

Provincial Legislature Question Period Transcript - Tuesday, April 11, 2017

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Transcript of Provincial Question Period

41st Parliament, 2nd Session

Tuesday, April 11, 2017

The following is a partially edited transcript of Question Period.

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MPP Brown to Premier Wynne Re: Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario

>> PC Leader Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier. We are joined by the elementary teachers federation of Ontario as they come to queen's park to stand up for members. I want to welcome every teacher here today and take a moment to recognize all teachers in the classroom across Ontario. Thank you for what you do. They deserve the safest possible classes. They deserve the best resources to create a world-class learning environment. But it seems the government disagrees. Mr. Speaker, will the Premier finally put students and teachers first rather than government's own political

agenda?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to reenforce the welcome to all of the teachers who are here and all of their representatives. There is nothing more important in this province than the start that we give to our youngest children, Mr. Speaker. And right through their education careers, Mr. Speaker, they have the supports in place. I got involved in provincial politics, as so many people in our government, Mr. Speaker, because of publicly funded education, because of the challenges that publicly funded education was facing at the hands of a government that actually didn't believe in publicly funded education, Mr. Speaker, actually was pushing children into the private system. So, Mr. Speaker, when we came into office, when we came into office, Mr. Speaker, there were no tax on early years, Mr. Speaker, no full day kindergarten. The graduation rate in this province was 68%.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, again through the Premier, that response coming from a Premier that has 600 schools on the chopping block. So much for support for public education. You know, Mr. Speaker, etfo supported the Ontario autism's call for this Liberal government to finally and truly support children with autism and special education needs. Etfo president Sam Hammond said both the consolidation and etfo are emphatic that Ontario education needs to overhaul its funding for special education. The first step to that overhaul is a proper review. So if you are committed to special education, Mr. Speaker, to the Premier, will you heed this etfo call and have a review on your special education funding?

>> Premier Wynne: Mr. Speaker, we will work closely with etfo. I want to make sure, Mr. Speaker, that all of the supports and resources are in place so that children have the best learning environment possible and so that teachers and education workers have the safest and the best working environments possible, Mr. Speaker. You know, we have worked in partnership with our education federations, Mr. Speaker, with the unions to develop policies that are in the best interest of kids. We have also, Mr. Speaker, built 810 new schools in this province, Mr. Speaker. There have been major renovations to 780. So we are paying close attention to the working conditions and the learning conditions of kids in the system, Mr. Speaker. And at the same time, those physical conditions are extremely important. So will we work in partnership with etfo? Absolutely, Mr. Speaker, we will.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier, there was no response to etfo's call of review of special education. The reality is that we know four out of five school boards say they spend more on special education funding than they receive from the province. Because of that etfo's building better schools platform says this, often school boards are strapped for funds and are compelled to take money allocated to other program areas to support special education which leaves every kid at a loss. Mr. Speaker, school boards should not have to choose between which children support. Mr. Speaker, that's not happening in Ontario today because of this government's lack of commitment to public education. My question again, etfo has asked for a review of the special education funding. Yes or no? Will the Premier honour that request?

>> Premier Wynne: Mr. Speaker, I was very clear in my previous answer that we will work in partnership with etfo, Mr. Speaker. I can't be more emphatic that it is incredibly important for us as a government to work with the people who are on the front lines in our schools, Mr. Speaker, understand the issue. That's why we have increased special education funding by billions of dollars, Mr. Speaker. That's why we put in place the provincial health and safety working group. If there is more that we need to do, Mr. Speaker, we will absolutely work with our -- Mr. Speaker, you know, we would not have increased the funding for special education by 70% since 2003 if we didn't believe that there was a need to support kids, all kids, in our school system, Mr. Speaker.

MPP Brown to Minister Thibeault Re: Industrial Conservation Initiative

>> PC Leader Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of energy. Mr. Speaker, did the Minister of energy receive consent to release the private billing information? Yes or no?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In relation to this, it's great that we work with our partners with electra, Mr. Speaker, and electra works with them. Electra said they will qualify for the ITI program, Mr. Speaker, just like thousands of other businesses, Mr. Speaker, right across our province will qualify for the ITI program thanks to this government, Mr. Speaker. They have no plan for electricity. They have no plan for -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we say, every business that has 500 kilowatts or above, Mr. Speaker, will qualify for the ITI program. We want every business in Ontario that qualifies to sign up so they can get the help, Mr. Speaker.

>> Patrick Brown: Again to the Minister of energy, my question was did the Minister of energy receive consent to release this private billing information? There was no response from the Minister on that. He obviously did not seek consent. My question, Mr. Speaker, is did the Minister of energy breach privacy laws when discussing the private billing information if that happened? Can we expect an apology from the Minister of energy?

