

Provincial Legislature Question Period Transcript for Wednesday, October 4, 2017

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Transcript of Provincial Question Period
41st Parliament, 2nd Session
Wednesday, October 4, 2017

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MPP Brown to Premier Wynne (Thibeault) Re: Hydro One Salaries

>> PC Leader Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier. The O.E.B. Smacked down Hydro One's outrageous executive salaries. In that ruling, they said Ontario shouldn't be on the hook for what they called unreasonably high compensation. And I hear some members of the government laughing at this. It's not a laughing matter. This confirms what we've been saying all along. Hydro One salaries are out of touch. A \$4.4 million salary for the C.E.O. Of Hydro One is absolutely unreasonable. The C.E.O. Makes ten times what C.E.O.s make in other provinces. So, Mr. Speaker, will the Premier rein in these salaries? Will she bring them in line with other provinces, yes or no?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: I not Minister of energy will want to comment on the specifics of this, but just to be clear, what was being said on this side of the House as the leader of the opposition was asking his question is that we're actually -- no one was laughing. In fact it was just a statement that the system is working, Mr. Speaker. This is exactly the o.e.b.'s real, Mr. Speaker, and so as I said the Minister will speak to the details. What we know, Mr. Speaker, is that people across this province have seen on average a 25% reduction in their electricity bills in some of the rural communities, Mr. Speaker, up to a 40 to 50% reduction. We knew that there was a challenge for many people in the province because of all of the investments that we have had to make, Mr. Speaker, to rebuild the electricity system. We've reduced those costs, Mr. Speaker. As I said the O.E.B. Has a job to do and they are doing it.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier. You know the Liberals were willing to back up the Brinks truck to the Hydro One executive office week. They traded a millionaire's club, Mr. Speaker, a millionaire club of Hydro One executives, and frankly if the increases are only stopping because the opposition brought it to light. So, Mr. Speaker, we still know only about a handful of these million-dollar salaries, because the government has kept secret these salaries. They've removed them from the sunshine list. So a very specific question for the Premier. It's time to change this stat. Will the Premier commit to releasing the salaries of all high-priced executives at Hydro One? Once again yes or no, Speaker ?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When it comes to Hydro One salaries, Mr. Speaker, it is now a publicly traded company, as the opposition well knows, and decisions over compensation are not made directly by the government. But what's interesting, Mr. Speaker, is just last week that party's actually complaining about the decision of the O.E.B.. This week they're liking the decision of the O.E.B., Mr. Speaker. That is why this is a quasi -- That is why, Mr. Speaker, the O.E.B. Is a quasi-judicial organization and our economic regulator because they have the best interests of consumers at their mandate, Mr. Speaker. And that's why this shows that the system is working, Mr. Speaker. They recognize that they're going to continue to find ways to protect consumers with this, Mr. Speaker, and I look forward to adding more in the supplementary.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier, I can't get a commitment to return million-dollar hydro executives back to the sunshine list they dodge and deflect that question. But the Minister of energy wants to talk about what happened last week and I welcome that, Mr. Speaker. Guess what happened last week? Rates are still going up. Another rate hike. It is ee unbelievable. It turns out these investments the Minister always claims were made into the system were actually just contracts handed out to Liberal-friendly firms. The system is still in desperate need of repair. So, Mr. Speaker, why is this government spending \$5.5 million on vanity -- Rates are going down. We just found out last week that rates are going up again. Can we please have an answer that, Mr. Speaker ?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So let's talk about what's coming down, Mr. Speaker. 25% on everyone's bills is coming down, Mr. Speaker. No part in thanks to this government and no support from the opposition. But let's be clear, Mr. Speaker. We've made sure we're holding the rates to inflation, Mr. Speaker. There will be nothing more than inflation. And when we're talking about Hydro One's draft rate order, it's estimated that the bill impact for 2017 would be an increase -- Would be a bill increase of 0.1% and 0.2% for 2018, Mr. Speaker. But that said, let me remind the opposition, Mr. Speaker, that the fair hydro plan has lowered bills by 25% on average per House hold and for over 500,000 small businesses and farms right across the country, Mr. Speaker. We'll

continue to do what's right for the people of --

MPP Brown to Premier Wynne (Sandals) Re: Partisan Advertising

>> PC Leader Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier. Yesterday the president of the treasury board said she doesn't agree that the advertising the government has introduced are partisan. The auditor general has explicitly stated otherwise. Mr. Speaker, why does the government continue to challenge the independent auditor general?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Mr. Speaker, -- and I know the president of the treasury board will want to comment in the supplementary. But, Mr. Speaker, I would just remind the leader of the opposition that we are the only jurisdiction in the country that has legislation that puts any constraints around advertising, Mr. Speaker. The constraints that are in place, demand that the legislation not be partisan, Mr. Speaker. And I would just remind the member from Nipissing I think it was who was shouting out there that the -- what used to be in place, Mr. Speaker, was advertising that had the face of the Premier, the former Conservative Premier, on government advertising, Mr. Speaker. And that is partisan advertising. Nothing like that happens, Mr. Speaker. There are strict rules in place, Mr. Speaker. We're the only jurisdiction -- That has rules around partisan advertising, Mr. Speaker. And other jurisdictions look to us, Mr. Speaker, for what we have done.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier. The only jurisdictions looking at Ontario is ways to abuse government advertising. Because they have become the effort in it, Mr. Speaker. The government's false media increase this year -- Mr. Speaker, the numbers don't lie. The government's bulk media buy increased from \$25 million -- Last year to \$57 million this year. That's quite an increase, more than double. And that's unacceptable. This is a government, Mr. Speaker, directly to the Premier. Does the government only massively increase government advertising to suit their own reelection? And will the Premier finally acknowledge it's not right to use taxpayer dollars to campaign? Enough waste to taxpayer dollars. -- Enough waste of taxpayer dollars.

