening to close the doors of small businesses across this province. We bring these stories to you every single week. Half of Ontario chamber of commerce members believe that a reduction of electricity costs will have a positive impact on their organizational health. But what has this Liberal government put forward to reduce the burden of high hydro costs? A \$40 billion borrowing scheme that does nothing

to fix the problems in the electricity system. That is an extra 40 billion in interest costs that Ontario businesses and families will have to pay back for years to come. It is irresponsible. When will this government stop making life harder for families and businesses and admit their desperate hydro tactic is nothing more than a partisan scheme. That will cost all of us more in the long run?

>>Minister Leal: Mr. Speaker, when I heard the member's supplementary, I'm reminded of the former observation that Sean Conway once made when he was responding to a question. I think the Minister's information was a bit of a petite canard. But frankly, but frankly, Mr. Speaker, we just got the financial accountability officer's report back in August which confirmed that Ontario's in the middle of the pack in terms of energy costs in Canada, and we've already done all the heavy lifting modernizing our energy infrastructure and transitioning off coal. While the F.O.A. Report adds value perspective our government recognizes small businesses alive and well in Ontario and I'd be prepared to share this information with the Honourable member.

MPP Potts to Minister Coteau Re: Autism Services

>> MPP Arthur Potts: Thank you, Speaker. My question's to the Minister of children and youth services. Now, Speaker, I know the Minister has been hard at work ensuring that the beginning of the rollout of the new Ontario autism program in June of this year is as seamless as possible. And I know the Minister has been meeting with parents from across the province to listen to their concerns and to their ideas. It is, after all, the utmost importance to this government that all students are provided with the best supports as possible especially those who have autism or on the spectrum. I've had so many calls from constituents in Beaches- East York who are caring for their children who are on the autism spectrum and they are looking for a direct funding option and it is our duty, Speaker, to help them succeed. So, Speaker, would the Minister of children and youth services clarify whether or not he is considering a direct funding option for parents who are caring for their children who are on the autism spectrum?

>>Minister Michael Coteau: Thank you for the question. I want to acknowledge that over the last week there was a lot of discussion on social media in regards to the rollout of the new program, the autism program here in June. And I understand that there's a lot of concern from parents because we're talking about children. In the face of these difficult questions, I want to provide some clarity on some of the issues that were under discussion this weekend. I want them to know that we will be rolling out a direct funding option as part of the Ontario autism program in June, and I also want parents to know, Mr. Speaker, that parents who are receiving, so children and families who are receiving direct funding currently will do so past June until they're brought into the new program. I just want -- and I want to say this one more time, Mr. Speaker, because I think it's important. Funding will be part of this new program. I know there are a lot of parents who are anxious out there, but we'll continue to work together with parents. Make sure we position children for --

>> MPP Potts: Thank you, Speaker. I want to thank the Minister for the great work that he's doing on this file. But I also want to acknowledge the work that the Minister responsible for accessibility and her contributions to this file previously and ongoing. But Speaker it's my understanding -- Well deserved. My understanding is the -- the Minister's going to Holland bloorview kids rehabilitation centre this afternoon to speak with parents and to check in on the progress of this key government commitment. And that commitment is to establish five new autism spectrum disorder diagnostic hubs across the province. Now last year I toured an autism care centre, breakthrough autism run by Nancy Marchese. They're doing incredible work with children with autism. Ontario is also investing an unprecedented half billion dollars over the next five years to create these new services for children and youth with autism spectrum disorder. Cot Minister tell us more about what these hubs will be doing and how they are expected to make a difference in the province and --

>>Minister Coteau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again thank you to the member for the question. The member is right. We will be investing \$5 million into five diagnostic hubs across the province of Ontario. Mr. Speaker, this will allow for staff to extend their hours to build more capacity within the system. And we estimate that 2,000 more children will be assessed per year through this investment.

And as the Minister of children and youth services I have to say, Mr. Speaker, that I'm proud of this government. I'm proud of the work we're doing to support families who have children with autism, and I'm proud to be leading this process into a new program that will be launching in June. Mr. Speaker, we're also committed to creating 16,000 new service space that is will significantly route wait times here in the province of Ontario. I pledge this government's continued commitment to work together. To ensure everyone with autism growing up in Ontario has the support and services they need to realize their dreams and their full potential.