>> Minister Thibeault: So the party doesn't have a plan on what to do with electricity. They don't have a plan on what to do for Ontario. But they -- So they ask a question, they ask a question about a business that won't qualify. And we clarify it for them, Mr. Speaker, just like we do every day that they will qualify, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So when it comes to businesses in this province, we're going to continue to work with all of the businesses, continue to work with the Ontario chamber of commerce to make sure as many businesses out there that qualify for ITI get on the ITI program, Mr. Speaker.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, again to the Minister of energy, I'm not sure he appreciates the seriousness of this issue. Mr. Speaker, the member told the House this, I quote, they actually have 600 kilowatts power. We confirmed with electra their electric company that they qualify for the ITI program. We know that is not true. They don't qualify for that program. We know they didn't have consent to release those numbers. My question is this, Mr. Speaker, how does this government have the audacity to release information, incorrect information by the way? Can the Minister be trusted with private information? Is there no contrition from this Minister for doing what is clearly wrong?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, thousands of businesses in this province will qualify for the ITI program knowing that they use more than 500 kilowatts of power, Mr. Speaker. That's the one thing that we talk about all the time. They don't have a plan to help businesses, Mr. Speaker. They don't. They don't know what to do for businesses. We do, Mr. Speaker. We're helping them with the ITI program, the industrial conservation initiative, providing businesses with saving up to one-third on their electricity bill. We're there, Mr. Speaker, with that business last week announcing a grant for program for that as well, Mr. Speaker. Not only are we helping this business and many businesses right across the province with energy, we're actually helping them with grants too, Mr. Speaker.

MPP Sattler to Premier Wynne Re: Gender Wage Gap

>> MPP Peggy Sattler: Mr. Speaker, my question is to the Premier. This year's sunshine list revealed that even within the public sector in Ontario, a massive wage gap for women still persists. Only 25% of the people on the list in 2017 were women. If the Premier can't get this right in her own House after her party has been in charge for more than 14 years, how does she expect the people of this province to trust that she is working to close the wage gap for all Ontario women?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Know that closing the wage gap is an extremely important imperative, Mr. Speaker. We have been taking action. We're committed to -- we're committed to getting there, Mr. Speaker. Whether it is setting a targets for women to make up at least 40% of public appointments to every provincial board and agency by 2019. And, Mr. Speaker, I would just say that across all of those agencies and boards we're actually at 44%. That doesn't mean that every single one is at 40%. That is our commitment, encouraging businesses to appoint more women to their boards of directors, Mr. Speaker, or whether it's the direct funding increases that we put into salaries for personal support workers and early childhood educators and developmental support workers. Vast majority of whom are women, Mr. Speaker, those are all initiatives that this government has taken to work to close that wage gap, Mr. Speaker.

>> MPP Sattler: Speaker, again to the Premier, the Premier and her Minister s have said they will try to put more women in more important roles in the public sector. She has asked the Toronto stock exchange nicely if they would please promote more women to their boards. Speaker, what women in this province need now is concrete action, encouraging, asking nicely isn't enough anymore. When will the Premier take this issue seriously and commit to enforcing tough measures to ensure that women in this province don't have to go to work and wonder if their male counterparts are still making more money than they are.

>> Premier Wynne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The president of the treasury board will want to speak to this. I will acknowledge, Mr. Speaker, when we put the comply or explain encouragement policy in place, I fully expected that businesses would step up, that we would see an increase on boards, Mr. Speaker, because there is a strong economic imperative. We know that business that is put women on boards do better. So I fully expected, Mr. Speaker, that we would see a better result. That has not happened. There has not been the increase we expected. We have put targets in place, Mr. Speaker. If that doesn't work, we will be prepared to move forward with more stringent measures. But Mr. Speaker, I completely and fully support the move towards having more women involved whether it's in the Cabinet of a government, Mr. Speaker, or whether it's a board of an agency or another kind of organization or whether it's a private sector company. We need more women involved.

>> MPP Sattler: Thank you, Speaker. Speaker, real action could come from this Premier and her Liberal government as early as budget day. The pay equity commissions budget was cut in half by the Conservatives in 1997 and has been flatlined for the last decade under the Liberals. As a result, we have seen more than half of all Ontario employers not complying with their legal pay equity obligations. The commission needs to be fully funded so that it can actually force pay equity compliance and have a meaningful impact on women's lives in this province. Will the Premier's budget this spring include funding for the incredibly important work of the pay equity commission.

>> Minister Liz Sandals: Yes. Thank you very much, Speaker, and obviously we have more work to do in this area. I think everybody recognizes that. But the Ontario public service actually has been a leader in addressing the gender gap wage gap. If you look at this year's data, we actually have reduced the pay gap between men and women in this year's sunshine list data from 15.8% down to 12.5%. Still more work to do. But if you look at who's in middle management in the public service, 55% of those positions are occupied by women. If you look at who is in the off senior management group -- Yes. And where we do see a gap is women in the public service in the stem occupations. In physicist roles, in init roles. And that's a gap that is reflected in society. As a society, we need to close that gap.