>> Premier Wynne: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. You know we have been very clear that the advertising that is put into the public realm, Mr. Speaker, is about giving people information, about giving people information about programs, about changes that are being made, Mr. Speaker. It's interesting, you know. The leader of the opposition sat in Mr. Harper's caucus I think for nine years, Mr. Speaker. And I seem to remember Canada's economic action plan -- All over, all over the country, Mr. Speaker. And I don't remember hearing a voice from the backbench saying that he didn't think that was acceptable. Mr. Speaker, the reality is that we are putting information into the public realm, giving people a way to get more information on free tuition, on reduced electricity bills, Mr. Speaker. They will get more information on free medication for their young people from 0 to their 25th birthday, Mr. Speaker. That's all information people in this province need and want, Mr. Speaker.

>> Patrick Brown: Mr. Speaker, again to the Premier. The Premier just spoke about how she used to criticize government advertising. Sadly she has become what she has criticized. Frankly she has now abused it to a greater level -- Mr. Speaker, sadly the Premier has become what she once criticized. But to a greater extent than we have ever, ever seen. Taking government advertising from 25 million to 57 million in an election year. Does the Premier think the public is stupid, that we don't see this? They're using government advertising to campaign. The auditor general says it's partisan. Everyone sees it's partisan. The Premier says trust her. Don't trust the auditor general. Mr. Speaker, I'm on the side of the auditor general. Will the Premier do the right thing and abandon these partisan ads?

>> Minister Liz Sandals: Yes. Thank you very much. I would like to repeat what I said at estimates about a dozen times, and apparently your representatives at estimates didn't report that to the leader of the opposition. But in a line called bulk media buy, which is a line in the treasury board estimate, it is true that it started out last fiscal 2015/17 at 25 million. But shortly after the beginning of the year, we consolidated into that line advertising budgets from a number of other ministries,

meaning that the actual amount of that line was 50 million. This year it's 56 million, and the reason for that increase is the increased cost of translating to make sure all Ontarians can get the information, to make sure we comply with the disability act, so that people -- Who have visual or hearing disabilities can get the information, and to make sure that we can include digital advertising. And the increase --

MPP Horwath to Premier Wynne (Hoskins) Re: Hospital Capacity

>> MPP France Gelinias: Voice of Translator: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the Premier. [End of Translation] There is an overcrowding in hallway medicine crisis in Ontario hospitals. The Premier knows it. Her Minister of health knows it and the good people of Ontario, who are forced to get medical treatment in overcrowded hospitals, they certainly know it also. The Liberals think, Speaker, that short changing hospitals by \$300 million in this year's budget and thinking about opening 150 interim beds in Toronto will solve the problem. This is not so, Speaker. This is not true. So is the Premier purposefully ignoring the magnitude of this crisis? Or is she really like that out of touch with what's going on in our hospitals?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Well, thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. And I not Minister of Health and Long-Term Care will want to comment. But, Mr. Speaker, let's be clear. There in our budget this year, it was over \$500 million, half a billion dollars, in additional funding for hospitals, Mr. Speaker. We recognize, we recognize that there needed to be an injection of funding into hospitals, Mr. Speaker, and that was part of a \$7 billion increase, Mr. Speaker, in health care funding over -- over the next seven years. So, Mr. Speaker, we recognize that hospitals have challenges, but to the point that the member opposite raised about the opening of beds and the facility that had been shut down, Mr. Speaker, you know it's intriguing to me that the NDP Wouldn't see that, if there is a challenge and this is about the flu season. This is about anticipated increase, Mr. Speaker, in patients. That they wouldn't see that solving the problem would be a good thing to do. That's what we are doing. We are solving a problem that is imminent, Mr. Speaker .

>> MPP Gelinias: Thank you, Speaker. Tillsonburg district memorial hospital reached a capacity of 123% in January of 2017. Just so you know, Speaker, 80% capacity is the maximum that expert considers safe for a hospital. Is this enough to convince the Premier that she and her Liberal government must act now to stop this crisis from getting any worse?

>> Minister Eric Hoskins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just had a look at the occupancy rate for tillsonburg. The most recent data. Unless the member opposite somehow magically has got data different than or more recent than what was published by the ministry. From April to June of this year they were below capacity, Mr. Speaker. In fact the member knows that the vast majority of hospitals across this province are below and often substantially below capacity. But it continues to boggle my mind, Mr. Speaker, that this party would somehow oppose the proposal coming from half a dozen hospitals in the northern part of the G.T.A. To open up 150 beds to relieve pressure on those hospitals, to take nonacute patients into a more appropriate transitional rehabilitative environment, which is better for them and it addresses the capacity. Mr. Speaker, only the NDP Would ask us to increase hospital capacity. And oppose those very proposals that are aimed to increase capacity, Mr. Speaker .

