

Provincial Legislature Question Period Transcript for Thursday, March 9, 2017

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Transcript of Provincial Question Period
41st Parliament, 2nd Session
Thursday, March 9, 2017

The following is a partially edited transcript of Question Period.

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MPP Brown to Premier Wynne (Thibeault) (Murray) Re: Cap-and-Trade

>> PC Leader Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier. While the Liberal government is in the mood of acknowledging their mistakes, I have a suggestion they can acknowledge another one. That mistake would be the fact that this government refuses to make the cost of cap and trade visible on natural gas bills. Mr. Speaker, will the Premier announce that mistake is going to be corrected today?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Minister of energy.

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again I'm pleased to rise and acknowledge the work that this government is doing, Mr. Speaker, to address climate change, Mr. Speaker. The action of us doing nothing, Mr. Speaker, would have been catastrophic, Mr. Speaker, and that's why this government that acted, brought forward cap and trade, Mr. Speaker, and our climate change action plan. As the member well knows, the leader of the opposition well knows, Mr. Speaker, a decision to put the cap and trade onto the bills within, you know, natural gas, Mr. Speaker, that was a decision that was made by the Ontario energy board, Mr. Speaker. They did consultation after consultation, Mr. Speaker. They've talked with the industry stakeholders and they said this was a cost of doing business, Mr. Speaker, and that cost, Mr. Speaker, will not be a part of the conversation as they move forward, Mr. Speaker. But this was an O.E.B. Decision, Mr. Speaker.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, back to the Premier. The reason this Liberal government does not want to admit this mistake is they want to cover up and hide the fact this is a cash grab. 1.9 -- Withdraw. The government is trying to hide this cash grab. \$1.9 billion a year to pander to voters, not to help the environment, not to make a real difference. If it was anything more than a cash grab, they'd be open and transparent about it. This is a Premier that promised she would be open and transparent. And this is the opposite of the -- this is the exact opposite. So my question, Mr. Speaker, directly to the Premier, in the spirit of being open and transparent, will you do the right thing? Will you make sure that this cost is very visible and the government no longer hides it?

>> Premier Wynne: Minister of the environment and climate change.

>> Minister Glen Murray: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I really enjoy the leader of the opposition. The man with no plan. He has no plan to reduce electricity by 25%. He won't support us. But he does have a plan, Mr. Speaker, on climate change. And we're so excited about it. He wants to introduce a carbon tax.

[Interjections] A carbon tax that wouldn't put 3 cents on natural gas but would put over 12. A carbon tax that wouldn't put 4 cents on propane. It would put 10 just like B.C. He would not put 4 cents on gasoline but 16 cents on gasoline.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, back to the Premier. Once again the Minister is simply making it up. You know, this is a cash grab --

[Interjections] A cash grab and the government is trying to hide it. You know, Lorrie Goldstein pointed out, once Ontario joins the California and Québec cap and trade market next year, all bets are off. Of the permits were sold last month in terms of the latest auction. Mr. Speaker, how much money will taxpayers be on the hook for because of this disastrous cap and trade?

>> Minister Murray: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, let me finish because he keeps on telling us -- Mr. Speaker, the leader of the opposition keeps on telling us that he likes this B.C. Carbon tax model,

which would add not 5 cents on diesel as our lower cost system would put. Almost 20 cents. And he says he would make Michigan the best leader ever had to use his words -- So to come anywhere near -- and those are numbers at 20 or 30 or 40, 50 under the federal government's cap, Mr. Speaker. That's the minimum amount, Mr. Speaker, that would be required. So if he wasn't using the B.C. Model which costs four times service the Ontario model.

MPP Brown to Premier Wynne (Hunter) Re: School Closures

>> PC Leader Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier. Since the Minister of education ran away from Alison Jones when she was asked this question, maybe the Premier will answer it for us. I'll give the Premier this opportunity. Mr. Speaker, very clearly, how many Ontario schools are under the threat of closure? Will the Premier please answer?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Minister of education.

>> Minister Hunter: Thank you, Speaker. Speaker, we know that when it comes to pupil accommodation reviews and school consolidations, those are very tough decisions that school boards have to make. And that's in fact why we've put a process in place where they need to consult with municipalities, consult with their local communities and what's important to know that these are locally elected officials in their communities that are making these very difficult decisions. It's important that we get that information from those local communities, and that's exactly what we have done, Speaker, so that when we're talking about school consolidations we know that these are decisions that are tough for local decision makers, Mr. Speaker, and that we're getting that information straight from them. And that's exactly what we're doing, Mr. Speaker.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, my question again will be to the rr. On Tuesday the Minister said it's not about the number of schools. She wouldn't give an arbitrary number. That's great because nobody wanted an arbitrary number. They wanted a real number. So I'll try again. Mr. Speaker, how many schools are under the threat of closure? Is it as high as the 600 schools the Minister previously identified? When will we get a real answer from this government? Will the Premier please answer?

>> Minister Mitzi Hunter: So, Mr. Speaker, let's look at the facts. We have a pupil accommodation reviews that are happening across the province. There are 43 of those that are happening, Mr. Speaker. We know these are very difficult conversations for locally elected school boards to have with their communities.

Mr. Speaker, there are 300 schools that are involved in those very difficult -- In the 2016/17 school year, through this very difficult process, we have seen boards decide to close 19 schools, Mr. Speaker. So it's important that, you know, we respect role of the locally elected school boards as they are leading this process in their communities together with their municipalities. And with communities, Mr. Speaker. And we know that these are very tough decisions for our boards.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier. Our lady of peace in Vuen, maple, 97 pores full. Vaughan. English, French stream. Very popular school. This government's priorities will close its doors. It's going to close. The school will close in June. The Liberals have made up their mind with our lady of peace and signalled there's going to be a closure. There's an opportunity to put a moratorium. I was disappointed that the Liberal members voted against our moratorium yesterday. But there's an opportunity for the government to take ownership of this and say no more school closures and we will support the moratorium. So my question to the Premier is can she do the right thing and stop closing schools left, right and centre across the province of Ontario? Our students deserve better. Our students deserve better.