MPP Tabuns to Minister Thibeault Re: Hydro Rate Reduction Plan

>> MPP Peter Tabuns: Thank you, Speaker. Speaker, my question to the Premier. Last week crista wrote to the NDP To tell us about her soaring hydro bills. She lives in Nipissing and she's on a fixed income of \$800 per month. The hydro bill she sent us was for \$451.51. How does the Premier expect crista to live and pay hydro at the same time when her bills are so high?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, I'm very pleased to rise and talk about Ontario's fair hydro plan that is coming, Mr. Speaker. That's going to help individuals like the individual that the Honourable member mentioned. Come this summer, Mr. Speaker, once we get the legislation through this House, Mr. Speaker, we could see up to 25% in reductions for families like that, Mr. Speaker, for individuals like that was mentioned. On top of that, Mr. Speaker, if this person is a Hydro One customer or another customer of one of the other six utilities that we have identified, their distribution costs are going to come down significantly, Mr. Speaker, bringing forward their rate of reduction to anywhere between 40 and 50%, Mr. Speaker. That is huge relief, Mr. Speaker, for these types of families. On top of that, we expanded the Ontario electricity support program adding another 50% and actually make it loosening the rules so more people will qualify. That is a significant saving of \$5.54 on top of that, Mr. Speaker.

>> MPP Tabuns: Thank you, Speaker. Again to the Premier. Crista already takes advantage of the Ontario electricity support program. The rural rate protection program is exempt from being charged for debt retirement. She still has to choose between paying her hydro bills and buying food. Clearly the Premier and her Liberal government aren't doing enough for people like crista. When will the Premier stop with the partisan posturing and actually present, present, a detailed plan in the legislature to fix the system she has helped to create in our hydro system?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, as I mentioned earlier, the Ontario electricity support program that the member mentioned that this individual has been able to take advantage of, Mr. Speaker, has increased by 50%. That will be a significant savings for this family and with the rrrp, if you put that together, Mr. Speaker, this is significant savings that families are going to see, individuals are going to see, you know, come summer, Mr. Speaker. That's when our system peaks in terms of cost and generation. We're going to make sure, Mr. Speaker, we are helping these families. There are other programs in place through the Ontario fair hydro plan that are actually going to help families and individuals. On top of the 25% every small business is going to qualify for we're bringing forward an affordability fund that will actually help them drop their bills even further, Mr. Speaker.

>> MPP Tabuns: Again for the Premier, the Premier has not tabled legislation in this House so that Ontario families and businesses know when or if relief is coming. The only thing the Premier has done to deal with exorbitant hydro rates in the province is announced that maybe sometime in the vague future she will burden our kids and grand kids with an additional \$40 billion in debt that they will have to pay off. When will the Premier do something to help people like crista and thousands of families, businesses, that are suffering under the crushing weight of their hydro bill?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again, very pleased to come and talk about what we are going to do for families and individuals like crista. 25% off on average on their bills by their bills, Mr. Speaker, by summer. If they are rrrp customers, between 40 and 50%, Mr. Speaker, by summer. Enhanced oesp, 50%. On reserve first nation individuals, Mr. Speaker, seeing their distribution costs waived at \$85 a month savings for these families, Mr. Speaker. So, Mr. Speaker, that is very clear relief that is coming for families right across the province. But I know the Honourable member used the term vague. The only party that has a vague plan, Mr. Speaker, is the third party. It's a vague plan, Mr. Speaker, with pie in the sky thinking, nothing to do to help families or low income individuals.

MPP Clark to Minister Thibeault Re: Hydro One Ombudsman

>> MPP Steve Clark: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Speaker, I have a very straightforward question for the Premier this morning. Can she tell the House who is the Ombudsman at Hydro One?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know recently that there's been a change within the Ombudsman department and the Ombudsman at Hydro One. That's the one thing that Hydro One has been working very hard at, Mr. Speaker, is working on getting the replacement. The Ombudsman office is still there doing the job that it's supposed to be doing ensuring that if people have concerns that they can bring those concerns forward to the Ombudsman. I had several meetings with the previous Ombudsman from Hydro One, Mr. Speaker. She was talking about how great this company has evolved to, Mr. Speaker, those are her words. Hydro One is going to continue to work with the Ombudsman to make sure that that office plays an important role within this company, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much.