>> MPP Gelinias: Thank you, Speaker. Between January and may of 2017, tillsonburg memorial hospital occupancy rate for its acute care beds stayed above 112% at all times. I will send the F.O.I. Document over to the Minister. This is five long months straight where the good people of tillsonburg were forced to receive medical care from a hospital that is operating above space capacity limits. Frontline staff and hospital administrators are doing everything they can, but they need help, Speaker. Will the Premier do the right thing, admit that there is a crisis and finally make sure that our hospitals have the resources that they need to offer the best care possible to Ontarian families?

>> Minister Hoskins: I would propose, Mr. Speaker, that half a billion dollars to our hospitals this

year, half a billion dollars in additional funds to our hospitals last year, is addressing the challenge that the member opposite is talking about. And they voted against our budget that included \$24 million specifically to address capacity and wait times across the hospital system. But it's not surprising, Mr. Speaker, when they had a Minister of cuts proposed in the last election to cut \$600 million from health and education, for a government when they were in government for a short time only fortunately, Mr. Speaker, closing almost 10,000 hospital beds, including 13% of all the mental health beds in this province. 24% of the acute care beds. They delisted home care, Mr. Speaker. They decreased the hospital budget in their last year of government. They reduced the number of drugs paid for by the public formulary. That's their -- I'm not taking any lessons or advice from them, Mr. Speaker .

MPP Armstrong to Minister Hoskins Re: Long-Term Care Homes

>> MPP Teresa Armstrong: My question is to the Premier. This morning we learned that three long-term care homes in Ontario have been order today stop accepting new residents. The conditions in these homes are horrific. Complaints range from inappropriate food and severe understaffing to violence in one home that went unreported to police for days. Seniors in London, Mississauga and Fergus deserve better than this. The Minister of health himself said that there was, quote, risk of harm to the residents' health and well-being in these homes, end quote. And that's what's happening in these homes right now. It's all well and good to stop new admissions, but can the Premier tell these families what her plan is for vulnerable seniors who are already in care at these homes and are being forced to live with these atrocious conditions?

>> Minister Eric Hoskins: Well, Mr. Speaker, again -- I said this yesterday, I take my responsibilities very, very seriously when it comes to individuals in this province that their home is in a long-term care home, Mr. Speaker. And that's why it is completely unacceptable that these operators are not meeting the province's standards, that they're not following the act that applies to them. That's why I issued the three cessation of admissions to these homes, Mr. Speaker, because they are not complying. But it's important to recognize the vast majority of long-term care homes in this province are complying fully with the act, many of them going beyond the act and provide -- and providing that important, safe high-quality care to the residents of their homes. And it's also important to recognize our inspection system, which is an annual system that every single long-term care home in the province -- is inspected on an annual basis, it's actually seeing results. In fact this is proof that we are able to identify the poor operators and act accordingly.

>> MPP Armstrong: Speaker, the wait list for long-term care in Ontario tops 30,000 people. Does the Premier seem content with the -- yet the Premier seems content with the status quo, to stop admissions to the worst homes and ignore the fact the wait list is growing and conditions across the province are worsening. We are -- we are going in the wrong direction on seniors' care in Ontario. Instead of improving care and opening new homes to meet the huge demand, we are allowing heartbreaking conditions to become the new normal and doing nothing about the wait list. How can the Premier hear the stories coming out of these homes this morning and not expand the Wettlaufer inquiry to include a broad look to address systemic problems in the long-term care homes?

>> Minister Hoskins: Well, you know, Minister, I -- or, Mr. Speaker, I categorically reject the perspective of the member opposite. So again, once again, as with the previous question, I'm confounded by the NDP. Do they or do they not want us to crack down on those long-term care homes that are repeatedly violating the act and the orders which are applied by my inspectors in my ministry? This is precisely again what I would expect they would support, that if we find operators that are not complying with the act, and these are particularly egregious examples when you look at some of the orders that were issued against these homes. We feel that it's entirely appropriate and it builds a stronger system and it sends a message not only to all the long-term care homes across the province that this kind of behaviour is unacceptable, but it reinforces to Ontarians what -- The vast majority of long-term care homes that they are safe and they are secure and it is their home, Mr. Speaker .

>> MPP Armstrong: Speaker, I can't believe this Minister categorically denies the systemic problems in long-term care. Our parents and grandparents deserve better than what the Liberal government seems to accept as good quality care. They deserve to have a shower, to have help brushing their teeth, to get good quality food that helps them stay healthy and they deserve to live with dignity and respect. These issues in long-term care -- in the long-term care system are systemic. It's more than just three homes with terrible care. This is not a question of rooting out a few bad apples. We need a find-and-fix approach to our long-term care system. Will the Premier finally admit that violence, short staffing and poor care are not just a one-time occurrences in these homes and expand the Wettlaufer inquiry to look at all the issues we know that are going on almost in every long-term care home across Ontario?

