



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Karla MacFarlane

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First Session

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS	PAGE
PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS:	
Gov’t. (N.S.): Ban on Eviction of Seniors - Request, G. Burrill	7490
GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION:	
Res. 926, Pink Shirt Day: Ending Bullying - Recog., Hon. B. Druhan	7491
Vote - Affirmative	7491
Res. 927, Orgs. & Families: Help for Diabetes Patients - Recog., Hon. M. Thompson	7492
Vote - Affirmative	7493
INTRODUCTION OF BILLS:	
No. 413, Employment Support and Income Assistance Act (amended), Hon. Z. Churchill	7493
No. 414, Giving Families a Break Act, S. Leblanc	7493

No. 415, Social Safety Net Security Act, Hon. D. Mombourquette	7493
No. 416, Serious Illness Leave Act, L. Nicoll	7493
NOTICES OF MOTION:	
Res. 928, N.S. Leg.: 1 st Black MLA & 1 st Female Speaker - Recog., Hon. B. Johns	7493
Vote - Affirmative.....	7494
STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS:	
Pink Shirt Day: Anti-Bullying Event - Recog., C. Palmer.....	7494
LOVE Nova Scotia: At-Risk Youth Pgms. - Recog., Hon. Z. Churchill	7495
Flenjor Foods/Indigevisor: Awds. Finalists - Recog., S. Leblanc	7496
Switzer, Suzanne: Books Publication - Congrats., Hon. B. Adams.....	7496
MLA for Cole Hbr.: Infl. Black Cdns. List - Recog., Hon. Z. Churchill	7497
Pete's Frootique Workers: 1 st Contract - Congrats., G. Burrill	7497
MacLeod, Brian: Death of - Tribute, Hon. M. Thompson.....	7498
Purcell, Dan: PROTx Svcs. - Recog., L. Nicoll	7499
Borden, Perry: New Chief Judge - Recog., S. Hansen	7499
Casey, Earl: Construction Ind. Contribs. - Recog., D. Ritcey	7500
Heart Month: Cardiac Arrest Action - Recog., Hon. K. Regan.....	7500
Coward, Rubin: Tom Miller Awd. Recip. - Congrats., K. Coombes.....	7501
Kelly, Ryan: New CANSail CEO - Best Wishes, Hon. K. Smith	7501
Fellow MLAs: Support During Illness - Thanks, R. DiCostanzo	7502
Bacon, Lyman: Com. Serv. - Thanks, E. Smith-McCrossin.....	7503
Food Bank: Usage Increase - Recog., S. Leblanc	7503
Borden Colley, Sherri: Hon. Doctorate - Congrats., J.A. MacDonald	7504
Souls Hbr. Rescue Mission: Drop-In Ctr. - Thanks, F. Tilley.....	7504
Price, Shevy: Com. Consultation - Recog.,	

S. Hansen	7504
Goodman, Sonny “Tug”: Death of - Tribute, Hon. B. Maguire	7505
Robichaud, Francis: Cert. of Recog. - Congrats., R. LeBlanc	7505
MichNat Fashion House: African Designs - Welcome, L. Lachance.....	7506
Queens Co. Athletes: Special Olympics - Best Wishes, Hon. K. Masland.....	7506
Paramedics: EHS Exemplary Svc. Medal - Congrats., C. Kerr.....	7506
Williamson, H./Hawley, B.: Firefighting - Thanks, K. Coombes.....	7507
Norman, A. & E.: Lazy Bear Brewing - Recog., Hon. J. Balsler.....	7507
Southwell, R./Grosse, R.: Infl. Black Cdns. - Recog., Hon. T. Ince	7508
Interfaith Harmony Hfx.: Harmony Week - Recog., L. Lachance.....	7508
Kinette Club: 60 th Anniv. - Congrats., Hon. S. Craig.....	7508
Salv. Army Team: Com. Serv. - Congrats., Hon. P. Arab	7509
Crouse, Jeff & Shelley: Curling Ch’ship Win - Recog., Hon. B. Druhan.....	7509
Furdas, G. & O.: Diabetes Care Awareness - Recog., B. Clark.....	7510
Affirmative Ventures: Housing Contribs. - Recog., Hon. T. Halman.....	7510
MacNeil, Nathan: CGM Advocacy - Thanks, F. Tilley.....	7511
Halisi Café: New Business - Best Wishes, Hon. B. Johns.....	7511
Marchand, Brad: Hockey Achievements - Recog., Hon. B. Jessome.....	7511
ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS:	
No. 1,375, Prem.: Serious Illness Leave - Update, Hon. Z. Churchill	7512
No. 1,376, Prem.: Affordable Housing - Prioritize, C. Chender	7513
No. 1,377, DHW: Need For Better Outcomes - Address, Hon. Z. Churchill	7515
No. 1,378, ECC: Coastal Consultation Results - Release, Hon. I. Rankin.....	7517
No. 1,379, ECC: Removal of Coastline Protection - Explain, Hon. I. Rankin.....	7518

No. 1,380, Hogan Court Purchase Price - Explain,
 S. Leblanc7519
 No. 1,381, MAH: Rent Supplements - Increase,
 Hon. K. Regan.....7520
 No. 1,382, MAH: Rent Increases - Explain,
 B. Clark7521
 No. 1,383, SNS: Res. Tenancies Enforcement - Start,
 B. Clark7523
 No. 1,384, SNS: Incentivizing Eviction - Stop,
 G. Burrill7524
 No. 1,385, MAH: CB Storm Impact Relief - Provide,
 Hon. D. Mombourquette7525
 No. 1,386, DAE: Student Housing Strategy - Release,
 L. Nicoll7526
 No. 1,387, DHW: Amb. Serv. Standards - Improve,
 E. Smith-McCrossin.....7527
 No. 1,388, EECD: School Lunch Pgm. - Implement,
 S. Hansen7529

OPPOSITION MEMBERS’ BUSINESS:

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING:

No. 412, Residential Tenancies Act (amended),
 B. Clark7529
 G. Burrill7533
 Hon. C. LeBlanc7535
 L. Nicoll7539
 No. 405, HST Reduction Act,
 Hon. Z. Churchill7541
 L. Lachance.....7545
 C. Palmer.....7547
 Hon. K. Regan.....7551
 No. 409, Income Tax Act (amended),
 F. Tilley7555
 L. Lachance.....7558
 T. Taggart.....7561
 Hon. K. Irving.....7563
 E. Smith-McCrossin.....7566

ADJOURNMENT:

MOTION UNDER RULE 5(5):

Gov’t (N.S.): Food Security - Provide,
 Hon. D. Mombourquette7571
 S. Hansen7574
 Hon. B. Maguire7578

ADJOURNMENT, House rose to meet again on Thursday, February 29th at 1:00 p.m.7580



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2024

Sixty-fourth General Assembly

First Session

1:00 P.M.