>> Minister Hunter: Speaker. You know, Mr. Speaker, as the leader of the opposition talks about what is happening in local communities, and I want to say that we have actually invested \$16 billion in school capital infrastructure. Building 810 new schools, Mr. Speaker, and 780 expansions or changing the configuration of a school. And, Mr. Speaker, we're doing that to ensure our students in Ontario receive the best education possible. And off that number 450 new schools are in rural

communities, Mr. Speaker. \$1.1 billion in capital that we're investing. So as we talk about what is happening in rural communities, it's important that we look at the fact that, yes, there are difficult conversations happening in terms of reviewing the accommodation needs in schools, and there's also -- Conversations happening about the investments that we're making in those local communities.

MPP Singh to Premier Wynne (Thibeault) Re: Hydro 25% Reduction Plan

>> MPP Jagmeet Singh: Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, my question is to the Premier. Yesterday was international women's day, and because of inequality we all know women are disproportionately affected by skyrocketing hydro bills. Women like Val Len Tina who lives in Brantford. She says what keeps her up at night is not knowing when hydro bills are going to increase again. The Premier's plan is nothing more than a band-aid. It offers no comfort to women like Valentina who can't save for their kids' future because they don't know when hydro bills are going to go up again. When will this Premier understand that her plan is nothing more than a plan to help bankers instead of helping the everyday people of Ontario. People like Valentina W need a permanent solution that will actually keep hydro bills down.

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. And I know that the Minister of energy is just raring to answer the supplementary question. But I want to just say to the member opposite that it was international women's day yesterday. I hope that he had an opportunity to see the announcement that we made in the morning about levelling the playing field for women in sports. It is extremely important as we know. 94% of women executives say that they competed in sport and it made a difference to them in their career trajectory, Mr. Speaker. So the announcement we made will mean that provincial sport organizations will be required to have equity policies in place. We're putting money into training women coaches, Mr. Speaker. A very, very important initiative in terms of. Levelling the playing field for women in sport in Ontario.

>> MPP Singh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sharon Sinha who lives in Sault Ste. Marie. The Premier and this government have heard Sharon's story before. She lives in only one room of her apartment because she can't afford the peak time of use fees to keep the heat on during the day in her apartment. Since the Premier claims her plan is designed to help women like Sharon, why didn't she put an end to the unfair mandatory time-of-use fees that leave Sharon suffering at home in the cold?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our plan, Mr. Speaker, will reduce those bills, Mr. Speaker, by 25%, and specifically in Sault Ste. Marie and area, Mr. Speaker. If those folks live on the outskirts. If they're a Hydro One customer, Mr. Speaker. If they're and Algoma power customer, Mr. Speaker, they're going to see their bills reduced between 40 and 50%, Mr. Speaker.

[Applause] But it's not only Mr. Speaker -- it's not only, Mr. Speaker, Sault Ste. Marie that's going to see the benefits. It's right across the province. Yesterday, Mr. Speaker, when I was in Hamilton, the mayor of Hamilton Fred Eynon was in the news yesterday talking about our hydro plan. You know what he said, Mr. Speaker? Our government's plan to reduce our bills by 25% is a very positive step for their city's hydro customers. He credited our Government, Mr. Speaker, with listening to Ontarians and implementing what he calls dramatic reductions, Mr. Speaker. While the party on that side, they put together a proposal -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know their proposal is nothing more Mr. Speaker -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's nothing more than wishful thinking, Mr. Speaker, on that side. We're putting this place a plan that offers significant relief, Mr. Speaker, for all Ontarians.

>> MPP Singh: Mr. Speaker, women across this province are suffering under the weight of skyrocketing hydro bills. Women like Valentina, Sharon and Mary Mullic, a small business owner in Sarnia. Had to leave behind her family in Brampton, her husband and children, because of the cost of high hydro bills meant that she had to lay off many of her workers. Now she lives in Sarnia, and that means that she only gets to see her family on weekends if she's lucky. These women and their

families expected more from this Premier and this government than the desperate band-aid Phoenix coyotes that they revealed last week. When will the Premier stop putting bankers and well-connected insiders ahead of everyday people and the women of this province and put forward a plan that actually puts them and their families first?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. All people within this province, Mr. Speaker, are going to see that 25% reduction. Small businesses as well, Mr. Speaker, are going to see that savings. And that's how wise, Mr. Speaker, we acted because we heard, Mr. Speaker, we heard from Ontarians that they wanted more relief. We brought forward the 8% reduction, Mr. Speaker, but we heard that people needed more so we acted and we brought forward a 25% reduction, Mr. Speaker. Their plan, Mr. Speaker, does nothing, does absolutely nothing, Mr. Speaker, to help the women that he mentioned. Our plan, Mr. Speaker, will. It helps them in small businesses. It reduces their bills, Mr. Speaker, by 25%. It reduces their home bills, Mr. Speaker, by 25%. What they're talking about, Mr. Speaker, is not even saving a single cent. And their plan doesn't even mention low-income and vulnerable people until the last page, Mr. Speaker, and they're saying wait. We're saying we're going to act by summer, Mr. Speaker.