>> Minister Hoskins: Mr. Speaker, I find it remarkably irresponsible for a member to exert that in nearly every long-term care home in this province, these occurrences are happening? I think it's outrageous. I think it contributes to fear mongering and it's consistent with the line that they've been taking across the board in disparaging and denigrating our health care system. We have one of the best health care systems in the world. And I will defend that to the end, Mr. Speaker, and I know that there are challenges, including in our long-term care homes. Speaker, it's not fair to the families. It's not fair to frail seniors to instill fear in them that they can't -- the homes that they live in -- Is somehow less than providing the highest quality of care. And we will -- Those who aren't.

MPP N. Miller to Minister McGarry Re: Species At Risk Guidelines

>> MPP Norm Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of natural resources and forestry. As the Minister knows, the forestry sector directly employs 57,000 people, mostly in northern Ontario. Forestry provides almost one in five jobs in the north. We have seen what happens when mills close. Communities become ghost towns. Speaker, the forestry sector in northern Ontario breathed a sigh of relief when the Minister announced she would delay the posting of the draft species at risk guidelines this summer. Will the Minister commit here today to real consultations with northern communities, indigenous communities and the forestry sector and to share with those groups the government's social, economic analysis before moving forward with the species at risk guidelines?

>> Minister Kathryn McGarry: Thank you very much, Speaker. I was delighted to meet with members of the OFIA and their members this morning. This is an important sector to the province of Ontario. Over \$15.5 billion worth of economic activity provides good-paying direct and indirect jobs to 172,000 people across the country in over 260 communities. Our government has alongside this industry to ensure that it's going to be thriving into the future. At the same time, I also know that mayors, communities and first nations leaders take their environmental stewardship and protection of endangered species seriously. They live it and breathe it every day. We are continuing to work to find a solution that protects species at risk in their habitats, minimizes impacts on forest operations and wood supply and continues to provide economic benefits to the people of Ontario. We continue to engage with all of our partners, our indigenous communities, to find a path forward to ensure that we can -- Protect species -- species at risk --

>> MPP N. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Back to the Minister. Northern Ontario is facing huge challenges in keeping and attracting working-age people in part because the area is losing jobs. The Minister has the power to do something to help the people of northern Ontario. The species at risk guidelines need to take into consideration not only the animals that live in the north but the people, their lifestyles and their ability to make a livelihood. This government claims to be worried about precarious employment. Creating precarious employment in the north. One mill manager told me he has hunted and fished -- One mill manager told me he has hunted and fished in the area for more than 20 years and he's never seen a caribou or any sign of them. Yet the ministry wants the forest managed for caribou that aren't there. And since moose and caribou don't live in the same habitat. Creating habitat for caribou would drive moose out of the area. Moose that are part of the local way of life. Mr. Speaker, will the Minister recognize today that people live in the north as well

and they should be –

>> Minister McGarry: Thank you, Speaker. We continue to engage in our -- with our industry partners, with first nations, including the federal -- the federal and provincial Ministers of forestry across the province not only to ensure that we can protect our caribou species but also recover them. And it's in that recovery program that we are now taking a second look. We've put a pause on any further poaching to ensure that we have the science right, that we continue to engage with all of our partners across Canada to make sure that we get this file right. But you know I don't take lessons from this Minister -- The opposition. The opposition member. The Conservatives do not support forestry in Ontario. Our government has provided over \$74 million this year to forest -- Forest funding. Under the p.c.est forest access roads were completely downloaded to the forest industry. The forest ministry. Sector with --

MPP Tabuns to Minister Thibeault Re: Hydro One Salaries

>> MPP Peter Tabuns: Thank you, Speaker. My question to the Premier. Last week, the Ontario energy board released a preliminary decision on Hydro One's transmission rate increase. The O.E.B. Gave Hydro One nearly everything it asked for, and we remain on track for a huge jump in transmission rates next year. The O.E.B. Said that these rate increases were being driven in part by executive compensation. But then, then it approved 96.5% of Hydro One's compensation costs. Last year the C.E.O. Of Hydro One, the privatized Hydro One, Collected six times the salary of the previous C.E.O. Does the Premier think that ratepayers should feel grateful that the O.E.B. Trimmed back this sort of executive -- By a mere 3.5%?

>> Minister Glenn Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again let me reiterate. So depending on Hydro One's draft rate order, it's estimated that the bill impact for 2017 would be an increase of 0.1%, Mr. Speaker, and 0.2% for 2018. And that said, Mr. Speaker, this -- you know our fair hydro plan has lowered bills by 25% on average. This is the single largest rate reduction in the province's history, which both opposition parties voted against I might add, Mr. Speaker. But when it comes to executive compensation, ind, Mr. Speaker, that people are concerned when they hear that number, but Hydro One is now a publicly traded company and decisions over compensation are not made directly by the government. But they have become a better run company, Mr. Speaker. That executive have found \$75 million in savings. They brought forward a volunteer winter disconnection program. They ended it, Mr. Speaker. They are becoming a better-run company and exactly why they have that executive in place, Mr. Speaker .

>> MPP Tabuns: Well, Speaker, taking out a huge loan to drive down rates is not a credible strategy. Speaker, the Premier promised that a privatized Hydro One would mean lower rates, not higher. Her handpicked privatization guru said that private sector discipline would drive down costs and rates for consumers. Instead private sector discipline means the C.E.O. Salary that is six times what the previous C.E.O. Earned. Private sector discipline means a huge increase in transmission rates for next year, plus another huge increase in distribution rates that Hydro One is also demanding. Will the Premier finally admit that her private sector discipline simply means more private profit for her private sector friends?