SPEAKER

Hon. Karla MacFarlane

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Lisa Lachance, Danielle Barkhouse, Nolan Young

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. First of all, I just want to say that everyone looks like they are celebrating and in the spirit today. You all look very pretty in pink, so thank you for being so involved in this day. We really appreciate it. I see a lot of social media posts going out, so it's good news.

Just before we begin the daily routine, I will read the topic for the late debate, February 28, 2024, submitted by the honourable member for Sydney-Membertou:

Whereas one in three visits to food banks are children and youth, and no significant action has been taken to address the needs to increase food security for children and youth; and

Whereas the provincial government has made \$3.4 billion in revenue but has not taken meaningful action to support children and youth in the last two and a half years with the rising cost of living, inflation and food prices at record levels;

Therefore be it resolved that more children and youth are facing food insecurity by this government's inaction on addressing food insecurity for children and youth across the province.

As all of you are aware, this is Liberal Opposition Day.

We will begin the daily routine.

PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Speaker, I beg leave to present a petition, which reads as follows:

Whereas over a quarter of those who are homeless for the first time are over the age of 60; and

Whereas nearly 6,000 people are on the waitlist for public housing, with an average wait time of 2 years;

Therefore be it resolved that the provincial government ban evictions of seniors whose incomes would qualify them for public housing until there is a place in public housing for them to go.

This has been signed by a considerable number of the residents of Flinn Street, Blink Bonnie Terrace and MacDonald Street in the constituency of Halifax Chebucto, and I have signed it also.

THE SPEAKER: The petition is tabled.

PRESENTING REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development.

RESOLUTION NO. 926

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas almost 17 years ago, two Nova Scotian students started a movement that has gone around the world, raising awareness for anti-bullying by wearing pink; and

Whereas every day, the teachers, staff, and students in our schools work to build safe, inclusive, and supportive environments in which to learn and work; and

Whereas we should all strive to build up, take a stand when we see someone in need of our help, and end all forms of bullying, no matter where they may be taking place;

Therefore be it resolved that members of this Legislature recognize the importance of the born-in-Nova Scotia Pink Shirt Day movement and do all we can to end bullying today and every day.

Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Health and Wellness.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Yes, you may.

MICHELLE THOMPSON: In the gallery today, we have some very special guests who joined the Premier and me this morning to announce more support for Nova Scotians living with type 1 and type 2 diabetes.

I would ask that these individuals rise as I introduce them. Nobody can get the smile off their face today on any side of the House, so it's very good.

Maria Campbell, the director of Government Affairs and Advocacy with Diabetes Canada, joined by advocates Amanada Williams, Aaliyah Cook, and Pauline Armour, and also Luka Stevanovic, the national director of Government Affairs and Advocacy with the JDRF Canada, the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, who is joined by advocate Emma Perry.

I would ask all members of the House to join me in giving our guests a very warm welcome. (Standing ovation)

THE SPEAKER: Congratulations, and welcome to the House. It's a pleasure to have you.

The honourable Minister of Health and Wellness.

RESOLUTION NO. 927

MICHELLE THOMPSON: I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas diabetes is a chronic condition caused by insulin deficiency and it affects more than 106,000 Nova Scotians, and between 5 per cent and 10 per cent of people living with diabetes in Nova Scotia have type 1 diabetes; and

Whereas, for Nova Scotians living with diabetes, it is a life-changing experience that for many, will have a big impact on their quality of life, but together, and with the right supports, we can help people living with diabetes better manage their care; and

Whereas supporting Nova Scotians living with diabetes is a collective effort between organizations like Diabetes Canada and JDRF Canada, the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, who provide education, materials, resources, services, and funding into diabetes research and the work of advocates, patients, and families;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of this Legislature join me to recognize the efforts of organizations, advocates, patients, and their families who work tirelessly to improve the quality of life for Nova Scotians living with diabetes.

Speaker, I ask for waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 413 - An Act to Amend Chapter 27 of the Acts of 2000, the Employment Support and Income Assistance Act. (Hon. Zach Churchill)

Bill No. 414 - An Act to Amend Chapter 293 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, the Motor Vehicle Act, Respecting Fees. (Claudia Chender)

Bill No. 415 - An Act to Index Social Supports to Inflation. (Hon. Derek Mombourquette)

Bill No. 416 - An Act to Amend Chapter 246 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, the Labour Standards Code, Respecting Serious Illness Leaves of Absence. (Lorelei Nicoll)

THE SPEAKER: Ordered that these bills be read a second time on a future day.

NOTICES OF MOTION

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Justice.

RESOLUTION NO. 928

HON. BRAD JOHNS: I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas the Nova Scotia Legislature was established in 1758, and is Canada's first Legislature; and

Whereas Province House opened in 1819 as the home of Nova Scotia's House of Assembly and the first such Legislative Assembly building in Canada; and

Whereas the member for Preston is the first African Nova Scotian woman to serve as a member of Nova Scotia's Executive Council, and the member for Pictou West is the first woman to serve as the House of Assembly's Speaker;

Therefore be it resolved that a permanent recognition of these two singular firsts of the member for Preston and the member for Pictou West be established in Province House by the Chief Clerk of the House of Assembly.

Speaker, I ask for waiver of notice and passage without debate.

[1:15 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings West.

PINK SHIRT DAY: ANTI-BULLYING EVENT - RECOG.

CHRIS PALMER: Speaker, on this last Wednesday of February, we come together to raise our voices against bullying and to promote kindness.

Pink Shirt Day is about more than just wearing pink - it's a powerful symbol of solidarity and compassion. The Pink Shirt movement began in the Berwick area, when David Shepherd and Travis Price, two high school students at Central Kings Rural High, wore pink shirts in solidarity with a classmate who was bullied for wearing pink the day before.

As we wear our pink today, let us remember the students who ignited this movement. We thank David Shepherd and Travis Price for their courage in standing up to bullying, and for promoting this message to every corner of our province and, indeed, around the world. Let us stand together, shoulder to shoulder, against bullying in all its forms, as we create a safe and inclusive environment for everyone.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction before my statement.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, I would like to direct the attention of the House to the West Gallery so I may introduce Mr. Dennis Adams, executive director of Leave Out Violence Everywhere Nova Scotia; Ms. Marika Paris, director of operations; and Mr. Nathaniel Dayes, a referral officer. We welcome them to the House as February 28th is Pink Shirt Day, a day designated to draw attention to worldwide efforts at counteracting bullying of all types. I would like to thank our guests for joining us, and I'd like the House to offer them a warm welcome.

THE SPEAKER: Welcome.