MPP P. Miller to Premier Wynne (Hunter) Re: School Closures

>> MPP Paul Miller: Thank you, Speaker. My question's to the Premier. Yesterday freedom of information documents revealed that the Premier knows that she's closing schools at full capacity based on a failed Mike Harris funding formula. Since 2011, the Liberal government closed more than 277 schools. Can the Premier please tell the mums out there and the dads which of these 277 schools were operate at full capacity when they were closed?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Minister of education.

>> Minister Mitzie Hunter: Thank you, Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for this question because the very reason why schools are doing accommodation reviews is so that they can review and look at those facts, including the utilization of schools, Mr. Speaker, the utilize -- the definition of boundaries for schools and to ensure that they are making the best possible decision on behalf of students in their local communities, Mr. Speaker, . That's exactly the work that the school boards are doing in these reviews, and that's why we have to ensure that they have an opportunity to have this very difficult but meaningful conversation with their local communities, receiving input from municipalities, working together with their local boards. We've sent a letter just this week, Minister of infrastructure and I, asking them to continue those conversations because they are important to the decisions of the future

>> MPP Miller: Thank you, Speaker. Speaker, let me narrow this down a bit. There have been more than 20 schools closed by the Liberal government in my community of Hamilton since 2011. Some of them, cresswood, Eastwood park, King George and can you imagine sir John a. Macdonald? Linden park. Can the Premier tell hamiltonians which of these schools were closed while operating at full capacity?

>> Minister Hunter: Mr. Speaker, I actually just said in response to that question that came forward from the opposition that we've actually invested in 810 new schools in this province and 780 expansions or renovations, Mr. Speaker. More than \$16 billion in capital infrastructure invested in our schools. We're continuing to make these investments, Mr. Speaker. Just a few months ago I was in Hamilton, and it's a great example of two school boards coming together to make a best decision on behalf of their schools. The catholic school board and French public school board, Mr. Speaker, to build one new school that will in fact have a community use and it will also serve the needs of high school students. In Hamilton, Mr. Speaker. We are making these investments in local communities because they are in the best interests of our students.

>> MPP Miller: Thank you, Speaker. Speaker, schools play an important role in Hamilton and everywhere else in the province. They support neighbourhoods. They bring communities together.

Parents in Hamilton are absolutely furious to learn that the Premier has been closing schools that are full. They are furious that the government modernization plan runs contrary to the state community hub plan and they know it. No one's fooling anyone here. Here's a couple more for you. Prince Philipp, roxboro park, St. Thomas. I could go on and on. Account Premier tell parents in my community and across this province how many of these schools were operating at full capacity when they were closed? We want some details.

>> Minister Hunter: Thank you, Speaker. Speaker, schools play an important role in Hamilton and everywhere else in the province. They support neighbourhoods. They bring communities together. Parents in Hamilton are absolutely furious to learn that the Premier has been closing schools that are full. They are furious that the government modernization plan runs contrary to the state community hub plan and they know it. No one's fooling anyone here. Here's a couple more for you. Prince Philipp, roxboro park, St. Thomas. I could go on and on. Account Premier tell parents in my community and across this province how many of these schools were operating at full capacity when they were closed? We want some details. Mr. Speaker, it's important that we look at what is -- what are the facts, Mr. Speaker? What is happening? Because I just mentioned to the member that 810 new schools were built, Mr. Speaker. And in addition 780 extensions and renovations, Mr. Speaker. When a school board is -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And when accommodation review is happening, it's really meant for the school board to gather that feedback in terms of the utilization, the condition of the building, Mr. Speaker, and in fact maybe a conversation like what happened in Peterborough, where we had two smaller schools that came together Mr. Speaker -- Mr. Speaker, like the example in Peterborough where Minister lille and I had an opportunity to announce \$13 million to build a brand-new elementary school with new facilities, Mr. Speaker, that will offer the best education --

MPP Smith to Minister Thibeault Re: Hydro 25% Reduction Plan

>> MPP Todd Smith: Thank you, Speaker. Good morning. My question this morning is for the Minister of energy. Last week I asked you, Minister, about the electricity increases. 15% last year alone in 20 health care hospitals. Your announcement last week won't actually roll back any of that. It barely addresses the increased cost of electricity going forward this year. Instead -- Decided with his big Liberal donors in his energy scheme last year, instead of siding with the doctors and staff and patients at 20 health care hospitals. So my question is this. How many billions of dollars in interest is the scheme that you announced last week going to cost electricity customers in the future?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think it's, you know, very obvious, Mr. Speaker, that they don't have a plan, Mr. Speaker, so they're making it up as they go. And I know last week the Honourable member put out a tweet that he had to correct, Mr. Speaker, on air when he said, you know, Mr. Speaker, what we were saying in that is inaccurate, Mr. Speaker, just like the question, Mr. Speaker, inaccurate information in it, Mr. Speaker. We're making sure, Mr. Speaker, that all people in this province see a 25% reduction. Hospitals, Mr. Speaker, because of the structural changes that we are making to the system, Mr. Speaker, they will see a reduction, Mr. Speaker, between 2 and 4%. That's significant, Mr. Speaker. But hospitals also qualify for many of our programs, Mr. Speaker. The save on energy program for example. My hospital in greater Sudbury Mr. Speaker -- \$400,000 a year by investing in the save on energy program, Mr. Speaker, and they put that back into health care, Mr. Speaker.

>> MPP Smith: Speaker, the price of electricity and -- at quinte health care hospital has gone up 34% since 2012. That is accurate. Speaker, the Minister had plenty of taxpayer money to throw around last week to bail out his government's bad decisions that they've made on the energy file. And let's call it what it is, a bailout is a bailout and this bailout is trying to save the Liberal hide in the next election. He didn't have a dime, however, last week for the patients and the doctors and the staff at quinte health care hospital. So I ask the Minister again, Mr. Speaker. How many billions of dollars in interest is his scheme that he announced last week going to cost electricity customers in the future of Ontario? How many billions of dollars?