>> Minister Thibeault: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So let's be clear. Hydro One r1 and r2 customers are seeing a 40 to 50% reduction in their bills, Mr. Speaker, and I know he doesn't like to talk about that or even look at that because he voted against it Mr. Speaker -- so on top of the 40 to 50% reduction that Hydro One r1 and r2 customers are seeing now, Mr. Speaker, thanks to this government, let's talk about how they've become a better-run company with many other things, Mr. Speaker, that they've put in place. They've actually introduced more active customer communication, calling customers directly with issues. They're giving customer choice with billing cycles helping them to better manage their bills. They've introduced ebilling and working towards mobile billing. Security deposits for new customers. Of course as I said before, Mr. Speaker, introducing a voluntary ban on winter disconnections.

MPP Martins to Minister Hoskins Re: Health Care Investments

>> MPP Cristina Martins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question this morning is for the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care. Providing all Ontarians with timely access to the care they need whether at home, in their community or in one of our outstanding hospitals is of the utmost importance to our government but also to me as the member of Davenport. Over the past 14 years, Ontario as health care system has improved tremendously. We've increased our investments in health each and every year allowing us to treat more patients, provide better care and reduce wait times to some of the shortest in the country. More than a million more Ontarians and 94% of all Ontarians now have access to a primary care provider. We've gone from worst to first for reducing wait times, including hip and knee replacements, cataracts, cardiac care, radiation oncology, M.R.I.S, C.T. Scans and ultrasound as noted by the wait time alliance. I know that our government has increased funding for health care by \$23 billion since 2003. Can the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care please inform this House. Of the achievements our government has proudly made?

>> Minister Eric Hoskins: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question, and I first want to -- because we are in the middle of mental illness awareness week, I want to not only acknowledge that and how critically important our supports for those suffering from mental illness are and the fact that there can be no health without mental health, Mr. Speaker. It's that important. And I want to acknowledge and celebrate and thank the mental health leaders, many of our mental health leaders are here with us today. Mr. Speaker, we have increased funding every single year we've been in office to the health sector, and we're building on these important investments by increasing investments in hospitals, in long-term care homes, in home care, in community care, in mental health, and that includes the investment this year and last year of \$1 billion added to the operating costs of our hospitals, \$20 billion over the next decade in capital investments. Mr. Speaker, we'll continue to make the investments required to ensure that as third parties are telling us we have one of the best health care systems in the world.

>> MPP Martins: Thank you, Minister, for setting the record straight in this House. I know health care is a top priority for our government and I'm pleased to know one of the -- the greatest investments that we're making in our province's hospitals. I also know our government is doing more than just investing in hospitals, Mr. Speaker. Our government has made a commitment to providing Ontarians with the support that they need to create a truly accessible, integrated health care system for all Ontarians. Can the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care please inform this House of the investment the the government is making to expand accessible care for all Ontarians going forward?

>> Minister Hoskins: Mr. Speaker ,, 14 years ago during their tenure, the P.C.S closed 10,000 hospital beds. And, Mr. Speaker, during their tenure in the 1990s the NDP Closed 9,645 hospital beds, Mr. Speaker. In the last several years, we have added to the complement of acute care beds by nearly 1,000, Mr. Speaker, in just the last several years. Since 2003 the number of physicians has grown by more than 6,000. In fact it's growing at three or even four times the rate of population growth currently, Mr. Speaker. We have 28,000 more nurses including 11,000 more R.N.S. That includes 2,642 additional nursing positions created over the last year alone, Mr. Speaker. I think we can all agree that even that one statistic -- Remarkable achievement given that the previous P.C. Government fired 6,000 nurses.

MPP Wilson to Minister McGarry Re: Tree Seed Plant Closure

>> MPP Jim Wilson: Speaker, my question is for the Minister of natural resources and forestry. The Minister has announced that, as of this time next year, she's closing the Ontario tree seed plant in Angus. I want to quote from an October 2013 release from her ministry that says, quote -- the

Ontario tree seed plant is celebrating 90 years of preserving biodiversity, protecting the environment and supporting the forest products and wood manufacturing sectors. It goes on to say -- by supporting tree planting, the facility helps Ontario adapt to the effects of climate change, restores endangered tree species and supports tens of thousands of jobs in the forestry industry, end of quote. Last year, I remind you, Speaker, you spent \$1.6 million to upgrade this facility and its boilers. So Speaker, what has changed? Has this government decided it's no longer important to protect our environment, support the forest product sector or -- Climate change? What is it?

>> Minister Kathryn McGarry: Thank you, Speaker. I have met recently with Rob Keane from Forest Ontario as well as Steve Howsell chair of that board. As Ontario's forestry practice has changed, the demand for services provided by the tree seed plant have decreased significantly and it no longer makes sense to operate such a large facility. As a result we'll be moving towards a more efficient and modern cedar kind of. During this transition, we'll be encouraging new market opportunities for Ontario's nurseries to provide native seeds to grow trees for the industry and public. Because we're modernizing these services, there will be significant savings to the Ontario taxpayers through reduced operating and capital costs and by developing new policies like the new seed zone policy and creating a modern cedar kind of we'll be better positioned to respond to changes. Associated with climate change, including successfully delivering on the 50 million tree program.