>> MPP Clark: Speaker, back to the Premier, I have got some advice for the Premier and her Minister s. A transparent and open government would never answer a question about who's the Ombudsman by I will get back to you, especially at a company whose rack record of customer service is one horror story after another. The former Hydro One Ombudsman has left over a month ago, yet her name and her picture still are on the government website. There's no media release about her replacement. Who is this government trying to fool? This government shamefully rare wrote the electricity act and stripped independent provincial watchdogs from their power on Hydro One. But section 48.3 of the act requires the board to have an Ombudsman in place. Speaker, when will the Premier and this government, when will they obey their own law?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Very pleased to once again talk about the Ombudsman office at Hydro One. And they have an acting Ombudsman who is doing great work with the company, Mr. Speaker, making sure that the office is still there doing the job it's supposed to do, Mr. Speaker. The former Ombudsman took another job, Mr. Speaker, just like other people do, we wish her well. She did great work while she was working for Hydro One in the last year. In my last meeting with her, Mr. Speaker, do you know what she said? That this company really turned around, now customer focussed, doing a better job of meeting the needs of its customers. That's what happens, Mr. Speaker, when you don't have a plan for Ontario or if you don't have a plan on what to do like electricity.

MPP French to Minister Hunter Re: School Safety

>> MPP Jennifer K. French: Thank you, Speaker. My question is to the Premier. Incidence of violence are rising across the province. Instead of supporting our students and the education system, this government continues to slash funding for classroom supports. Children as young as four or five are stuck on growing wait lists for vital early interventions they need. As a teacher I have seen the disruptions this causes in classrooms. How does the Premier plan to make our school safer when she won't even provide the basic supports that students need to succeed?

>> Minister Mitzie Hunter: Thank you, Speaker. I want to thank the member opposite for the question, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, any incidence of violence in our schools is unacceptable. We have to make sure that our school communities are safe, Mr. Speaker. And it's very important that if an incident occurs that a school board has protocols and policies in place, Mr. Speaker, that can respond appropriately to that incident and that there are reporting mechanisms in place as well. Mr. Speaker, we know that we have to provide the right level of support to ensure that the culture of safety is promoted in our schools, and we're working together with our education partners, including etfo members who are here today, Mr. Speaker. Just last year, we had a half day devoted in professional development on the health and safety of our workers.

>> MPP French: Thank you, Speaker. Teachers and education workers have some of the highest levels of lost time due to injury as a result of workplace violence. When we're talking about their workplace, we're talking about the classroom. So that means that students are at risk too. As an etfo member, I know and appreciate that every student has the right to an education and the right to reach their full potential. And it is this government's obligation to support them to keep them safe and ensure that they can learn. How are we supposed to believe that you are serious about addressing violence in schools when you continue to cut supports for students and our classrooms?

>> Minister Hunter: Well, Mr. Speaker, that's simply not true, Mr. Speaker. We are increasing our supports in education. Just take, for example, Mr. Speaker, we have increased education assistance by 37%, Mr. Speaker, since 2013. 6,300 education assistants. Mr. Speaker, we have provincial health and safety working group, Mr. Speaker, that we are working together with all of our education partners to strengthen the culture of health and safety, Mr. Speaker. I can go on. I want to say not member opposite in their plan for education when they ran in 2014, your plan was to cut supports from health and from education. Your proposal was to bring forward \$600 million in cuts. Mr. Speaker, we will continue on this side of the House to invest in our publicly funded education system.

MPP Kiwala to Premier Wynne Re: U.S. and Ontario Trade Relationship

>> MPP Sophie Kiwala: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Premier and Minister of intergovernmental affairs. We all know that both 2016 and the start of 2017 have seen many global uncertainties emerge both politically and economically. I know that Ontario's economy remains poised to lead Canada in growth and has remained strong through the uncertainty. However, my constituents of Kingston and the Islands and I both have growing concerns over what we're doing as a province to defend our jobs and maintain our access to trade. This is particularly important to me as well as our greater chamber of commerce and other Kingston businesses. We need to ensure that we're maintaining strong relationships with our biggest trading partner, the US. Mr. Speaker, through you to the Premier, what are you specifically doing to reassure Ontario families and businesses that we're aware of the importance of our integrated economy and defending Ontario's interests?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, Ontario and the US have enjoyed and still enjoy a very strong relationship, Mr. Speaker, strong, balanced economic relationship and that relationship is fundamental to our prosperity here in Ontario. The work that we have been doing, Mr. Speaker, to work with our partners in the federal and Québec governments to ensure that Canada was top of mind as the discussion took place in New York, Mr. Speaker, is indicative of how much we value that relationship. And so the Minister of international trade and the Minister of economic development and growth both went to Albany, Mr. Speaker. They talked with many, many leaders there. They worked with our representative in Washington who was on the ground in Albany as well, Mr. Speaker. And we're going to continue to engage with workers and with businesses, Mr. Speaker. As a result we're very pleased at the buy American provisions for dropped for the New York –

>> MPP Kiwala: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Premier. My question is again through you to the Premier. With so many of Ontario's industries and jobs directly impacted by our Neighbours to the south, especially those in my riding of Kingston and the islands, we need to show strength as we now turn our attention to discussions on nafta. This is particularly important to businesses in Kingston as well as all other border communities. We need to maintain momentum as we defend our economy and position Ontario for long-term success. Although buy America is off the table now, there are other issues around the border adjustment tax as well as ensuring Ontario's views are heard at the nafta negotiating table. Mr. Speaker, through you to the Premier, what are you specifically doing to reassure Ontario families and businesses that as we enter discussions on nafta and other key issues, we will be represented?