>> Minister Thibeault: Mr. Speaker, we're saving Ontario ratepayers 25%, Mr. Speaker, on all of their

bills. The only person that doesn't understand about the billions that they're going to cost is again that party, Mr. Speaker. And they talk about ripping up contracts, Mr. Speaker. I not Honourable member recognizes that they can't do that because it will cost them billions, Mr. Speaker, because they don't have a plan. We have a plan, Mr. Speaker. We're bringing it forward, Mr. Speaker. We're helping businesses. We're helping municipalities. We're helping ratepayers, Mr. Speaker. We're making sure everyone in this province will see a reduction, Mr. Speaker, on their electricity bills. I know they don't have a plan, Mr. Speaker. The only thing that they want to do, Mr. Speaker, is put a carbon tax on and then tax everything when they bring back coal, Mr. Speaker.

MPP Campbell to Minister Thibeault Re: Hydro and Forestry

>> MPP Sarah Campbell: Thank you, Speaker. My question is to the Premier. The nickel lake lumber sawmill employs 25 people near fort Frances. It has seen its hydro bills jump 50% in the last few years. Mr. Kendall Lundy, the owner, tells me he has just about had it and that everyone's jobs are in jeopardy. His competitors in Minnesota have hydro bills that are half of what he pays. What's worse is that he is subsidizing cheap hydro exports to these competitors, costing ratepayers like Mr. Lundy billions of dollars each year. Why does the Premier's hydro man have no solution at all to rein in these wasteful hydro exports and reduce overall hydro costs?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course I'm pleased to rise and talk about the importance of our forestry sector and of course the importance of energy is to our forestry sector. And I know the Minister of natural resource and forestry will want to comment as well, Mr. Speaker. But for us in northern Ontario, we recognize that our large industry play a very important role, not only in our northern economy but in the economy of Ontario and of Canada, Mr. Speaker. And that's why, thanks to this government, Mr. Speaker, for northern Ontario, we brought forward the near program Mr. Speaker, . The northern industrial electricity rebate program, Mr. Speaker, which is helping every forestry company within northern Ontario, within all of northern Ontario, Mr. Speaker. And that's why we're so pleased to see that our forestry companies and their energy costs, Mr. Speaker, are one of the lowest, not only in Ontario, Mr. Speaker, not only in Canada, Mr. Speaker, but in all of North America, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know the company in Thunder Bay resolute, they're talking about how their energy costs, Mr. Speaker, are some of the lowest in their entire fleet in North America, Mr. Speaker. We're going to continue to work with our forestry sector our mining sector to ensure we remain as competitive as possible with the lowest possible price. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

>> MPP Campbell: Speaker, here's the thing. The Premier's hydro plan does next to nothing to help medium size businesses like nickel lake lumber. The smau mill is too big to receive the 8% hydro rebate and as far as we can tell it also won't receive the 17% in bill reductions that the Premier has promised for small businesses. But it is not big enough to have the capacity to participate in the expanded industrial conservation initiative. The NDP's plan would reduce hydro bills for all ratepayers, including medium size businesses like the nickel lake lumber sawmill. Why does the Premier's plan exclude medium size businesses from the 25% in savings she has promised?

>> Minister Thibeault: I encourage the third party to read our plan because medium size businesses will qualify under our new expansion of the I.C.I. Program, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we've lowered the threshold to 500 kilowatts, Mr. Speaker. We would encourage them to look at the plan. When talking about forestry sector, Mr. Speaker, I've got a letter here from tembec. Very, very prominent forestry company, Mr. Speaker. Let me quote. Tembec is able to effectively manage our electricity system costs in Ontario through our participation in a variety of programs. As a result electricity costs at the tembec news print operations are comparable to our operations in other jurisdictions and with other competitors, Mr. Speaker. We recognize the importance, Mr. Speaker, of the forestry sector, of the mining sector, of our resource sector, Mr. Speaker. And that's what we're doing, Mr. Speaker, is bringing rates like with programs like the near program that is helping all of our industry, Mr. Speaker.

MPP Qaadri to Minister Thibeault Re: Hydro 25% Reduction Plan

>> MPP Shafiq Qaadri: Voice of Translator: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is also to the Minister of energy.

[End of Translation], Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the Minister of energy along with my Colleague the MPP For Etobicoke-lakeshore, Minister Albanese and Minister Sousa, with the multicultural press of Ontario. That announcement of course the government's energy plan generated an extraordinary amount of excitement. 25% of reduction for hydro bills for all Ontarians, otherwise known as Ontario's fair hydro plan. Speaker, as you can imagine such significant savings for House hold costs. The program initiative not just for today but for a sustainable program going forward. In my own district, the exceptional riding of Etobicoke north, we are blessed by a huge number of condominiums. So Minister, I ask you, how will my condo residents benefit from the government's announcement of its 25% reduction in hydro costs?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Voice of Translator: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[End of Translation] I want to thank the member for Etobicoke North for that important question and also for all of his work on this file. He and I were together the other night talking O constituents about this. So ensuring that all Ontario House holds receive this benefit is important to me and this government, Mr. Speaker. So I think it's important that we clarify. If you pay an electricity bill for a resident you will receive this benefit, Mr. Speaker, regardless of whether you live in a House, a condo or an apartment. In fact if your condo has facility costs that are shared among the residents, these shared electricity costs will be also receiving this reduction. This is an essential part of our plan to increase the fairness of our electricity system in Ontario, Mr. Speaker. That's why not only, Mr. Speaker, will you see your bill reduced, but costs will be held to inflation for at least the next four years, Mr. Speaker. We are proud of Ontario's fair hydro plan and the significant lasting relief it will provide.