The honourable member for Yarmouth.

LOVE NOVA SCOTIA: AT-RISK YOUTH PGMS. - RECOG.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, I rise today to recognize the contributions of LOVE Nova Scotia in working towards the elimination of violence due to bullying in our province.

You may recall that Pink Shirt Day is a global anti-bullying movement that had humble beginnings in 2007 in small-town Nova Scotia. It represents a peer-inspired campaign to prevent bullying in schools, workplaces, homes, and online. Pink Shirt Day increases awareness of these issues.

Leave Out Violence Everywhere Nova Scotia is a Halifax-based non-profit organization, the aim of which is to provide support for disadvantaged youth aged 12 to 18 who are at risk of becoming victims of or participating in violence themselves. LOVE provides arts and leadership programs, after-school programs, summer camps, 24-hour crisis support, and on-site social workers. Participants learn about where to go for help if they have a problem.

Nova Scotia's at-risk youth emerge from LOVE's programs with greater resilience, heightened skills, and the confidence to be leaders.

Please join me in showing our deep appreciation for the leadership provided by LOVE as they work across our province with at-risk youth in reducing the impact of violence in Nova Scotian homes, schools, communities, and workplaces.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

FLENJOR FOODS/INDIGEVISOR: AWDS. FINALISTS - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I am proud to say that this year, two of the five nominees for the Halifax Business Awards Small Business of the Year, Flenjor Foods and Indigevisor, are located in Dartmouth North. Better still, I am excited to share that Flenjor Foods, the African food vendor with a location at Albro Lake and Wyse Roads, won the award in January.

When Business Voice magazine asked Flenjor what they were most proud of, they replied, their contribution to immigrant retention in this province. Being able to find food from your home country that you're used to cooking, that your family has been cooking for generations, is a major factor in many people's decisions to stay in Nova Scotia.

Indigevisor is a women-led business on Wyse Road that assists clients in creating a reconciliation action plan. When asked what they were most proud of, Indigevisor told Business Voice: "sparking systemic cultural change." I ask the House to join me in congratulating Indigevisor in their nomination for Small Business of the Year, and Flenjor Foods for bringing the award home.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Passage.

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: I beg leave to make an introduction. I would like to draw your attention to the Speaker's Gallery. I am honoured to have with me today my constituency assistant, Lisa Rochon - all stand up - as well as Suzanne Switzer, who is a recent published author from Eastern Passage, her wife, Mary, as well as Suzanne's - Catherine Gabriel, who is her sister. I'd like to welcome them to the Legislature today.

THE SPEAKER: Welcome, it's a pleasure to have you.

SWITZER, SUZANNE: BOOKS PUBLICATION - CONGRATS.

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: I rise today to congratulate Suzanne Switzer on publishing her book *Jake the Chain Snake* and the recent publication of the associated coloring book *Jake's Colorful Ocean Adventure*.

Jake the Chain Snake is a children's book which was inspired by Jake the Snake, located beside the boardwalk in Eastern Passage. Jake the Chain Snake is a meandering compilation of painted rocks left by local residents and tourists alike. The outpouring of community involvement sparked an inspiration in Suzanne to tell the wonderful story of Jake the Chain Snake. Suzanne, along with community members, hope that Jake the Chain Snake grows in number to reach a world record.

I ask all members of the Nova Scotia Legislature to join me in congratulating Suzanne on her wonderfully written and beautifully illustrated, heartwarming book and colouring book, and for being an inspiration for kindness throughout our community.

THE SPEAKER: Jake the Chain Snake. Say that five times.

The honourable member for Yarmouth.

MLA FOR COLE HBR.: INFL. BLACK CDNS. LIST - RECOG.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: I rise today to recognize my friend and colleague, the honourable member for Cole Harbour, who has been named one of the Most Influential Black Canadians in the country. (Applause)

The member for Cole Harbour was first elected as MLA in 2013, defeating a sitting Premier, and he has made incredible strides advocating for the African Nova Scotian community ever since. He's a driving force of the Canadian Congress of Black Parliamentarians, focusing on how government can better serve African Canadians by building trust and increasing engagement within the community. The member for Cole Harbour's passion and compassion are truly unmatched.

We're grateful for the strong voice he brings to our caucus and to the Legislature; our Province is a better place for his contributions. I fondly recall one of the most moving speeches that I've heard delivered in this House by the member for Cole Harbour where he reminded every single person in the House that what the African Nova Scotian community was looking for was not saviours, but allies. Let's all continue to be allies as African Heritage Month comes to a close.

I also want to recognize all African Nova Scotians for the contributions they make to our communities and our province, and reaffirm that there is more work to do to make our province a more equitable place. (Standing ovation)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

PETE'S FROOTIQUE WORKERS: 1ST CONTRACT - CONGRATS.

GARY BURRILL: I would like to extend the congratulations of the House to the 92 workers of Pete's Frootique, Halifax location, members of the Service Employees International Union Local 2 on achieving their first contract as a result of their seven-week strike which ended January 5th. The gains attained in this contract are considerable, including three paid sick days a year, bereavement leave, and improved vacation benefits and wages.

Prior to the strike, the majority of Pete's workers were paid minimum wage. Wages will now range from \$15.45 to \$19.57. Lump-sum payments were also achieved for all members of the union. It was not uncommon during the strike to hear people speak of it as a valiant but possibly hopeless effort, but with tenacity and courage, Pete's workers held rallies at their Dresden Row location and across the city, and were joined by union workers across the country in a national day of action. They have shown conclusively how much can be accomplished when people mean business about solidarity and fairness.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Antigonish.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

MICHELLE THOMPSON: In the Speaker's Gallery today, I am honoured to introduce members of the MacLeod family. William, Brian Douglas, Sheumais, and Jermal are joining us here today as we celebrate the life and the legacy of Brian MacLeod. While all of these individuals are tremendous in their own right, I do want to note that the eldest son, William, is not only an author and a musician, but he's also a real-life cowboy and a talented cattle roper.

THE SPEAKER: Welcome to Province House.

The honourable member for Antigonish.

MACLEOD, BRIAN: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Speaker, I rise today acknowledge Brian MacLeod, who was posthumously inducted into the Nova Scotia Business Hall of Fame last night.

Brian passed away Christmas Eve, leaving behind a tremendous legacy. Brian was a builder - a builder of families, communities, and businesses - who fiercely believed in rural communities. He was an entrepreneur, building MacLeod Cares with his late wife, Irene, providing senior care in 14 communities and employing 1,000 workers.

Brian passionately believed that healthy communities had vibrant cultures, so he contributed much time and resources to help communities celebrate their heritage. He supported many local causes in his home community of Antigonish and throughout the province.