MPP N. Miller to Minister Sandals (Naqvi) Re: Hydro Advertising

>>MPP Norm Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Premier. Mr. Speaker, despite this government creating many of its own problems, they are once again using taxpayer dollars in an attempt to save themselves. The auditor general has stated that the Premier's recent hydro ads, quote, convey a positive impression of the current government -- Pat-on-the-back type of advertisement. The ads would not have had under the previous legislation, close quote. Two years ago, when the government reduced the oversight of the auditor general, the Deputy Premier stated, quote -- this legislation expands the oversight of our advertising and clarifies what is in fact considered partisan, close quote. Speaker, given the auditor's comments, can the Premier really say that the auditor's powers to block partisan advertising have been expanded?

>> Minister Liz Sandals: Yes. Thank you very much. I want to point out that we need a little bit of a reality check here. The Ontario legislature, the Ontario government is the only government in Canada that actually has an advertising act that lays out the rules. And in fact the ads in question follow the legislation, are consistent with the rules that are set out and the budget has been set out by the legislature. And they are not in contempt of the legislature, and I would point out that this much loved legislation in original form, that they voted against it.

>>MPP Miller: I think the Minister 's forget ago couple other facts. Two years ago you changed the legislation to make the auditor general --

[Applause] These hydro ads are not the first time this government has funded partisan ads through taxpayer funds. The government's pension panel cost Ontarians almost \$800,000. The auditor called those ads self-congratulatory and stated that they had added no value to the public. In the last two years, this government has spent nearly \$6 million Of taxpayer money on a s Eries of ads containing on the environment. The auditor says -- Self-congratulatory and in some cases misleading. Mr. Speaker, will the Premier Mr. Speaker, will the Premier restore the auditor general's authority to review government funded ads?

>> Minister Yasir Naqvi: Member opposite is forgetting some fact was that it was her government when they were in power that ran under Mike Harris's leadership advertising words \$400 million. Speaker, \$400 million. And when this party and this government came into office, one of the undertakings they took brought in a piece of legislation that would ensure that we do not have that kind of Mike Harris style government. And, Speaker, you wonder how.tories vote about that bill? They voted against that bill. So did the NDP So I would like to ask the member opposite what were you thinking then? Why did you not support for that bill that creates one of the most strictest and stringent restriction on government advertising in Canada, Speaker. The only legislature that has a law like this. They have very little ground to stand on, Speaker.

MPP Sattler to Minister Hoskins Re: Mental Health Services

>>MPP Peggy Sattler: Thank you Speaker. My question is to the Premier. While this government fails to show leadership to address London's mental health crisis, my community is looking for solutions such as the innovative E.R. Diversion projects between London health sciences centre, the cmhacrisis centre and Middlesex London E.M.S. All the project requires is the health Minister 's sign-off to fund the E.M.S. Transfer of nonacute mental health patients directly to the crisis centre instead of to the

hospital. The project would divert 3,000 patients a year and save \$2.5 million annually, money that is desperately needed in my community. Will the Premier direct the Minister of health to sign off on this project today?

>> Minister Eric Hoskins: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I mentioned last week in my response to this question, we have legislation in the province of Ontario called the ambulance act. It pertains to the governance, the activities, issues of deployment where individuals, patients can be dropped off by E.M.S. It pertains to all of the elements that surround our emergency medical services and our ambulance services. It would be a violation of the act, Mr. Speaker, today to allow an ambulance to drop off a patient at a location other than a hospital. I know that one of the -- whether it's a pilot project or otherwise, Mr. Speaker. I am looking very closely at this project. We were the government that funded c.m.h.a. to open and run. This incredible crisis centre in the community. We are working very closely with all partners to see how we can further provide care to these vulnerable individuals.

>>MPP Sattler: Thank you, Speaker. Even if it were true that approving the pilot would be breaking the law, which it is not, this government has had two years to figure out how to make it happen. As CTV reported last week in London, the need for this diversion project has never been more urgent. Lhse psychiatric E.R. is at 152% capacity and 26 mental health patients are waiting for beds. Why is this Liberal government refusing to support the efforts that London is making to deal with this urgent and ongoing crisis?

>>Minister Hoskins: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. And I'll state again that the Lhin, the local hospital, cmha itself, my ministry, my office, myself were all engage under conversations to see how we might be able to find a path forward, Mr. Speaker, but it would require a change to the ambulance act. One possible solution that was provided some time ago, Mr. Speaker, was if that crisis centre was actually to come under the corporation of the hospital. Then it would be possible and it would be legal, Mr. Speaker, as has been done in other parts of the province for that deployment and that drop-off to take place at the crisis centre. It was decided locally not to pursue that path so we're looking at any other option that we can to make sure that that important service that we funded, that we started along with cmha last year. Services augmented even further.