>> MPP Qaadri: I begin, Speaker, by thanking the Minister not only for this program and your stewardship resulting in the 25% reduction of Ontario's hydro costs, but also physically crisscrossing Ontario to explain the details to Ontarians. Speaker, as you'll appreciate after decade of neglect of our electricity system, yes, by parties of all stripes, it is heartening now to see that government's taking steps to secure an energy future that is clean, reliable and most importantly affordable to all. Speaker, I know that the 25% reduction in hydro bills applies to everyone more of the 4 million House holds in Ontario and especially welcome in my area of Etobicoke north. The Minister 's previously mentioned many small businesses as well as farms will benefit from that reduction as well. And I understand there are even more group that is will qualify. So my question is this, Speaker -- will the Minister please share with the House. How this announcement will benefit other House holds and other sectors of our economy?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And again I want to thank the member for this question, and the opportunity to clarify this important point, Mr. Speaker. The 25% reduction through the fair hydro plan will not only apply to House holds but to many other small ratepayers as well, Mr. Speaker. This includes hundreds of thousands of small businesses, the vast majority of farms, Mr. Speaker, that I know the Minister of agriculture works with day in and day out with, Mr. Speaker. Small offices of all kind including not profits, Mr. Speaker, and charities, retirement homes, long-term care homes, housing co-ops, community agencies. Those on retail contracts are with sub meters, Mr. Speaker. More and more, Mr. Speaker, will qualify for this rebate. The simplest thing to remember is, Mr. Speaker, your bill includes the time-of-use prices, Mr. Speaker, you will be receiving the full benefits of this plan. Mr. Speaker, this I going to mean major savings for these cross-sections of Ontario, Mr. Speaker, and we're happy to be implementing the plan.

MPP Oosterhoff to Minister Matthews Re: Digital Government

>> MPP Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Deputy Premier. Deputy Premier, in June of 2016, your government opened up applications for a chief digital officer, a government executive whose job it would be to make life easier for people through easy-to-use online services and programs. However, it seems that this government doesn't want to actually make life easier for people, Speaker, because eight months have gone by and this chief digital officer is nowhere to be seen. Once again, the Liberals talk the talk but won't walk the walk. When will the Deputy Premier, S Minister responsible for digital government, get back to work and find a chief digital officer so Ontarians can access the services and programs they deserve?

>> Minister Deb Matthews: Digital government. Thank you, Speaker. I want to say thank you to the member. This is the first question I have ever received as Minister responsible for digital government. So thank you. Digital government is all about providing services for the public that are faster, that are easier, that are simpler and that cost government less money. We are absolutely committed to moving forward on our digital strategy. Hiring a chief digital officer is very much part of that, and I will ask the member to be a little bit patient because, Speaker, this is an important job that we are hoping to fill very soon.

>> MPP Oosterhoff: Speaker, my question is back to the Deputy Premier. Ontario have seen the result of this Liberal government's bungling and digitization before. This government simply can't be trusted to get the job done. Let's look at the facts. Ehealth was an \$billion scandal, and the rollout of the social management system or stans was a disaster. Cpin, the child protection information network, a cumbersome system that won't even have a searchable database. Consulting costs alone on spin have cost tens of millions. What will the Deputy Premier do to ensure this government delivers a digital system that is actually a service to the people of Ontario instead of another expensive boondoggle?

>> Minister Matthews: Mr. Speaker, there are many initiatives that are already under way when it comes to digital government. And I have to say I'm enormously proud of our digital government team in Ontario, Speaker. They're doing excellent work. One example of this and one that I hope the members opposite, all the members in this House have actually taken advantage of, is the new osap calculator. This is a tool, Speaker that, allows people, students, elementary school students, their parents, high school students, actually understand how generous and transparent our student assistance program now is, Speaker. What it means is that hundreds of thousands of students in this province will have access to the education because they Huse the ability. They've earned the right. They've been admitted but free tuition for over 200,000 Ontario students. And more supports, Speaker, more generous support. So having that calculator available so people know up front how much they can expect is a big, big step forward.

MPP Forster to Minister Thibeault Re: Hydro 25% Reduction Plan

>> MPP Cindy Forster: Thank you, Speaker. My question's to the Premier. My office has been flooded with complaints around the skyrocketing hydro bills from people like Lorna lanceman. Lorna has lived in St. Catharines -- the whip may know her -- for 30 years and says she's never in her life seen a hydro bill so high. Her bills have tripled over the last few years. Her last hydro bill was \$600. Lorna is in her early 50s. She has a decent job but her husband is on a disability pension, and they find themselves having to choose between whether they can put some money away for retirement or whether they're going to pay that hydro bill. Why is the Premier choosing to put \$40 billion in the pocket of bankers and ignore the very people like Lorna Lampman, who need our help most?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. It is important, Mr. Speaker, that we acted to ensure that we're helping people like the Honourable member has mentioned, Mr. Speaker, and that's why the fair hydro plan, the single largest electricity rate reduction in Ontario's history, will be providing a 25% reduction for that family, Mr. Speaker, and for all families across the province. While I don't know the specifics of that individual family, Mr. Speaker, the Ontario electricity support program is there to help those type of families, Mr. Speaker, and we also increased, increased the oesp program, Mr. Speaker, by 50% and increased it so more families and more individuals will qualify, Mr. Speaker. So the oesp program is there to help. And on top of that,

Mr. Speaker, on top of that we created the affordability fund. The affordability fund will actually help them through their utility, Mr. Speaker, to actually make their home more energy conservation, Mr. Speaker.