The MacLeod family motto is "hold fast," which means that in times of trial you hold on, stoic in your pursuit, assured that time will provide the answers that may not be present in the moment. He held fast.

William, Brian Douglas, Sheumais, and Jermal, please accept the condolences of the House on the passing of your father, and also our deep gratitude to him and your mother for their lasting and significant impact in Antigonish and in our province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

PURCELL, DAN: PROTX SVCS. - RECOG.

LORELEI NICOLL: Speaker, today I stand to recognize a local health and wellness business owner, Dan Purcell of PROTx Portland Hills in Cole Harbour-Dartmouth. Dan grew up in the Cole Harbour-Lawrencetown area and is passionate about working with clients who are active and self-motivated, and who appreciate the value of living a healthy lifestyle.

A favourite saying of Dan's is "What you do outside of this clinic is more important than what you do when you are here." He firmly believes that physiotherapy is a critical piece of the health and wellness puzzle, but that without all the other pieces, it will never be complete.

Currently, Dan is focusing on the growth of his PROTx Portland Hills business, with the goal of becoming the go-to location for injury management and health and wellness services in greater Halifax. I support Dan in his approach of encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

BORDEN, PERRY: NEW CHIEF JUDGE - RECOG.

SUZY HANSEN: I rise today to recognize Chief Judge Perry Borden, of the Provincial Court of Nova Scotia. He is the province's first African Nova Scotian to achieve that position. Chief Judge Borden is originally from the North End of Halifax, and he graduated from the Schulich School of Law in 2002 before being called to the bar in 2003. He received a Queen's Counsel designation in 2020.

He began his legal career as an associate lawyer in Halifax, and in 2007 he joined the Nova Scotia Public Prosecution Service. By 2015, he had risen to the level of Senior Crown Attorney, a position he held until his appointment to the bench. As a lawyer, Chief Judge Borden spent countless hours giving back to his community.

I'm grateful to have mentors like him in our community to inspire us to be successful, to give back, and never forget where we came from. He has improved access to justice and legal services for historically marginalized groups, and I would like to thank Chief Judge Perry F. Borden for always looking out for us in the community and having those real talks with us. You are truly an inspiration.

[1:30 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Truro-Bible Hill-Millbrook-Salmon River.

CASEY, EARL: CONSTRUCTION IND. CONTRIBS. - RECOG.

DAVE RITCEY: I rise today to recognize Earl Casey of Casey Concrete Ltd. for his invaluable contributions to the construction industry and to offer my congratulations for his induction into the Nova Scotia Business Hall of Fame last night.

Earl's leadership and the dedication of the Casey family have been instrumental in shaping the landscape of our communities. Their commitment to excellence, quality, and innovation sets a remarkable standard in the industry. Earl's vision and tireless efforts have not only built structures, but also forged enduring relationships and strengthened communities.

Here's to celebrating the legacy of Casey Concrete Ltd. and the visionary leadership of Earl Casey, who inspires countless others in the construction sector. I would like to congratulate and thank Earl, Eleanor, Steven, Bruce, Peter, and the entire Casey family for their contributions to our community and Province once again.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Yes, please do.

KELLY REGAN: I would direct the members' attention to the west gallery, where we have some guests joining us from Nova Scotia Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada. Resplendent in red is Hilary Richardson-Murphy, who is a senior advisor with Nova Scotia Heart and Stroke Foundation, and with her is Kevin Dolan, who is an advocate and survivor. I would ask them to both rise and receive the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome and thank you for being here.

The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HEART MONTH: CARDIAC ARREST ACTION - RECOG.

KELLY REGAN: February is Heart Month. This month, we raise awareness of heart disease and shine a spotlight on a condition that can happen to anyone, at any age, at any time: cardiac arrest. Cardiac arrest means the heart has stopped beating. It's a critical

medical emergency. Every second counts. According to Heart and Stroke Foundation, 60,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests occur each year in Canada. Only one in 10 people will survive.

This doesn't have to be the case. Kevin Dolan was playing pickup basketball back in 2019, when one of his friends noticed he had collapsed. It was his 42nd birthday. The quick action of those around him, doing absolutely the right things - calling 911, performing CPR for 24 minutes, and using an AED, an automated external defibrillator - saved his life. When you perform CPR and use an AED, you can double the chance the person will survive, as happened with our guest. I encourage everyone to learn CPR and AED use. It's easy to learn, simple to do, and training can be completed with friends or colleagues, even your caucus.

I want to remind Nova Scotians that they can connect via heartandstroke.ca to schedule an educator to come work with your group and save a life like Kevin's.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

COWARD, RUBIN: TOM MILLER AWD. RECIP. - CONGRATS.

KENDRA COOMBES: I rise to recognize the 39th annual Tom Miller Human Rights Award recipient, Rubin "Rocky" Coward, for his dedication and outstanding service in the community, especially to those disadvantaged by discrimination or poverty.

For over 30 years, Rocky has dedicated his life to fighting systemic racism in Canada. The fight began with Rocky's battle against racism directed at him while serving in the Canadian Armed Forces, which led to PTSD and an early retirement from his military career. In receiving the award, Rocky stated: "It almost made me weep to think that I'm getting an award for being human to other people . . . From women that have been raped that I represent, to people that have post-traumatic stress disorder, from racism or discrimination or bullying . . . trauma and pain do not discriminate and neither do I."

Rocky's speech during the 2024 African Heritage Month Gala Dinner was inspiring, and it was a privilege to be present for it. Congratulations, Mr. Rubin "Rocky" Coward for receiving the Tom Miller Human Rights Award. You've made Whitney Pier very proud.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Shore.

KELLY, RYAN: NEW CANSAIL CEO - BEST WISHES

HON. KENT SMITH: I rise today to bring recognition to Ryan Kelly, who is about to move on from his employment with the Province as special advisor to the Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture.

Recently, Ryan accepted the position as new Chief Executive Officer for Sail Canada. A lifelong sailor, he worked for a long time in support of the Royal Canadian Sea Cadet Sailing Program, and he was the president of Sail Newfoundland and Labrador for eight years. Ryan is currently a dinghy coach at the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron and is an active Sail Canada Learning Facilitator. Ryan's professional career has centered around the ocean sector, with more than 15 years in marine safety and general workforce development.

Ryan's assistance was vital to the previous minister and has been critical for me as I transitioned into the role of Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture. His expertise has been invaluable to the team, and I appreciate his hard work and dedication. He will be missed.