>> Premier Wynne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Let me just begin by saying that we are in a very uncertain time in terms of the policies south of the border, Mr. Speaker, and I would say beyond. But specifically in relation to our partners in the United States, we are going to continue to engage in conversations, as the member from Kingston and the Islands has said on the border adjustment tax, Mr. Speaker, on nafta. And even though the buy American provisions have been dropped from the New York budget, Mr. Speaker, that does not mean that we don't have to continue to be vigilant because that protectionist rhetoric, Mr. Speaker, is still part of the political discourse. So we are going to continue to work. I am going to, for example, Mr. Speaker, I will be attending the governor's association -- the national governor's association in Rhode Island, Mr. Speaker. I was just in Chicago yesterday meeting with the governor of Illinois. And I will continue to engage with governors around the states.

MPP Scott to Minister Naidoo-Harris Re: Gender Wage Gap

>> MPP Laurie Scott: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today is pay equity day, 30 years since the unanimous passage of Ontario's pay equity act. Unfortunately we haven't been making much progress on pay equity under this Liberal government. On average women in Ontario are paid 30% less for doing the same work as men, a gap that is only 6% smaller than it was at the time of the act's passage. Despite these worrying statistics, this government has ignored this issue until last year when all they did was strike yet another committee. Even now the story has been one of delay and endless consultation rather than action. So my question to the Minister is why has it taken this government almost 14 years to admit that they need to address pay equity in this province.

>> Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And I am pleased to rise today and speak on pay equity day on what I think is a very important issue. First off, I want to point out to the member opposite that this is the side of the House that actually took action on this. Would the Premier's assignment of the ministry of the status of women and the first stand alone Minister responsible for early years in childcare, we are taking actual concrete steps towards closing the gender wage gap. And the number one recommendation from the steering committee on closing the gender wage gap was to invest in childcare. And guess what? We're doing that. We are transforming the way they are delivering childcare. We have committed to creating a hundred thousand new childcare -- licensing childcare spaces over the next five years doubling what we already have. That's not all. I'm very happy to talk about more of the work that we are doing.

>> MPP Scott: Back to the Minister, this government likes to talk a big game on this file. They are living in a bubble of self-delusion. The reality on the ground is the situation of working women remains largely unchanged under their watch. That is simply unacceptable. The government only appointed a dedicated status of women Minister this past January. I guess because it's 2017. As I mentioned, the House yesterday, all the government has done is strike a closed door committee on pay equity to further review

the emotions already made by an expert committee reported on pay equity in 2016. Delay and inaction is the name of this government's game. But Ontario women aren't fooled. So my question to the Minister is, will the government take responsibility for their inaction and admit they have no real plan to help working women in Ontario finally achieve equality in the workplace.

>> Minister Naidoo-Harris: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I find it surprising that the member opposite is actually talking about inaction when I haven't seen any action on that side of the House on this issue. Let me tell you, day in and day out, I sit in this House and listen to the criticism that is lobbed from that side of the House to us. Let me tell you something, we are doers. We are acting on this file. We are solving the issues. I am working closely with my Colleague, the Minister of labour, when it comes to closing the gender wage gap. In fact, Ontario has made great strides when it comes to improving women's economic empowerment. We are leaders in this field. Our commitment to end such --

MPP Mantha to Minister Murray Re: Mercury Contamination

>> MPP Michael Mantha: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of environment and climate change. Under the water, there is a massive Mercury contamination that is the result of decades of discharge from a paper mill that closed a long time ago. Imagine, nearly 400,000 cubic metres of soggy paper towels full of Mercury covering over 50 football fields worth of lake beds. In 2014, the ministry of environment and climate change along with federal partners presented a report outlining options to clean up north harbour. An action plan was supposed to follow. Three years later, the people of Thunder Bay are still waiting for the cleanup plan. Where is it?

>> Minister Glen Murray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. And I appreciate the member raising that very important question. And I would be glad to sit down with him and other members to go through the details of that file. This government has taken unprecedented action on Mercury after 60 years of inaction in contamination. The neglect of Hamilton harbour only finally under this government is that harbour being cleaned up in full partnership with the federal government. Grassy narrows after 60 years of neglect, finally after 60 years of government sitting in this House and doing that. The details on where we're at on Thunder Bay, if you had given me a little heads up about the question, I would gladly get the details. I will sit down with my ministry, Mr. Speaker. I will pull the file and get the details. As you know, there is no lack of action on Mercury on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker.