>> MPP Forster: Thank you, Speaker. I'm not sure that the Minister understands because Lorna doesn't want this pushed onto her children and her grandchildren. And it's not just people like Lorna that are worried about retirement that I'm hearing from that are struggling to pay their bills. I also recently heard from a young student in my riding who suffer from the a disability. She expects to graduate soon. She worries about her student loans and the interest that she's going to have to pay when she's finished her studies. But she, too, is finding that choice. Do I put some money away for my student loan payments? Or do I pay the ever rising hydro bills? Speaker, why is the Premier continuing to support wealthy bankers instead of the very students and people trying to retire in this province?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to say that that individual student, Mr. Speaker, will also qualify for the 25% reduction. But on top of that, Mr. Speaker, by the great work by Deputy Premier and her ministry, all students moving forward, Mr. Speaker, get free tuition as well, Mr. Speaker, and that's fantastic. So not only are we providing free tuition, Mr. Speaker, but we're working with folks right across the province to help them reduce their bills, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday as I mentioned, Mr. Speaker, I was in Hamilton. You know, Mr. Speaker, the mayor isn't the only hamiltonian that is excited about our plan. Elektra, Mr. Speaker, they're talking about how the homeowners in Hamilton will see more than 25% savings, Mr. Speaker. The folks in Hamilton will see between 27 and 28% reductions, Mr. Speaker, because our fair hydro plan, Mr. Speaker. That's a significant savings for families and small businesses. And that's something, Mr. Speaker, I do hope that the opposition will support. Because it is helping all families right across the province.

MPP Rinaldi to Minister Chiarelli Re: Rural Natural Gas Access

>> MPP Lou Rinaldi: Thank you, Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my question's to the Minister of infrastructure. Minister, folks in rural Ontario are invested hardworking people who pay their taxes, put food on their table, put their kids through school and take care of elderly relatives. And like all other Ontarians, they are looking to get ahead and want our government to make life easier and more affordable. I was excited that the Minister s recently announced new natural gas grant which would help communities like the ones in my riding switch to more cost-effective fuel sources, spending less money on heating their homes means more money available for their kids' education, for essential home improvements or tucking away in an rrsp. Speaker, through you to the Minister. Could he please explain how -- natural gas grant programs will benefit my constituents? Newly announced.

>> Minister Bob Chiarelli: Thank you for the question. At Roma I was proud to announce that we are investing \$100 million to expand natural gas to underserved rural communities. Speaker, this will go a long way towards making energy consumption more affordable for rural Ontarians and it will leverage hundreds of millions of dollars of investments for natural gas distribution companies. Rural Ontario will have more access, affordability and choice and greater opportunities for economic development. Access to natural gas infrastructure in rural, remote and indigenous communities is a priority for this government. Natural gas expansion could save consumers up to \$1,500 in heating costs every year. Speaker, the intake for this program will begin this spring.

>> MPP Rinaldi: Thank you, Speaker. I thank the Minister for his response. Minister, saving \$1,500 a year will be a huge win for farmers and rural families, providing excess affordability and choice to rural energy consumers, something our government is focusing on. It will support economic very much in our rural communities and that is something of which I'm very proud of. This grant program's fully compatible with the energy board decision of natural gas expansion in November and most importantly will provide meaningful support for our communities. Speaker, through you to the Minister, could he please explain how this natural gas grant program compares to the plans put forward by the opposition?

>> Minister Chiarelli: That's certainly an excellent question. The fact of the matter is, these are the N. -- Neither the NDP Nor the foreys, Mr. Speaker, ever proposed any policy to expand natural gas access in rural communities. We are investing \$100 million in this program in direct response to feedback we received from rural stakeholders such as the ofa and greenhouse operators. Our investment will leverage hundreds of millions of dollars of private investments, Speaker. Speaker, we're hearing absolutely nothing from the P.C.S on how they will expand natural gas to rural communities. The leader of the opposition has yet to announce a plan or even a single idea that will save rural energy consumers so much as one penny. If the leader of the opposition is serious about supporting natural gas expansion, then he should get behind our unprecedented initiative and support what we're doing.

MPP Coe to Minister Matthews Re: Skilled Workforce

>> MPP Lorne Coe: Thank you, Speaker. My question is for the Minister of advanced education and skills development. Speaker, the Minister of advanced education has been in a role for nearly a year, and during that time the highly skilled work force expert panel report was also released. Speaker, why is this government ignoring its own panel's recommendation? And when will this government address the serious skills mismatch that exists in this province?

>> Minister Deb Matthews: thank you to the member opposite for the question. The highly skilled work force report that was prepared by a group LED by former member Sean Conway was presented to the Premier and we are committed to actually moving on every one of the recommendations in that report, Speaker. There is a lot of work under way. A lot of discussions. In fact just yesterday I had a very good meeting with the Minister of education and the Canadian manufacturers and exporters, Speaker, where we talked about how they could participate in that highly skilled work force report, particularly around exp Eriential education, Speaker. One of the most important I think recommendations in that report is that every student, by the time they graduate from high school, and again when they graduate from university or College, have had one meaningful exp Eriential learning opportunity. That's a big, big shift, Speaker. And we're committed to achieving that.

>> MPP Coe: Thank you, Speaker. Back to the Minister of advanced education. Speaker the auditor general confirmed that youth unemployment rate here in Ontario is hovering at 15%, well above the national average which is clearly unacceptable. So my question is simple. Does the Minister believe her government's record of high youth unemployment is acceptable? Yes or no?