MPP Kiwala to Minister McMahon Re: Community Aboriginal Recreation Activator Program

>>MPP Sophie Kiwala: Mr. Speaker, my question is to the Minister of tourism, culture and sport. As the former parliamentary assistant to the Minister of tourism, culture and sport, I saw first hand the benefits of our government's support to indigenous sport and recreation. For example nearly in its tenth year the community Aboriginal recreation activator program continues to improve the quality of life and well-being of first nation communities through sport and recreation in communities all across Ontario. This program supports the calls to action from the truth and reconciliation commission as well as the recommendations generated by the studies of hope report, which was written to address the needs of difficulties facing indigenous young people. Mr. Speaker, through you to the Minister, can you tell the members of this House about what else our government is doing to support physical activity and recreation-based programming --

>> Minister Eleanor McMahon: Merci, monsieur president. Thank you very much to the member and for her advocacy, Speaker, on behalf of first nations communities across this province. I'm very proud -- yes. Very proud of the community Aboriginal recreation activator program which helps to support the integration of traditional values and culture into sport and recreation programming benefitting over 50,000 first nations Ontarians.ia since 2006 we're very proud that \$7.8 million has been invested in first nations communities through CARA, and the program continues to expand. In fact, Speaker, it's grown by 80% since 2014 alone from 16 to 27 communities, which is really exciting. Building on that model, our government recently hosted two successful youth cultural camps, Speaker. Supporting indigenous youth in accessing their cultural teachings through hands-on programming. One in pe tank couple and fort Albany attracted 260 first nations young people. I look forward to more in my supplementary.

>> MPP Kiwala: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister, for your response. It's fantastic to hear how wide-reaching comprehensive and successful our government's investment has been. The CARA program's community development model is considered across government as a best practice for first nations programming. I know the mohawks of the bay of quite outside of Kingston are a CARA community that have benefitted tremendously from the CARA program. As the MPP For Kingston and the islands, I'm very encouraged by this. Through you to the Minister, can you please tell the members of this House about other ways Ontario engaging in welcoming young indigenous -- Into organized sport?

>> Minister McMahon: Thanks to the member from Kingston and the islands. I want to thank my Colleague for the Minister of relation and reconciliation for his strong advocacy and his leadership on behalf of indigenous Ontarians both in sport and more broadly. Our government continues to provide funding to the Aboriginal sport and wellness council of Ontario to oversee grassroots physical activity and participation, coordinate sport development and coaching initiatives and represent Ontario's indigenous people at the national level. In July 2016 the council voted the first Ontario Aboriginal summer games in partnership with the six nations of the grand river welcoming athletes, coaches, volunteers from across our province. This summer I'm very excited Toronto will for the first time host the North American indigenous games. These games promise to be one of the most exciting sporting events in Canada. Represent all 15 provinces and territories and 5,000 athletes across North America leveraging the investments we made, Speaker, in the pan am games and all the facilities --

MPP McNaughton to Minister Duguid Re: Ontario Economic Development

>> MPP Monte McNaughton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My question today is for the Premier. Many groups and organizations are simply ignored when they come to queen's park to meet with this government. So I strongly urge the Premier and her government to listen and act upon what is being said here today in the legislature. Speaker, as the past president of the strathroy and district chamber of commerce I can tell you that the members and leaders of the chamber of commerce are some of the most active, engaged and involved people in our community as a vital organization here in the province. But, Speaker, only 24% of the Ontario chamber of commerce membership is confident in the Ontario economy. Speaker, how can the Premier stand here and say that the economy is on track when three out of four members of the chamber of commerce lack confidence in the economic outlook in the province of Ontario?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Minister of economic development and growth.

>> Minister Brad Duguid: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. Let me begin by welcoming the Ontario chamber of commerce here to queen's park today. I don't know if this government has a partner that we've worked more closely with than our friends at the Ontario chamber of commerce. When it comes to developing the economic strategies, Mr. Speaker, that have taken Ontario to the forefront in Canada in economic growth, the Ontario chamber of commerce has been with us every step of the way -- chamber of commerce. They supported and urged us to make the investments in infrastructure. The \$100 billion over the last ten years. 160 billion we're investing over the next 12. They've urged us and supported us in making investments in our people in building one of the best education systems anywhere in the world today. And, Mr. Speaker, they've urged us and supported us in our commitment to innovation. That's building the next generation economy here in Ontario so we're in a position to lead the world.