>> MPP Mantha: Once again to the Minister, the international joint commission identified Thunder Bay's north harbour as an area of concern over 3 decades ago. Over 30 years has passed. And there has been no action to clean up the Mercury. Three years ago, we were promised an action plan. Three years later, we're still waiting. How much longer must the people of Thunder Bay wait for their government to take action?

>> Minister Murray: Mr. Speaker, no government in 60 years has taken greater action on Mercury than this government. No government, including the party opposite -- As I said, including the party opposite, who took no action on Mercury for even five seconds, Mr. Speaker, when they were in government. The record in Ontario on dealing with Mercury over the last half century, Mr. Speaker, quite frankly has been shameful. Mr. Speaker, it was only this government that took on the issues in Hamilton harbour. I will look into the issue. I know there is a great deal of work being done on it,

MPP Hoggarth to Minister Flynn (Naidoo-Harris) Re: Gender Wage Gap

>> MPP Ann Hoggarth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of labour. Today, April 11th, is equal payday in Ontario. To recognize that a pay gap still exists between men and women in the province and across the world. Accurately payday serves as a symbolic reminder of the extra time each year that it takes a woman on average to earn as much as a man. In 2017, it's 2017. This disadvantage towards women sadly should not still exist. The women in my riding of Barrie deserve to see change. The women across our province deserve to see change. In the Minister's mandate letter from the Premier, she asked him to lead the development of a wage gap strategy to close the wage gap between men and women. I'm proud to be a member of a government that is taking action on this issue very seriously helping to lead the way in Canada. Can the Minister please share with this House what he is doing to improve the working lives of women across the province and close the gender wage gap?

>> Minister Kevin Flynn: Thank you, Speaker. I want to thank the member from Barrie for that excellent question. Speaker, last year after holding consultations right across this province we engaged with stakeholders, hundreds of members of the public, men and women came out, Mr. Speaker, to offer advice during town hall submissions, thousands of submissions, the gender wage gap working committee, steering committee, released its final report and final recommendation, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank them for their hard work. Members of the opposition have denigrated that work, Mr. Speaker. I think it's great work. As a result of that, we have established a working group now. Reps from business, labour, human resources experts. They're going to provide practical feedback, Speaker. First group, the first meeting of this group is this Thursday. I look forward to being there. Equal payday really serves as that symbolic reminder of the Barrier that still exists for women. As a government we know it's imperative. The member from Barrie is absolutely right. We need to close the gender wage gap.

>> MPP Hoggarth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Minister for your response. I'm glad to hear that work continues to close the gender wage gap through the development of a wage gap working group. As members of this House know, the gender wage gap still unfairly disadvantages women in my riding of Barrie, across Ontario and every other jurisdiction. When women workers are treated equitably, everyone benefits. The number one recommendation from the gender wage gap steering committee was that government invest in childcare, working women and their families. Mr. Speaker, through you to the Minister, what are we doing to address these recommendations?

>> Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the hardworking member for this very important question and strong advocacy on this issue. The gender wage gap steering committee top recommendation, top one and two recommendations, was an immediate investment in childcare. And in the speech from the throne, the government did just that. We announced a plan to creating a hundred thousand new licensed childcare spaces, historic, it's the right thing to do. But there's more hard work under way in government, including strengthening the application of gender based analysis in government, decisionmaking and committing to increasing the number of women on boards. For example, we're among the first jurisdiction to introduce comply or explain rules, government targets of 40% for women on provincial agencies, business targets of 30% for women on boards and in senior executive positions. Speaker, we must ensure all women from all walks of life find economic security. There's a need for an integrated whole of government approach and we're working on that.

MPP Jones to Minister Hunter Re: York Region District School Board

>> MPP Sylvia Jones: Thank you, Speaker. Speaker, we're learning more and more about the terrible abuse of taxpayers dollars in an unprecedented amount of work at the York region school board. Trustee travel and spending appears to be out of control. Will -- sorry, my apologies. To the Premier, Premier, will you put a moratorium on travel for the York region District School Board trustees.

>> Minister Mitzie Hunter: Mr. Speaker, for many, many months we have been dealing with the situation at the York region District School Board. I have heard from parents, students and the community Mr. Speaker, and that is exactly why in January I appointed a set of reviewers, Herbert and Patrick case, who have been working with the community to hear those concerns. And they have put forward their recommendations, Mr. Speaker. And the reason why, Mr. Speaker, we went this route to an anteindicted review is because we know that our schools must be places that all students feel safe, Mr. Speaker, and that any incidences that affect that well-being of the student is addressed and that we don't shy away from those concerns. Mr. Speaker, that report has been submitted to me. I am reviewing that report. I will have more to say on that.