>> Minister Matthews: Speaker, the answer clearly is no. That's why we're working very, very hard to focus our work on those groups of people who are facing exceptional challenges, Speaker. And we are listening very carefully to what the auditor general had to say about making sure that we're actually getting results for the money that we are investing in the programs that support young people as they get into the work force, Speaker. I just do want to remind the member opposite, though, that his party, everybody over there in the last election ran on the platform of firing 100,000 people. Those are the very people that support young people who are facing challenges to get through the education, Speaker -- And into the work force. Those cuts would have been disastrous, Speaker. And we are committed to making sure every young person in this province achieves their full potential.

MPP Armstrong to Minister Hoskins Re: Long-Term Care Home Safety

>> MPP Teresa Armstrong: My question's for the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care. Families contact my office and tell me how worried they are for their loved ones in long-term care. Over the past six months, 86-year-old James acre had been brutally beaten and sexually assaulted in his long-term care home. The home had been cited for not protecting residents and staff from assault. Ant same home has received a written warning for not reporting and investigating abuse. Minister, your record on long-term care is truly disappointing. How many times does James acre have to be

assaulted before you take action?

>> Minister Eric Hoskins: Mr. Speaker, whether it's resident abuse or neglect or violence against staff in a long-term care home, it's never acceptable. In fact it's never acceptable in any of our health care environments across this province. Mr. Speaker, regrettably and despite our best efforts, this violence or neglect or abuse unfortunately and regrettably from time to time does take place. That's why we've created one of the most rigorous inspection regimes certainly in Canada and in north America, Mr. Speaker, using the best possible evidence, and I'm proud to say that, for this home as for every single home in this province for the past two years, entering the third year now, we have inspected 100% of our homes. When we do regrettably find that more work or protection needs to take place, we take it extremely seriously and I'm happy to follow up in the supplementary.

>> MPP Armstrong: Minister, James acre's family is here today. Tammy corbino came because you have refused to meet with her. The Canadian association of retired persons have also lobbied you to meet with the acre family and you have refused. The acre family knows that Ontario's long-term care system is so cash strapped that resident-on-resident violence is not being fixed. One person who can change that is refusing to meet with them. Minister, will you commit today to fix the problems in long-term care homes and to meet face-to-face with the acre family?

>> Minister Hoskins: Mr. Speaker, as I said, this is an incredibly serious issue that the member opposite has raised. It's regrettable that we should have to have this discussion at all but it's a reality that we're facing. So that's why we're taking a number of measures. In fact we've already spoken to and I look forward to introducing shortly in the legislature additional measures that we believe are important to take to not only reduce and eventually eliminate such violence, whether it be resident on resident or whether it be resident-to-staff, that additional measures to ensure those long-term care homes that need to do more, Mr. Speaker, are not only complying with the act but that we have the tool in place to ensure that that compliance doesn't indeed happen and take place. But we take this issue -Serious, Mr. Speaker, and of course if the family is here, I'm not sure if they're in the gallery. So I do see that they are here. I'd be happy to have some words to them and speak to them after question period, Mr. Speaker .

MPP Martins to Minister Del Duca Re: Union-Pearson Express

>> MPP Cristina Martins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of transportation. When our government announced that we were moving forward with the union Pearson express, a dedicated air link between the downtown core and Pearson international airport, it was clear that this was exactly the type of investment that Toronto needed, both for the city's economy and for the environment. After going into service, it was also clear that riders love the U.P. Express but it was clear that the initial ridership levels weren't meeting our expectations. I know that our government was very clear something need today change and that is why we took action to reduce the fares. Actually, Mr. Speaker, that many of my constituents in Davenport had called for. I have heard that this course of action has had a huge impact on the uptake of the service. Mr. Speaker, can the Minister please provide an update. On the current status of the union Pearson express ridership?

>> Minister Steven Del Duca: Thank you very much, Speaker. First I want to begin by thanking the member from Davenport not only for the question but on this particular issue and so many that affect the west end of the gtha, Speaker, for her advocacy and for being such a strong championment she's absolutely correct, Speaker. Response to the up express ranked very high on customer satisfaction but not high enough on ridership. Today, Speaker, we are celebrating a very important milestone. One year ago today, our lower fares for the union Pearson express came into effect. After lowering the fares, we quickly started to see the ridership grow. I am very pleased to say today, Speaker, that the up express ridership has quadrupled with daily ridership now averaging upwards of 9,000 riders per day, Speaker. That's great news for people visiting our city and our region and our province, Speaker. It's also great news for commuters in the west end of the gtha, including those. Who live in the wonderful riding of Davenport. Thank you very much, Speaker.

>> MPP Martins: Thank you, Speaker. Thank you to the Minister for his answer. I couldn't agree

more. Davenport is a wonderful riding. While certain members of this House jump at the opportunity to criticize our government's investment, it is very clear that it's paying off. Ridership numbers show a huge increase from what we saw previously and I have no doubt that they will continue to grow. And I know that some days it's been standing room only on the Pearson U.P. Express. I know that since the fares have been reduced, I've heard from many in my community that the U.P. Express is now a real affordable option for them. Some members in my community who work at the airport use it daily, while so many others now use it as a way to move between the downtown core and Davenport. This shows the versatility of the service. Mr. Speaker, will the Minister please provide an update. Who actually is using the up express? Specifically how many riders are nonairport commuters like the people in my community?