>> MPP Wilson: Back to the Minister. Speaker, we're talking about the loss of a valuable and unique resource in Canada. If the announced closure goes ahead we'll be losing the act to protect and restore our forest with native genetically appropriate species. My constituents are concerned not only for their jobs. By the way it's not a really large operation. There's six jobs involved. But also about the loss of this valuable resource that's literally being thrown away by your government with no consultation whatsoever. Growers in my riding point out that the seed plant is a state-of-the-art facility producing the very best quality of seed. They explained that the seed storage is also top-notch and involves much more than just buying a freezer as some government representatives have told us. Growers also note that this will directly impair the feasibility of Forest Ontario's 50 million trees program, as well as other conservation initiatives. Speaker, my constituents have questions, lots of questions. So I ask the Minister will she agree to meet with my constituents and to explain what is happening, why it's happening and formulate a good plan going forward?

>> Minister McGarry: Thank you, Speaker. I'd like to thank again Rob Keane and his team that came in to speak with me from Forest Ontario and from that team for their work in delivering the 50 million tree program, and this year's green leaf challenge. We're going to continue to look at all the options working with our partners and ensure this as win-win situation from Ontario residents as well as our partners. Speaker, the member opposite knows we're working with our partners to provide a smooth transition and is just trying to score cheap political points. He knows what we're doing is moving from an outdated model to a more efficient and modern one, one that will save taxpayers money. Unfortunately -- Unfortunately it was his party in 1996 that opened our province's provincial nursery program for privatization and put the Ontario tree seed plant in this position in the first place. He might want to --

MPP Hatfield to Premier Wynne (Chiarelli) Re: Highway 401 Safety

>> MPP Percy Hatfield: Speaker, my question is to the Premier. Good morning, Premier. Ontario should and could have the safest roads in Ontario, or I should say in North America. My mistake. Yet so many families have been devastated by accidents and loss of life on a single part of the 401. So many in fact, it's earned the disturbing name of carnage alley. Just ask the friend of the Payne family or the Smulders or Brundrigs. For years concerned citizens have been calling for a median barrier between London and Tilbury. Speaker, when can we expect enhanced highway safety measures to be put in place on this stretch of the 401?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I not Minister of Infrastructure will want to comment on the technical issues but, Mr. Speaker, first let me express my condolences to all of the families who have lost loved ones on this stretch of highway. I know that some of them are

here today, Mr. Speaker, and it is an unbearable loss and I want them to know that we are listening. I know that the Minister of transportation is going to be meeting with them later today, Mr. Speaker, and we are going to be moving forward, Mr. Speaker, to put in place Barrier on that highway, Mr. Speaker, and, as I say, the Minister of infrastructure will speak to the specifics. But I understand that the ministry is working right now, Mr. Speaker, on getting started on building a Barrier.

>> MPP Hatfield: Speaker these fatal accidents didn't happen in secret. They're well documented and without new safety measures they are likely to increase. The 401 is being widened in the Toronto area. More trucks will be heading to the two new border crossings in Windsor. We need to feel safe when we drive on the 401. Why won't the government listen and commit, give us a time line for immediate -- median Barriers along this stretch known as carnage alley?

>> Minister Bob Chiarelli: Speaker, I thank the member for the question. Speaker, road safety is our government's top priority and I know that my Colleague the Minister of transportation takes any concern about it very, very seriously. I'm aware that a number of advocates from this part of the province will be here at queen's park today to share their concerns regarding the need for median Barriers on highway 401 between Tilbury and London. My understanding is that Minister del Duca will be meeting with a number of those advocates, including the member from Chatham-kent- Essex later today, who was also Conservative this particular issue. I know that will be a very important discussion and that the Minister will have more to say at that time. For now I would be pleased to advise that more information on that will be provided this afternoon by the Minister. He has taken very serious attention to this issue and looking forward to meeting with the constituents and the member this afternoon.

MPP Qaadri to Minister Ballard Re: Climate Change

>> MPP Shafiq Qaadri: [Speaking in French] Voice of Translator: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This question is for the Minister of the environment and climate change. [End of Translation] Speaker, in the last 14 years, Ontario's air quality has improved dramatically and the medical and health community knows this well. That's why we took the initiative in first north America to permanently ban coal fired electricity generation in the province. And in doing so, we have significantly reduced the number of smog days in Ontario. And I know this particularly, Speaker, because the emergency room visits, because of asthma, COPD, emphysema and other respiratory ailments has decreased dramatically. The 2016 vital signs report for example shows that premature deaths and hospitalization as a result of air pollution dropped by 23 and 41% respectively since 2004. Speaker, Ontarians are able to breathe easier and live longer -- Documented. Speaker, account Minister please explain how Ontario's air quality has improved under our mandate?

>> Minister Chris Ballard: [Speaking in French] Voice of Translator: Thank you very much for the question. [End of Translation] Thank you to the member for that question. It's a very important one that will he would know, being a medical doctor himself. It's an opportunity for us to talk about how we've made life better and more fair for Ontarians in the past 14 years. Speaker, as the member mentioned, we have significantly reduced the number of smog days in Ontario. In 2005 for example Ontario exp Erienced 53 smog days. That's 53 smog days in one year. Twelve years later, we have seen zero smog days so far -- In 2017. From 53 to zero, Mr. Speaker, by shutting down coal-fired plants, we have reduced sulphur dioxide emissions in Ontario by nearly 25%, which has significantly increased -- Ontario's quality. Thanks to our government as environmental leadership over the past 14 years, Mr. Speaker, Ontarians are literally breathing easier than they were 14 years ago.