>> Minister McNaughton: Thank you, Speaker. Back to the Premier. Speaker, the tilt of the business confidence survey Canadian that -- indicate that Ontario business is in a delicate position. Chamber members are unsure of the stability of the provincial economy and critical of the impact Liberal policy will have on their organizations. This lack of confidence is causing businesses to hold off on hiring, investment and ultimately growth here in Ontario. Speaker, the most recent example is fiat

Chrysler, which is now planning to wind down its transport operations in Windsor, affecting nearly 300 jobs. Speaker, all of this stems from the burden of input costs that this Liberal government is placing on businesses. Speaker, the Ontario chamber of commerce is our largest, most inclusive incredible business network. Why does the Premier refuse to listen to Ontario's business leaders like the Ontario chamber of commerce?

>> Minister Duguid: There's never been a time that I can recall when our business community should be more confident in our economy here in Ontario than today. We're talking about an economy, Mr. Speaker, whose unemployment rate is at a level not seen for over a decade, Mr. Speaker. The lowest level it's been in ten years. We're talking about an economy that's seen the creation of 700,000 net new jobs across this province, Mr. Speaker. We're talking an economy that's not only leading the country in growth. It's leading the G-7 in growth, Mr. Speaker. We're talking about an economy that's attracting more foreign direct investment here in this province than any other jurisdiction in North America. Mr. Speaker, our business leaders are confident in this economy. They're investing in this economy in record amounts. They're creating jobs in this economy. And they're doing it in partnership with our government, in synch with our economic development strategy. This is a great time to invest in --

MPP Horwath to Minister Jaczek Re: Rental Costs

>> NDP Leader Andrea Horwath: My question's for the Premier. This weekend a young woman named Neelofar Gocar told the media she was evicted from her home because her landlord told her he was moving in. It turned out her landlord just wanted today cash in on Toronto's red-hot rental market because just a few weeks after she moved out, Speaker, he was advertising the apartment for \$500 more than Neelofar was paying. Does the Premier think it's about time to tighten up the rules and make sure that people like Ms. Golkhar are protected from economic evictions like this one?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Minister of community and social services.

>> Minister Helena Jaczek: And of course we are very aware that there are many Ontarians who are faced with housing costs that continue to rise dramatically. Evictions do occur obviously from time to time. We're very aware that families' tight budgets are feeling the pinch in a rental market that is struggling to keep up with demand. And that's why we've been developing a plan to address unfair rises in rental costs by delivering substantive rent control reform in Ontario as part of an ongoing review of the residential tenancies act. And so of course we have been taking action. Very, very broadly, and some of the initiatives that we've been taking I will expand in the supplementary.

>> Andrea Horwath: Speaker, the Ontario landlord and tenant board has seen a 23% spike in these types of evictions just since 2013. It's a sign that renting in Toronto is becoming more and more uncertain and expensive. Closing the loophole that allows buildings built after 1991 to be exempt from meaningful rent control is a very good first step in addressing this growing problem, Speaker, and this growing insecurity that families are feeling. 45% of people who live in Toronto are renters. Does the Premier think that extending rent control protection to 45% of Torontonians is actually the right thing to do?

>> Minister Jaczek: Initiatives that we've been taking are working with our municipal partners to make secondary suites a quick way to provide affordable housing in our communities, passing inclusionary zoning legislation that will empower municipalities to require the construction of affordable units in new residential developments, freezing the municipal property tax on apartment buildings to provide relief to renters. And let's not forget of course it was -- lest we forget it was our government that eliminated automatic evictions under the P.C. Government were granted unless a tenant filed a notice within five days. So we certainly do believe that eviction is a remedy of last resort and that all tenants are entitled to a hearing at the landlord and tenant board to decide this issue. And we wish to ensure fairness for all parties. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MPP Milczyn to Minister Naqvi Re: Access to Legal Services

>>MPP Peter Milczyn: My question is for the Attorney General. Access to justice continues to be a challenge for many people in Ontario. We believe Ontario plays an important role in addressing this challenge and max a positive impact in many people's lives. Every day they help almost 4,000 people access legal services regardless of their ability to pay. People are often marginalized, vulnerable and living with limited means. That's why our government has made historic investments in legal aid Ontario to ensure more people have access to legal representation. I understand that on April 1st Ontario's providing even more people with affordable access to legal services by increasing the financial eligibility threshold for legal aid by another 6%. Can the Attorney General tell us more about our government's investments and how raising the financial eligibility threshold. Will ensure people can access legal services?