>> Minister Del Duca: Speaker, I thank the member from Davenport for the follow-up question. She is 100% right, Speaker. One thing I didn't mention in my initial answer. In 2016 the union Pearson express moved over 2.3 million people between the airport and the city of Toronto, Speaker, in downtown Toronto. Also interestingly for us to note, Speaker, one year after lowering those fares, one in every four passengers, roughly 25% on the up express is a regular commuter, Speaker, taking advantage of the fact that union Pearson express fares match existing g.o.fares on that same corridor, Speaker. I couldn't help but notice when the member from Davenport was asking her follow-up question, Speaker, members of the NDP Caucus were making a lot of noise, Speaker. I don't know why members in that caucus wouldn't be supportive of more affordable fares, more option for commuters in the west end of Toronto, better transit service, Speaker. Except to say, as typical of members from that party, they don't have a plan. They don't have a path forward. We do. We're proud of it. We're going to keep building, Speaker. Thanks very much.

MPP Walker to Minister Jaczek Re: Support for Developmental Disabilities

>> MPP Bill Walker: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My question's to the Minister of community and social services. Justin Harknock's 18th birthday was on January 9th but there was no celebration. You see Justin's severely disabled. He developed a brain tumour at 3, suffered a massive stroke at 4 and is at the level of a 4-year-old and that will never change. Sadly the fact didn't stop the ministry of community and social services from hut -- cutting his supports in half to \$860 from \$1,900 a month on his 18th birthday. They also put him on a passport wait list which we all know is a deeply flawed, messy and long wait. On behalf of Justin and his family, I asked will the Minister admit that the progress promised on the passport funding wait list has been a complete mess and a sham?

>> Minister Helena Jaczek: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the question, to the member opposite. I'm obviously not able to comment on the specific case, but certainly my ministry and our government does understand the difficulties that families can face in some cases where there are very challenging issues related to medical complications for those with developmental disabilities, those perhaps with some behavioural issues. These are very difficult and challenging situations for families and for caregivers and so on. In terms of our passport waiting list, we are actually ahead of schedule in eliminating wait lists. We now have -- You know, we have actually increased by -- we have some 20,000 people now on passport. There's much more to do of course. We acknowledge that. But this is a program that is really transforming individual situations. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

>> MPP Walker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Back to the Minister. Minister, we have no idea what you've done. You talk about the wait list action. There is a 2014 wait also you're proud to actually get caught up on. This is 2016. At the end of the day people don't expect a three-year wait list. They want action and passport funding when they need it. What they want, Minister, is leadership. They want to know that when the programs are there, you're not transforming Justin's life. You're making a mess of Justin's life and he and his family are struggling because of it. The fact, Minister, you've been in charge for three years. Keep getting deeper. I want to know through you, Mr. Speaker, to the Minister, how much longer do Justin and other families just look him in crisis have to wait to get real leadership, real programs and real services?

>> Minister Jaczek: Mr. Speaker, the reality is that we spend \$2 billion every year supporting

individuals with developmental disabilities. Three years ago we initiated an absolute unprecedented investment in this sector. \$810 million -- And I think we all recall at the time the party opposite voted against that particular initiative. And look tag platform back in 2014, neither of the opposition parties had anything to say about these most vulnerable Ontarians. Our government is standing up for them and we are doing everything we possibly can to help situations exactly as described.

MPP Mantha to Minister Mauro Re: Northern Mining

>> MPP Michael Mantha: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Good morning to you. This week -- my question is to the Premier. This week I attended the annual pdac conference where I had the chance to talk to many stakeholders from the mining sector and this is what I heard, Premier. Despite 70,000 current jobs depending on the industry, where -- we're way down on the is when it comes to investment, attractiveness and policy effectiveness. Only six in Canada where we should be first. Investors have no confidence in this government's policy. This Liberal government keeps saying it plans to spend \$1 billion in the last budget to develop infrastructure in the ring of fire, but, Speaker, besides lawyers, bureaucrats and accountants on bay street, where is the progress on this ring of fire?

>> Minister Bill Mauro: Speaker, the member in one question talked about two different topics. One moment he's talking about the ring of fire. In the first instance he's talking about investment in Ontario in the mineral development sector so let's deal with the first half of it first. Fundamentally, Speaker, the member is wrong. The increase in the exploration sector in the province of Ontario is going north. It is getting larger than it has been in the past and so I'm not sure who the member was talking to at pdac but I think that for those of us who attended that conference, on this side of the House, we're hear ago very, very different story. The industry is optimistic. They feel very excited about the way things are going in the province of Ontario right now, and actually, Speaker, the numbers, the raw numbers when you look at exploration dollars being invested in the province of Ontario, this year the projection and the increase last year speak very positively about what's going on when it comes to the mineral development sector in our province. We're very proud of that. On the second half of his question I'm happy to talk about that in the supplementary.

>> MPP Mantha: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again to the Premier. First nations communities, miners, prospectors and other people from industry are frustrated with the lack of leadership from this government. This Liberal government has a copy-and-paste approach to infrastructure plans in the last three Liberal budgets without actually developing even a trail, even a trail to the ring of fire. First nations are asking, as well as industry and many across northern Ontario, what has this government done and where have you been? Mr. Speaker, the people of Ontario deserve better. First nations are asking for action. And when will you start delivering results and ignite the ring of fire?

>> Minister Mauro: Speaker, I think that if you talk to the nine-member metal first nations communities they will tell you very clearly what we've done and where we've been. Again, Speaker, this is no different than the question that was asked by the P.C.S a little while ago where they want to frame the mining sector in Ontario in the context of only one project. And of course, Speaker, that is their goal to make it look like things are not going well. As I said to the member from the opposition, the official opposition, there's currently three mines under construction in the province of Ontario. Exploration dollars are increasing from where they were in the past. And of course when they're not, this is reduced or relative to global demand and global price. If the price is down, obviously exploration is not going to occur if they can't make money at it. Speaker, there's three mines under construction right now. The mining sector is doing well. We supported the near program, northern industrial electricity rate program is a big part of that. Currently ten mines benefit from that. It's a competitive sector.