>> MPP Jones: The Minister acknowledges she's known about it since January. She didn't put a moratorium in place. Why not? Former Liberal candidate promised to regain the public's trust when she became chair of the board last December. This travel spending scandal isn't a good step. It appears trustees use the board as a taxpayer funded travel agency. This travel is unacceptable and unnecessary. Will the government commit to reviewing all travel expenses and calling for the funds to be reimbursed?

>> Minister Hunter: Mr. Speaker, the member opposite knows full well that this issue has been brought forward and that we are taking action to address the concerns that have been raised by parents, by students, and by the community, Mr. Speaker. That is why I have asked for a review of the leadership of the York region District School Board and ensuring that when we hear issues that they are dealt with. Mr. Speaker, I have heard from many members and Colleagues on this side of the House in York region about the concerns that they were hearing from their community. It is the first time in many weeks and many months that the member opposite has raised those concerns. So I'm happy to stand in this House and tell you the actions that we are taking, Speaker, because those actions are meant to ensure that our students get the best education possible.

MPP DiNovo to Minister Sousa Re: Taxing Cultural Hubs

>> MPP Cheri DiNovo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of finance. Late last year, tenants in 401 Richmond in Toronto received an incredible shock. Their property taxes were about to triple threatening the cultural hub, which provides below market rents to arts organizations and creative industries in downtown Toronto. Taxes were tripling because impact does not assess properties like 401 Richmond based on the current use of the property but on the value of the condo tower empac images might stand in its place. Will the Minister enable such a property tax class and save buildings like 401 Richmond?

>> Minister Charles Sousa: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question. I mean, we all value the contributions of not-for-profit and cultural community and art community, especially at the 401 Richmond which for a long time now has been providing a great service to our community and we want that to continue. We also recognize that the city of Toronto has at their disposal the opportunity to provide for some reductions directly. The city has the authority to provide property tax rebates directly to not-for-profit organizations, regardless of whether they are the owner or the Tenant of the property. Bottom line, the approval of the province is not required for them to provide the immediate service and rebate to the area.

>> MPP DiNovo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The highest and best use, which was the term used by empac, of 401 Richmond is not to become another condo tower. By providing a home for artists and creative industries, 401 is already serving its highest and best use. Toronto has specifically asked this Minister for the ability to protect such cultural hubs without having to resort ad hoc property tax workarounds which is what they have done. Will the Minister finally agree to create a new tax class for cultural hubs and heritage buildings like 401 Richmond? Help the city of Toronto.

>> Minister Sousa: Mr. Speaker, we absolutely want to support 401 Richmond. We want to provide and encourage the city, who by the way, does have the ability to give a property tax rebate of up to 40% of the property taxes paid by the eligible heritage buildings. As the taxing authority, it is up to the city to decide whether to provide property tax relief to specific heritage buildings within Toronto. They can do that and we would encourage them to do so. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MPP Anderson to Minister Leal (Thibeault) Re: Greenhouse Vegetable Growers

>> MPP Granville Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of agriculture and rural affairs. Minister, we have been hearing recently from members opposite making false claims. Despite what the opposition may believe, the industry is growing and has the full support of our government. We have committed more than 10.7 million to 440 projects in the greenhouse industry since 2013. And just last month, I had the pleasure of being joined by Minister at links greenhouse to announce the province is investing towards the greenhouse competitiveness and innovation initiative. In addition -- Minister, can you please explain what else our government is doing to support the greenhouse sector and update --

>> Minister Jeff Leal: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, Ontario's greenhouse sector is growing. Today we learned that natural fresh farms is building a new \$400 million distribution centre in wonderful leamington, Ontario. Recently greenhouse produced a hundred million dollar development. This builds on 81,000 jobs already in the sector. The Ontario greenhouse vegetable growers also expect the interest rate to keep growing by 150 acres a year. This is real growth regardless of what others may say. We're partnering with industry. Just last month, elite greenhouses in Bowmanville Ontario, our government announced funding. The climate action plan allocated 150 billion to cover agricultural producers. This is the kind of innovation we're investing in Ontario.

>> MPP Anderson: Thank you to the Minister for that response. It's good to hear that the greenhouse industry is continuing to expand and invest in my riding of Durham as well as the rest of our great province. Just like any other business, there is a wide array of factors that impact industry. Our government works closely with industry stakeholders like the Ontario greenhouse alliance and more. And, one, we have heard from our industry partners and my constituents is over the cost of electricity concerns, concerns over the cost of electricity, Mr. Speaker. The government recently announced our fair hydro plan which will reduce bills by 25% on average this summer. Greenhouse owners are wondering whether the savings will apply to them. Minister, please share with the House how the fair hydro plan will reduce --

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I also want to thank the member for the question and for his hard work. It is a pleasure to be able to speak about our government's fair hydro plan, meerk. Part of the plan involves logo the threshold. Participants in the ITI program can save as much as one-third off their electricity costs. We will be lowering the threshold from 100 megawatts to 500 kilowatts. Greenhouses will be counted among that group, Mr. Speaker. Any greenhouse that uses more than 500

kilowatts in electricity demand will be eligible for that program. As members of this House know, Mr. Speaker, Ontario farms are benefitting from Ontario's fair hydro plan. That means for those greenhouses who don't qualify for the ITI program, they will still be eligible, Mr. Speaker, for that 25% reduction as well.