I ask all members of the Assembly to join me in thanking Ryan for his service to the province, and to wish him success in his new position of CEO of CANSail.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

FELLOW MLAS: SUPPORT DURING ILLNESS - THANKS

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Speaker, I rise today to thank my colleague, the MLA for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier, for putting my name forward for a recovery basket from the Island Breast Friends of Cape Breton. I was really touched with the delivery of the most beautiful comfort basket, and they actually deliver this to many women recovering from breast cancer surgery and chemotherapy.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all my colleagues from all sides who reached out to me with notes of encouragement, kind thoughts, and flowers. I will be forever grateful to all for giving me strength and warmth as I navigated this difficult time. We may disagree many times on policy, but it is comforting to know that we are all here for each other in difficult times.

I ask the House to join me today in thanking Island Breast Friends of Cape Breton, and to celebrate our commitment to hold each other up in the House during times of difficulty.

THE SPEAKER: It is such a blessing to have you back. It really is nice to see you.

The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Speaker, may I make an introduction?

THE SPEAKER: Yes, you may.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you. I would love to introduce my

friends in the gallery today, Sasha Tomin and Ms. Sandra Woodford. I'm so pleased to have them here with us today. Sandra and I have (inaudible) since 1992, I believe, and she just retired as a registered nurse. They are from Liverpool. Welcome.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

BACON, LYMAN: COM. SERV. - THANKS

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Speaker, today I rise to give recognition to a great man from our area of Cumberland North, Mr. Lyman Bacon. Mr. Lyman Bacon just retired from the Truemanville Volunteer Fire Department, where he served for 38 years as a firefighter, as well as 29 years as the fire chief.

Recently, we had a celebration in our community that was organized by his two sons. I want to thank them for taking the time to bring everyone in our community together to honour Mr. Lyman Bacon. He's a humble man, so it was hard for him, but he took all the praise very graciously.

Speaker, I just want to mention and bring him and honour him today here in this House. Mr. Lyman Bacon was not only a leader in Truemanville, but also provincially and Maritime-wide, as he held various positions as firefighter here in the Maritimes.

Thank you, Speaker, and we bring praise to Mr. Lyman Bacon.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

FOOD BANK: USAGE INCREASE - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: At the beginning of 2024, the North Dartmouth Outreach Resource Centre Society, one of Dartmouth North's local food banks, posted a sobering figure to its Facebook page. In 2023, the average number of children served by the food bank went up to 70 in 2023 from 31 in 2022. Even more sobering is that the average number of children served by the food bank in both 2021 and 2020 was 15. That means that today, the North Dartmouth Outreach Resource Centre alone is serving 55 more children than they were three years ago. They're just one of the many food banks in Dartmouth North, and of course the province, that is serving the people bearing the brunt of the affordability crisis.

Nova Scotia has the highest child poverty rate in Atlantic Canada, and approximately one in four kids in Nova Scotia don't get enough to eat every day. There are so many things we can and must do to reduce and eliminate child poverty, some of which we have proposed in this Legislature.

I hope that every member in this House can commit themselves this session to

working toward a world where no family has to rely on a food bank to feed their children.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants East.

BORDEN COLLEY, SHERRI: HON. DOCTORATE - CONGRATS.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Speaker, I would like to recognize Enfield's Sherri Borden Colley on being honoured with a Doctorate of Civil Law by the University of King's College.

Sherri has been a dedicated journalist for most of her life and has been committed to telling the stories of African Nova Scotians such as Viola Desmond. Sherri has a special talent of connecting with people, giving her the ability to portray the entire truth in her stories.

Speaker, Sherri is a staple in our community, and we are proud of all her accomplishments. I would like all the members to join me in congratulating Sherri on her Doctorate of Civil Law from the University of King's College.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

SOULS HBR. RESCUE MISSION: DROP-IN CTR. - THANKS

FRED TILLEY: Speaker, I rise today to congratulate Souls Harbour Rescue Mission for opening a drop-in centre in the community of Northside-Westmount, specifically on the Main Street in Sydney Mines, providing a hot meal each day for the residents who are in need and need that. I would like to welcome them to the community, specifically Terry Dwyer and his family, who moved two years ago to get this set up in Cape Breton. A much-needed service for those in our community.

I would like to welcome and thank new chef Scott Anderson and the manager, Alana MacLellan. They're open Monday through Friday from 12:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. for a hot meal and a place to meet the community and have great conversation.

Congratulations to Souls Harbour Rescue Mission. Welcome to the community.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

PRICE, SHEVY: COM. CONSULTATION - RECOG.

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, I rise today to recognize a beautiful person, Shevy Price. This mother, visionary, entrepreneur, and community advocate is a public figure across Atlantic Canada. Formerly known as one of her region's most influential underground artists, Price has seamlessly transitioned into community consultation and

management. Her unwavering love for communities is the root of her business, Prix Co., a consultant company that aims to support community members through shared knowledge resources, conflict resolution, and advocacy.

Price's community-centric approach is not only at the heart of Prix Co., but it's also the approach taken regarding management. She enjoys assisting underrepresented local artists by curating inclusive opportunities, marketing strategies, and administrative support - all by working with each artist individually to ensure tailored solutions and recommendations. Price dedicates her social footprint to nurturing community growth, fostering collaboration, and amplifying connectivity. I love her saying: "Together, let's elevate HRM communities."

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

GOODMAN, SONNY "TUG": DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Speaker, it is with sad heart and mind I speak of the passing of Sonny "Tug" Goodman. Sonny was a bigger-than-life figure in our community. Sonny was generous and cherished his friends, family, and community. I'm going to miss the loud voice, our arguments, and his larger-than-life personality.

Sonny leaves behind a legacy of kindness, hard work, and friendship. To his son David, know that your dad was loved, and that love will never stop. Rest in peace, Tug. An entire community mourns for you.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

ROBICHAUD, FRANCIS: CERT. OF RECOG. - CONGRATS.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Speaker, I rise today to extend my heartfelt recognition to Francis Robichaud, who was recently honored by the Meteghan Fire Department with a Certificate of Recognition. This certificate commemorates his unwavering commitment as a former member of the fire department and for his many years of service. Mr. Robichaud, now in his nineties, not only dedicated himself to serving as local undertaker but also played a pivotal role in providing ambulance services.

These early volunteers not only responded to emergencies in our communities, but also played a key role in expanding and shaping the fire departments into the organizations we see today. We owe a debt of gratitude to Francis and other volunteers of the time. Their commitment laid the foundation for our current well-equipped and well-trained fire departments.

I ask that all members join me in thanking Mr. Francis Robichaud and all the firefighters who have contributed to these organization. Merci.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

[1:45 p.m.]

MICHNAT FASHION HOUSE: AFRICAN DESIGNS - WELCOME

LISA LACHANCE: This past Winter, my office building, which is just up the hill from the House, welcomed MichNat Fashion House to their brand-new studio location.