>>Minister Yasir Naqvi: Thank you very much, Speaker. I appreciate the question from the MPP From Etobicoke- Lakeshore on this very important issue. The member is correct it is a serious challenge facing Ontario's justice system. That is why, Speaker, our government has made historic investment in legal aid Ontario. I'm pleased to let this legislature know, Speaker, we increased legal aid Ontario's funding by \$153 million over the pasx four years so that more low-income and vulnerable Ontarians across the province can have access to legal services regardless of their ability to pay. The member's also correct, Speaker, that on April 1st, Ontario's providing even more people with affordable access to legal services by increasing the financial eligibility threshold for legal aid by another 6%. This is the fourth time that our government has boosted the eligibility threshold by 6%, Speaker. This increase will have a real positive impact on people's everyday lives. Effective April 1st, about 140,000 people will be eligible to receive legal aid services they need.

>> MPP Milczyn: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the Attorney General for his answer. Community and legal clinics such as the south Etobicoke community legal services play an integral role in Ontario's justice system. And I know my constituents will be please today hear that our government's commitment to raise the financial eligibility threshold will ensure that about 140,000 more people will be eligible to receive the legal services they need, regardless of their ability to pay on April 1st. Mr. Speaker, increasing the eligibility threshold builds on our government's commitment to improve access to justice for people all across Ontario. This is part of our 2014 commitment to expand access to legal aid services to an additional 1 million Ontarians in ten years. Can the Attorney General tell us more about our government's commitment and what the next steps are after the increases are complete?

>>Minister Naqvi: Thank you very much, Speaker. The member from Etobicoke- Lakeshore is right. Our goal is to expanding access to legal aid services to an additional 1 million Ontarians in ten years. Speaker, I have some very good news. With this threshold increase more than 500,000 more people in total are now eligible for legal aid services. This is important, Speaker, because it means that Ontario's now more than halfway to our goal to expand access to legal aid services to an additional 1 million people. I would also like to recognize the community and legal clinics that play an integral role in delivering legal aid. We value the work they do to ensure people with lower incomes have access to justice. Speaker, on behalf of our government I would like to thank A.L. O.for their work as well as the services provided by community and legal clinics. We look forward to continue to support them and to work with them to improve access to justice for all Ontarians. Thank you, Speaker.

MPP Coe to Minister Duguid Re: Highly Skilled Workforce

>>MPP Lorne Coe: Thank you, Speaker. During the Ontario chamber of commerce's consultation process of their 2016 report, on the skills mismatch, they said many small business owners validated their concern. To the Premier. Many small business owners Val indicated the -- validated the concern there's a serious mismatch between the nature of job vacancies and the qualifications of those seeking work. In fact the report says 39% of employers have difficulty filling a job opening over the last year. This number was up 11% from 2014. Speaker, the government's own highly skilled work

force expert panel report also show that the skills mismatch is a significant problem. Speaker, when will this government start taking the skills mismatch seriously. And implement the recommendations from the highly skilled work force panel report?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Minister of economic development and growth.

>>Minister Brad Duguid: Well, Mr. Speaker, I really appreciate that question. I think it's a very valid line of questioning. In many ways, I mean the highly skilled work force was our task force. We set it up for that very reason, to give us advice. A fast-changing economy where we have many of our sectors migrating and automating and changing the way they do work. We've got to make sure that our work force and our education systems and our skill train systems move with them and that's entirely why under the leadership of Sean Conway, our Minister Deb Matthews appointed that task force and the recommendation that they brought forward are extremely important as we put forward our strategy to stay at the cutting edge of skills development and education in this world. So a very valid question. And we're on it and we'll continue to be on it and we'll certainly see it as a priority.

>>MPP Coe: Back to the Premier, Speaker. The conference board of Canada estimates that the skills mismatch costs the economy of Ontario up to \$24.3 billion in gross domestic product and \$3.7 billion in tax revenues each year. Weeks ago I asked the Minister of advanced education when this government will address the skills mismatch by adopting the recommendation from the highly skilled work force expert panel's report. The Minister provided no ded deadline and vague commitments to providing recommendations from the report. Will the Premier step in and demonstrate that the skills mismatch is being taken seriously? Or will we yet be given another vague response?

>> Minister Duguid: Mr. Speaker, the Premier doesn't have to step in to make sure that our efforts to enhance skills in this province are taken seriously. That's part of the D.N.A. Of our Premier, part of the D.N.A. Of this government and part of the reason why, Mr. Speaker, we've been successful in the future of building a strong economy and will be successful in building a new economy here in Ontario based on the fact changing innovation taking place around the world. So this is an issue we take extremely seriously. It's absolutely crucial we continue to work with our education leaders and we have a great education Minister who is highly engaged in that. We continue to work with our postsecondary partners, Mr. Speaker. We continue to work with our labour leaders. We continue to work with our businesses to ensure that we're producing the most highly skilled work force anywhere in the world today. Mr. Speaker, we have we're close to be interesting now but it's a fiercely competitive global environment.