>> MPP Qaadri: Thank you, Speaker. To the Minister not only for his stewardship but in own personal quarter consultations I know he has a true passion for this file. Speaker, extreme climate events unfortunately are increasing it seems week to week these days and scientists of course are attributing this to human settlement, coal, fossil fuel burning and a another activities. More than half of Americans believe climate change contributed to the is he verlt of recent hurricanes in Florida, Texas as well as the caribbean. We know this is a global issue and Ontarians are facing

similar concerns about climate change. Speaker, act locally but think globally, our government has actually taken steps to mitigate climate change. Speaker, can -- How this government has taken action to mitigate the increasing apparent threat of extreme climate events?

>> Minister Ballard: Thank you, Speaker. Thank you to the member for that very important question. You know, Speaker, in the past decade, climate change has become an increasingly important issue globally, and right here for Ontarians. Our government has responded by taking significant steps to mitigate climate change and to make Ontario a green leader in the face of this global problem. We know that steps such as introducing a cap-and-trade system, which caps pollution levels and reinvests every dollar into programs that will help Ontarians fight climate change are the best path forward. We know -- what we don't know, Mr. Speaker, is if the opposition even believes in climate change. In fact the member from Lambton-Kent-Middlesex tweeted on January the 16th of this year, he said -- Justin Trudeau should not force provinces to implement the carbon tax or cap and trade period, Mr. Speaker. This raises the question do the members opposite believe that climate change. Is not a threat to our province?

MPP Nicholls to Premier Wynne Re: Highway 401 Safety

>> MPP Rick Nicholls: Speaker, my question is to the Premier. They call it carnage alley for a reason. The stretch of 401 between London and Tilbury is one of the most dangerous roads in Ontario. About a monthing ago on August 29th, a pickup truck crossed the centre median of the 401 near Dutton, smashed into a van on the other side. Two people in that van were a mother and her 5-year-old daughter. They died of their injuries and the driver of the pickup has been charged. It has now come to light that the driver of the pickup was intoxicated with both alcohol and cannabis in his body. Nothing can bring Sarah and Freya Payne back. They died from their injuries. But a median Barrier would do a lot to prevent needless deaths and accidents like theirs, and some of the pain friends and family are here today in the east gallery. A median Barrier would have solved that. So, Premier, when will the government act and build the Barrier? Before another tragedy happens?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: So again, Mr. Speaker, my deepest condolences to the families. You know, there are no words that can really express the sorrow at the loss of a family member, and we do work very hard in this province. We consistently have the safest or the second-safest roads in North America, Mr. Speaker, and that has been for many, many years. But there's always more that can be done, and this particular piece of highway, Mr. Speaker, is a place where there needs to be more done. That's quite clear. I want to -- you know what? I want to thank the member for Chatham-Kent-Essex for being such a strong advocate on this issue because he has been, Mr. Speaker. He's brought it forward and he has been very clear about what needs to be done. Thank you. So I want the member to know that the ministry's actively working to install high-tension cable Barriers in the grass median on this section of the highway of highway 401. That is in the works. I'll finish in the supplementary. Thank you.

>> MPP Nicholls: Thanks, Speaker. Back to the Premier. Mark Lafontaine was killed in another isolated accident along with his niece Alyssa. A tractor trailer crossed the median and hit the car head on. Mr. Lafontaine's sister Denise is here today. I commend the Minister of transportation for agreeing to meet the concerned friends and family of the victims. I have petitions numbering over 4,000 signatures from across Ontario demanding construction of a concrete median Barrier. I will be reading that petition into the record this afternoon. My colleague, Jeff Yurek, from Elgin-Middlesex-London and I have been advocating for public safety for some time now. So Premier, what will this government do to make sure that reelection is taken to build the Barrier and make carnage alley safer?

>> Premier Wynne: Mr. Speaker, again let's agree that a Barrier has to be built. The ministry is working on that engineering right now, Mr. Speaker. So there will be a Barrier built. I think that it's important that -- Yes. I think it's important that the families have an opportunity to meet with the Minister, because there are -- and I can tell you this from having been the Minister of transportation

for a couple of years. There are always discussions around materials, exactly what the specs should be, exactly what it should look like, timing and so my hope would be -- and I say to the member of Lambton-kent- Middlesex that he and the families will be able -- sorry, Chatham, sorry. Chatham-Kent middle -- Chatham-kent-essex. Chatham-kent-essex, that he will be able to deal with the families, meet with the Minister of transportation, ask all the questions around what is happening in the ministry of transportation but we agree a Barrier has to be built and it will be built.