The MichNat brand has been going strong since 2020, and now has the space where clients can come to peruse textiles and designs, and even get fitted for custom outfits. MichNat specializes in unique, Afro-centric clothing designs, and ships their merchandise all across Canada. Everything is designed by Funmi Odeniyi, whose goal is to increase diversity in the fashion industry in Atlantic Canada. She makes her pieces by infusing traditional African prints into contemporary designs with amazing results.

I invite all my colleagues in the House to join me in welcoming Funmi and MichNat Fashion to Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Queens.

QUEENS CO. ATHLETES: SPECIAL OLYMPICS - BEST WISHES

HON. KIM MASLAND: Speaker, I rise today to wish four Queens County athletes the very best of luck as they take part in the Special Olympics National Games in Calgary this week. Jillian Young, Michael Moreau, and Rebecca Delaney will be competing in the snowshoe competition, and Ben Theriau will compete in curling.

Whether veterans to national competition or first timers on the national stage, I am confident that each of these incredibly talented and dedicated athletes will represent Team Nova Scotia with pride, and will bring their A-game to their events.

It gives me great pleasure to pass on my best wishes for success to these athletes. I hope they enjoy their travels, make new friends, and, most of all, have fun doing what they love. Always remember, Jillian, Michael, Rebecca, and Ben: I am your biggest fan.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

PARAMEDICS: EHS EXEMPLARY SVC. MEDAL - CONGRATS.

CARMAN KERR: Paramedics are a critical part of our emergency medical team in our province, and we owe them a debt of gratitude for the tremendous sacrifice they make to help their fellow Nova Scotians. The Emergency Health Services Exemplary Service Medal honours paramedics who have demonstrated exemplary service in their

careers for at least 20 years, including 10 years in an emergency medical services position that involves potential risk.

We have amazing paramedics in Annapolis, and I was pleased that this year, two of them - Scott Veinot and Lorna Mastin - were among the paramedics who were honoured with this prestigious award. I invite all members of the House of Assembly to join me in congratulating both Scott and Lorna, and all the recipients of this medal, and in thanking them for their exceptional service.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

WILLIAMSON, H./HAWLEY, B.: FIREFIGHTING - THANKS

KENDRA COOMBES: I rise to recognize two incredible individuals whom I have had the privilege of knowing for 35 years: Harold Williamson and Benedict “Benny” Hawley. Harold and Benny are long-time serving members of the Scotchtown Volunteer Fire Department. As of October 1, 2023, Harold Williamson had been serving the community for 54 years, and Benny Hawley has been serving the community for 50 years. Both remain active members of the department and are significant assets to the fire service. They serve their community with honour, pride, and distinction.

On behalf of their grateful community, I ask the House to join me in thanking them for their combined 104 years of service.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Digby-Annapolis.

NORMAN, A. & E.: LAZY BEAR BREWING - RECOG.

HON. JILL BALSER: Today I rise to recognize a very popular family-owned business in Smiths Cove. Lazy Bear Brewing is a microbrewery owned and operated by Andy and Erin Norman. They started their business in 2016 with one beer called the Gut View Amber, a brown ale. They began by selling it at the Annapolis Royal Farmers & Traders Market and sold out on the very first day. They’ve come a long way since then. Now they offer over 10 different products, including cider and mead, and they offer wood-fired pizza at their brewery, and often host events and pop-up vendors.

Andy is a professional engineer and specializes in process improvements and operations at Lazy Bear, and Erin earned her Master of Food Science and Process Engineering at Dalhousie University. Together, they welcome visitors and tourists from all around the province and beyond. Thank you, Erin and Andy. Keep up the great work.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour.

SOUTHWELL, DR. R./GROSSE, R.: INFL. BLACK CDNS LIST - RECOG.

HON. TONY INCE: I stand to also recognize two other Nova Scotians who made that list of 100 Most Influential Black Canadians. There is Dr. Rustum Southwell, who is the executive director of the BBI, and Mr. Russell Grosse, who is the executive director of the Black Cultural Centre.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

INTERFAITH HARMONY HFX.: HARMONY WEEK - RECOG.

LISA LACHANCE: I'd like to recognize an organization in our community that works hard to promote inclusivity and celebrate cultural diversity in the HRM. Interfaith Harmony Halifax is a volunteer-based organization whose goal is to foster interfaith awareness, understanding, appreciation, respect, diversity, inclusion, and peace through a number of events and activities that include various theistic and non-theistic groups within the HRM.

Every year, during the first week of February, Interfaith Harmony Halifax organizes a World Interfaith Harmony Week, packed with a wide array of events to celebrate and teach different cultural traditions. This year, they held a very successful week, the theme of which was being together at the table, emphasizing the importance of inclusive collaboration and conversations about diversity and peace.

I ask my fellow members to join me in recognizing Interfaith Harmony Halifax for all their hard work in hosting another uplifting Interfaith Harmony Week this past year.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sackville-Cobequid.

KINETTE CLUB: 60TH ANNIV. - CONGRATS.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: I rise today to congratulate the Kinette Club of Sackville. Kin Canada, an all-Canadian service organization, has been serving its communities through hosting and sponsoring events and community service projects since February 20, 1920.

On May 25, 2024, the Kinette Club of Sackville will be celebrating their 60th anniversary of serving the community. For the past 60 years, the Kinette Club has worked diligently to better our community and enhance the well-being of our community members.

I would like to ask that all members of the House of Assembly join me in congratulating the accomplishments and dedication of each Kinette past and present of the Kinette Club of Sackville, and thank them for their efforts in serving the community's greatest needs over the past 60 years.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

SALV. ARMY TEAM: COM. SERV. - CONGRATS.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: I rise today to highlight the exceptional efforts of the Salvation Army Halifax West Community Church Street Ministry team. Their commitment to aiding the homeless community reflects the longstanding tradition of the Salvation Army, which has been providing emergency disaster services in the Maritime region since the 1917 Halifax Explosion.

Despite the presence of numerous organizations assisting the homeless, this ministry team has made it their mission to target areas that are often overlooked by others. Led by Dave Watts and a team of 20 dedicated volunteers, they tirelessly visit these sites with their four emergency disaster service trucks every Monday and Thursday to offer vital resources, food, clothing, and support. One Monday evening in January, they exemplified compassion and dedication by serving over 40 individuals at five encampment sites and transit terminals throughout the city.

Please join me in recognizing and applauding the invaluable contributions of the Salvation Army Halifax West Community Church Street Ministry team. Their selfless service embodies the spirit of compassion and community support that makes our city a better place for all.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Lunenburg West.

CROUSE, JEFF & SHELLEY: CURLING CH'SHIP WIN - RECOG.

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I rise today to recognize Jeff and Shelley Crouse of the Bridgewater Curling Club on their win of the Nova Scotia Stick Curling Association's Mixed Provincial Championship in January. Twenty-one mixed teams from across the province competed in the second annual championship held in Amherst from January 19th to 21st.