MPP Coe to Minister Hunter Re: School Closures

>> MPP Lorne Coe: Thank you, Speaker. Speaker, to the Minister of education, on March 28th, 2017, in the legislature, the Minister said, we know that schools play a vital role in the social fabric that ties our great communities together. Our local schools are really the centre of communities. Speaker, if the Minister truly believes that, will she stop closing schools?

>> Minister Mitzie Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On this side of the House we continue to invest in our great education system here in Ontario, Mr. Speaker. In fact, as the Premier said earlier, 810 new schools have been built in this province, Mr. Speaker, including 450 of those in rural communities alone. We have expanded 780 schools significantly, Mr. Speaker. And we will continue to invest in our public education system because we know that schools are the heart of communities, Mr. Speaker and that we are providing the best education possible. At the same time, Mr. Speaker, we have to support our local school boards as they make very difficult decisions. When there is a need to change a school, for whatever the reason is in that local community, Mr. Speaker, we want to ensure that they have the resources, that they can continuously invest in the education of our students so that they can get the best education.

>> MPP Coe: Thank you, Speaker. Back to the Minister of education, there's hundreds of schools being considered for closure by this government. And Liberal members missed their opportunity to stand up for students and families when they voted against an immediate moratorium on school closures. But, Speaker, Speaker, there's still an opportunity for the government to take ownership and say, no more school closures. No more. Speaker, when will this government do the right thing and support our call for an immediate moratorium on school closures.

>> Minister Hunter: Mr. Speaker, you know, it's important that we don't look at just a one-size-fits-all solution because we actually know that local communities are going to be responsible for making those decisions locally, and that's why we support our school boards. In fact, the member opposite in his own party, and I quote, a tough piece of reality for everyone to accept is that student enrolment is on the decline, which is putting everybody in tough situations. We have to stand tall. We have to work with realities in front of us. This is from MPP Lisa Thompson from the Owen Sound. We are investing in our school communities in the member's own riding, 11 new and improved schools in 2003 have been built. So we have to ensure that, as we're making these decisions that they are appropriate for our local communities and that we're providing --

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

>> MPP Teresa Armstrong: They are shocked at the rates they're being charged and desperate for relief. One particularly heartbreaking story was from a young couple with a baby only a few months old. Because

they can't afford their hydro bill, this young mom spends time at her parents House to save time of use charges. That hasn't worked. Can you imagine the frustration and anger young parents are feeling because they are forced between choosing to pay for your government's hydro scheme or providing for their family?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Mr. Speaker, I know that the Minister of energy will want to speak to the specifics of our fair hydro plan. We knew that even with the measures we had taken, the 8%, Mr. Speaker, the reduction that was in place as of January 1st, that we needed to do more. We knew that we needed to do more. Another 17% reduction will mean that that young family will see a 25% reduction on their electricity bill, Mr. Speaker, come the summer. It was exactly those situations where families, people were carrying too much of a burden, Mr. Speaker, too much of a burden for investments and upgrading of a system that is going to last for generations. We were asking those people to pay now, Mr. Speaker and a disproportionate amount. We're spreading those amounts.

>> MPP Armstrong: Speaker, there's no comfort on passing on debt to the next generation. Premier, this young family lives in a semidetached nothing large. They don't have electric heat. They don't live in their own House during the day. Despite drastic measures, their hydro bills are still way too high. Premier, you have failed young families like my constituency. And, worse, you have put their ability to provide for their child at risk. When will this government take responsibility for their failed energy policies that you are forcing young families to pay for? When will we see your new Liberal plan?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's good news for families like what the Honourable member mentioned in relation to ordinary fair hydro plan. Up to 25% or on average 25% will be coming to actually help families just like them, Mr. Speaker. And that's good news for every family right across the province. And on top of that, Mr. Speaker, if this family qualifies, if they're low income, Mr. Speaker, we will make sure that they can get access to the Ontario electricity support program where they will actually see an additional 50%, Mr. Speaker, to help them. That's what we're making sure we're doing, Mr. Speaker, helping every single family, small business and farm in this province through the Ontario fair hydro plan, Mr. Speaker. On one side of the House, one party has no plan. The other party has a plan that's a vague context that doesn't take one cent off anybody's bills, Mr. Speaker. We're doing more than that.