MPP P. Miller to Premier Wynne Re: Basic Income Pilot

>> MPP Paul Miller: Thank you, Speaker. My question is to the Premier. This morning the Liberal government announced only 400 people have so far signed up to its basic income pilot project in Thunder Bay, Brantford and Hamilton. New Democrats have raised concerned that the amounts received are not adequate for participants and could keep them struggling in poverty if the basic income is subject to garnishments and debt Collections. Well surprise, surprise. Now we've learned that anyone who signs up for the basic income project may be subject to garnishments and debt Collections on that income. This is according to the coordinator of the basic income pilot project. Mr. Speaker, this is unacceptable. Regular recipients of odsp and O.W. Are not subject to these additional garnishments and Collections but it seems those on basic income will be. It has even gotten so bad that poverty advocates in my home town of Hamilton are warning people not to join the project. Speaker, many Ontarians struggle under House hold debt but for people in poverty debt. It can be a crushing endless loop. Will the Premier confirm that basic income is subject to creditor liens on that income? Will she commit to making necessary changes to ensure that this isn't the case?

>> Premier Kathleen Wynne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, and I appreciate the questions from the member opposite. Mr. Speaker, my understanding -- and I have asked about this and the responses I've received from staff are that there are not many hundreds more but in fact thousands more people who are in the pipeline to be processed and to be part of the pilot, Mr. Speaker. Are there questions about the -- the rules around the pilot, Mr. Speaker ? Are there adjustments that will likely have to be made? Yes, Mr. Speaker. It is a pilot project. This has not been done for decades, Mr. Speaker. It has been talked about for 30, 35 years, but no government has, until now, until our Liberal government, no government has taken it upon themselves to actually put a pilot in place. And to find out whether this is something that can help people. We're doing that, Mr. Speaker, and we are working very hard with the researchers to get it right.

>> MPP P. Miller: Well, Mr. Speaker, poverty is affecting people right now, Premier. However it will be years before Ontario makes a final decision whether to turn the pilot project into a broad policy. This reality is, Mr. Speaker, the poverty is affecting Ontarians now, and we have a solution. Bill 6. The ministry of community and social service amendment act could actively help reduce poverty immediately by creating a social assistance research commission, annual recommendations can be made to determine what social assistance rates need to be in each region of this province. Moving bill 6 forward will give the province the ability to experiment with this minimum income project. So my question is, Speaker, why has this government stalled bill 6 in committee?

>> Premier Wynne: Mr. Speaker, you know, as I've said the basic income pilot is one part of a response to poverty reduction in Ontario, Mr. Speaker, and, you know, it's an important -- it's an important pilot project and we're working very hard to get it right. But the Minister of community and social services is also, also engaged in reform of the social assistance program, Mr. Speaker. But on top of that, we recognize that people need support. And so free tuition for over 200,000 students in this province, Mr. Speaker, an increased minimum wage to \$15 an hour, free medication for children from 0 until their 25th birthday, Mr. Speaker. Those are all supports that are being put in place, Mr. Speaker, to tackle poverty across the province. And there's always more that we can do. The basic income pilot is part of that, Mr. Speaker .

MPP Des Rosiers to Minister Zimmer Re: Indigenous Relations

>> MPP Nathalie Des Rosiers: [Speaking in French] Voice of Translator: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Ministry. [End of Translation] And we know that reconciliation is more than just an event or more than just an apology. It's a journey. It's a journey that we have to take together with our indigenous partner. My own riding is on Algonquin territory and I'm very happy that the government has made some significant steps to finally have a modern treaty with the Algonquins. So can the Minister give us more examples of the work that has been done in the last 14 years to rebuild relationships with our indigenous partners and ensure a better future for First Nation, Métis and Inuit in Ontario?

>> Minister David Zimmer: Thank you, Speaker. Speaker, the reality is the last time when the Conservatives were in power, relations with indigenous communities across Ontario were strained, flaring into crisis all due to a lack of respect for indigenous people's rights and cultures. Just a month, though, after forming government in '03, we launched the Ipperwash inquiry at the request of indigenous communities. It was this inquiry that delivered many of the recommendations for righting our province's relationship with indigenous people including the creation of a full ministry of indigenous affairs. Since we established the ministry ten years ago, we've worked every day to reconcile relationships to ensure a better future for indigenous peoples. We've closed gaps and removed barriers. We've supported cultural revitalization. We have found meaningful -- solutions to historic grievances through Honourable agreements, Speaker .

>> MPP Des Rosiers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the Minister for his answer and for his inspiring commitment to his portfolio. Mr. Speaker, I understand the parties opposite over the years have voted against different budgets which provided many significant investments to support indigenous communities. In 2014, budget provided investment in urban indigenous communities and the ring of fire. The party opposite voted against that. In 2015, the budget included commitment to ensure clean drinking water for First Nations. The parties opposite voted against that. In 2016, the budget had major investment in indigenous health and violence against indigenous women. The parties opposite voted against that. Just this year the budget provides for an historic commitment. I want the Minister maybe to give us the impact of these investments over the years.

>> Minister Zimmer: Speaker, here's what our government has achieved. We have officially apologized for Ontario's role in the residential school system. We've made a historic \$250 million commitment to reconciliation through the journey together. We've committed \$108 million to take actions to end violence against indigenous women. We've concluded 24 land claims. We've provided \$121 million in compensation to First Nations. We've committed \$95 million to support indigenous communities economic development. We've passed the treaty recognition week, making Ontario the first province to officially celebrate this week every November. Speaker, our record is clear, and it's a shame that the parties opposite have voted against the historic agreement. That we've made to support a better future for indigenous people in this great province.