The Crouse duo was victorious after defeating a team from Amherst in the championship game. This is an incredible achievement, as it's only Shelley and Jeff's second time competing at this level. They'll now move on and proudly represent their club and Nova Scotia at the Maritime Stick Curling Championship in Prince Edward Island this March. Next year, they plan to compete to defend their title at the 2025 Mixed Stick Curling Championship set to take place in Bridgewater.

I ask the House to join me in congratulating Jeff and Shelley on their championship win, and wish these Nova Scotian ambassadors the best as they continue their journey over the upcoming year and beyond.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

FURDAS, G. & O.: DIABETES CARE AWARENESS - RECOG.

BRAEDON CLARK: With regard to the announcement this morning about diabetes care, I wanted to give a shout-out to two constituents of mine: Gloria Furdas and her daughter Olivia. Over the last two and a half years, they've been instrumental in my understanding of the issues around diabetes care and the profound differences that continuous glucose monitors can make to the lives of diabetics, particularly children and seniors.

I just wanted to give Gloria and Olivia a shoutout, and all of those in my constituency of Bedford South and beyond who will benefit from the fact that they will no longer have to prick their finger eight times a day, and worry constantly about where their blood sugars are at. I just wanted to give a shoutout to Gloria and Olivia and everybody else who will benefit from that.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth East.

AFFIRMATIVE VENTURES: HOUSING CONTRIBS. - RECOG.

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: Speaker, I rise this afternoon to recognize Affirmative Ventures from Dartmouth East.

Affirmative Ventures is a non-profit organization involved in supportive living and the development of affordable housing projects in the Dartmouth-Cole Harbour area. One of these projects is on Main Street within a clear view of my constituency office, and I always enjoy observing the progress they are making every day. The Province of Nova Scotia is a strong supporter of the Main Street centre, which will provide more affordable housing.

Affirmative Ventures' commitment to addressing the pressing need for affordable housing and their willingness to partner with the Government of Nova Scotia, the federal government and HRM exemplify the collaborative approach required to tackle this important issue. Their work not only benefits the community, but also sets a positive example for other organizations to follow.

Speaker, I ask the House to please join me in expressing our sincere appreciation for the Affirmative Ventures Association for their contributions to increase the availability of affordable housing in our province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

MCNEIL, N.: DIABETES CARE AWARENESS - RECOG.

FRED TILLEY: Speaker, like my colleague for Bedford South, I'd like to thank a young man by the name of Nathan McNeil, who came to my office early on after being elected, advocating for continuous glucose monitoring. He explained to me the benefits and the health prevention of those monitors, and how expensive they actually were for people.

I'd like to commend the minister for making that announcement this morning. It's going to help a lot of people in Cape Breton. Thank you to Nathan for all your hard work and advocacy on this behalf.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sackville-Uniacke.

HALISI CAFÉ: NEW BUSINESS - BEST WISHES

HON. BRAD JOHNS: Speaker, as this month is African Heritage Month, I would like to take an opportunity to recognize a recently opened restaurant in my constituency. Halisi Café has just recently opened in Middle Sackville.

Halisi is a locally owned restaurant which is dedicated to offering fresh, healthy, and flavourful food choices to all customers, including those with eating restrictions.

The owner of the café, Suzanne Riendeau, was inspired to open her own café after she and her son had fallen ill. To try to restore their health, Suzanne began to expand her already-extensive cooking skills, and started to master something that people were commenting on, so she thought it would be time to open a restaurant.

Recently, I had the honour with the Premier to actually visit Suzanne's restaurant. We had the opportunity to try her carefully prepared home-cooked food.

I would like to ask all the members of the Legislature to join me in wishing Suzanne much success with her growing business.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hammonds Plains-Lucasville.

MARCHAND, BRAD: HOCKEY ACHIEVEMENTS - RECOG.

HON. BEN JESSOME: Speaker, today I'd like to recognize and congratulate Brad Marchand and the Marchand family. Brad recently celebrated 1,000 games in the NHL. He was drafted in 2006, 71st overall. He's won a World Cup gold; he's won a Stanley Cup; he's won a World Junior gold. He's a big supporter of Maritime NHLers 4 Kids. This year he became Boston's team captain. He's closing in on 1,000 points. He's surpassed 900. We want to wish him more success and more Stanley Cups in his future.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time is now 2:00 p.m. We will finish at 2:50 p.m.

[2:00 p.m.]

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: SERIOUS ILLNESS LEAVE - UPDATE

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, working people in Nova Scotia are struggling under the financial squeeze of having some of the highest inflationary costs in the country and also paying the highest taxes. Working people also have the least amount of job-protected leave in the case of serious illness. After our caucus filibustered hard in the last sitting of the Legislature, the government agreed to pass an Opposition resolution to evaluate serious illness, job-protected leave, and to present a plan to this Legislature in this sitting.

Can the Premier please provide us an update on that resolution that was passed by the entire House?

HON. TIM HOUSTON (The Premier): The consultations are ongoing. The minister is trying to move that file along. Consultations are ongoing with Nova Scotians as to what may be possible in that space. We're certainly open-minded as we do those consultations.

ZACH CHURCHILL: This was a resolution passed by the House. There was supposed to be an update presented to this Chamber in this Spring session. I'm worried about the government still telling us that this is in consultation, because we all know that with this government that's where issues go to die. That's where issues get brushed under the rug. That's where they try to push everything off until after the next election. We've seen how they consulted on Pallet shelters. We've seen how they consulted on the Coastal Protection Act. We've seen how they consult with municipal governments in this province. We've got people in Nova Scotia who have serious illness and they don't have job-protected leave over three days.

Will the Premier please commit to ensuring that Nova Scotians who have serious illness actually know that after they deal with that illness, they can go back to work?

THE PREMIER: This is a serious issue. We're taking it seriously. We're being mindful of those Nova Scotians and respectful of their situations for sure. I want to be very clear on that. When we say we're going to consult and listen to Nova Scotians, we do that.

We invest in Nova Scotians. You know, Speaker, listening to the member opposite, I was reminded of something I read in the Auditor General's report yesterday. The Auditor General talked about a Liberal policy, a no-trust policy. I'm not kidding. The Liberals actually have a no-trust policy. If you're in the Chamber and you close your eyes and you just listen to the member, you can see he embodies that no-trust policy. I would like to ask the member: Did he create the Liberal no-trust policy? He certainly preaches it and practises it.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Here we see the problem with the leadership of the province. Here we see the problem with this government. We are talking about Nova Scotians who are struggling to make ends meet, struggling to get by, who don't have job-protected leave when they have cancer, and what's the Premier's priority? Taking shots at the Opposition - like he's got nothing better to do and like there aren't bigger issues in the province that are affecting people every single day of the week, affecting a constituent like his. Kathy MacNaughton, whose husband was dying of cancer, had to take on a manual job to pay their car insurance.

Does the Premier really think that taking shots at us is going to help his constituent, Kathy MacNaughton, and other Nova Scotians who have to go to work when they have cancer?

THE PREMIER: I know Kathy well and have great respect. I have worked with her through this process. We're sincere. We're doing the consultations. When we say we're doing something, we actually do it.

The Leader of the Official Opposition can talk about leadership. I'll talk about leadership with him any day of the week. The Auditor General just yesterday said that the Auditor General had concerns with respect to the management integrity of the Liberal Party. I know this leader says he inherited the problem from somebody. I don't know who he inherited the problem from, but I can tell you this, Speaker, he did nothing for two years except look the other way and try to, in the Auditor General's words, conceal the misappropriation of funds. That's not leadership. On this side, every single day, we go to work on behalf of Nova Scotians. We invest in Nova Scotians. We support them. That's what leadership is.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the New Democratic Party.

PREM.: AFFORDABLE HOUSING - PRIORITIZE

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Let's talk about housing. While the Premier maintains that increasing supply alone will fix our housing crisis, the tents across the province, the seniors being forced out of their apartments, and the families being priced out of this province tell a different story.

Despite an improvement in rental housing completions last year, the vacancy rate is unchanged: 1 per cent, and homelessness has tripled. When is this government going to recognize and prioritize the need for truly affordable housing?

THE PREMIER: This is a serious issue. I know the member and I have a philosophical difference on the housing situation. I firmly believe that the solution to a housing crisis is more housing across the spectrum. That's why we did the province's first - I think it's the first, but it's certainly a first in a long time - housing strategy, where we understand the need for 40,000 units over additional ones. That is also why, under the work of the minister, we see the first investment in over 20 years in public housing. That's action. It's why we see the first investments in making over 17,000 additional affordable units. We are getting to work, rolling up our sleeves, and getting it done, and we'll continue to do so.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Our philosophical difference is on the scale of effort required to address the affordable housing that we need, which we are losing much faster than the government cares to replace it. One housing scholar calculated that Halifax alone is losing as many as 31 affordable units per week. I'll table that. The wait-list for public housing across the province is nearly 5,000.

Those 247 units that might be built someday in the next several years will not make a dent. We're talking about a few months of loss of affordable housing units. The Pallet units and the shelters aren't going to make a dent either, because they're not housing. We need to protect the housing we have, and the programs in place are not moving fast enough. This is a Premier who wants to move quickly . . .

THE SPEAKER: Question.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: What is the plan for the 31 households a week that are losing housing?

THE PREMIER: There is work to be done. There will always be work to be done, but I wonder if the member opposite thinks that the \$1.7-billion investment we're making in housing will make a dent. I think it will. We know we need to increase the housing supply. We know we need sustainable, affordable housing, but that's why we're getting to work. That's why you see investments in student housing at the Nova Scotia Community College campuses. That's why you see it working with institutions like Cape Breton University on their student housing. This is also why you see subdivisions being - because we need housing across the spectrum.

It all plays together, and we are serious about making the investments. We're doing more of it tomorrow in the budget again.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: The work isn't working, Speaker. A recent report found

that rents in Halifax increased an average of 11.9 per cent in 2023, described as the highest single-year increase. While the Premier's been supercharging development in HRM, spending our money like water, and ignoring the real rent and eviction controls needed to keep people housed, affordability has declined steeply, and so have vacancy rates. Even in affordable buildings, when tenants move out or are forced to move or made to sign a fixed-term lease, rents go up, way up, and increasingly, this is a province where young people and families are priced out.

When will the Premier protect current tenants so that they can remain in homes they can afford while waiting for the trickle-down housing the Premier has promised?

THE PREMIER: Obviously, the member might not want to acknowledge that those supports are in place. Those investments are happening. I heard something I never thought I'd hear. I heard the NDP member talk about spending money like water. It's actually investments in Nova Scotians. We are investing in Nova Scotians.

We won't apologize for it, and we're not ashamed of it, and we will do a heck of a lot more of it starting again tomorrow. These are investments that Nova Scotians want to see. If the member has an issue with them, she can tell us which ones not to do, because we saw from the NDP government, when they were there, how not to invest in Nova Scotians. We learned the lesson and we're making things happen for Nova Scotians right now.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

DHW: NEED FOR BETTER OUTCOMES - ADDRESS

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: The one thing that this government loves to brag about is how much money they're spending. What the government fails to recognize are all the statistics and the lived experience of people that are getting worse by the week - health care system collapsing, ERs overrun, poverty on the rise, homelessness doubling. More extreme weather events that are pounding this province than ever before, and what are they spending money on to deal with these issues? Phone apps.

Oh, there's a health care crisis; well, we'll get a phone app for that. There's a climate change crisis; now we have a phone app for that. There's a homelessness crisis; don't worry, we've got a phone app for that. I find it completely ironic that the Premier said what happened in CBRM was a PR stunt. His whole government is a PR stunt.

THE SPEAKER: Question?

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: When will the government actually start investing in things that will change the outcomes and statistics that people are experiencing here in Nova Scotia?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: I'll tell you, eight years of austerity did nothing to help me do this job in the last two and a half years, but thanks to this Premier, we have invested record amounts of money. We do have an app, and I'll table it. There is an app for that - if you don't mind - and I hope everyone in the Chamber has downloaded it. It has expanded virtual care to every Nova Scotian in this province, giving them two free visits a year. (Applause)

Ten thousand patients are now able to access some of their records on their phones, which is country-leading.

AN HON. MEMBER: Oh, wow. (Applause)

MICHELLE THOMPSON: It allows us to navigate all of the different access points, which are 60,000 additional appointments per month. (Applause)

ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, what these apps don't do is get people family doctors. We've got 150,000 (inaudible) people without a family doctor. (Applause) What they don't do is increase access to emergency care, which has been shut down under this government. What they don't do is change poverty levels in this province that are getting worse.

What they don't do is get people housing who are living on the street. What they don't do is deal with the crime issues that we're seeing increase now because of these increases in poverty; and what they don't do is fix the issues around climate change that are impacting coastal communities from one end of this province to the other.

Again, the government is really focused on these apps when things are getting worse. My question is to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change because the Premier won't answer any questions, which I think is ridiculous: Does he really think this app is going to protect people who are building in very dangerous situations in coastal communities?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: You know what? You're right, an app won't fix everything. However, the strategic infrastructure is generational that we're investing in in this province. We have actually invested in surgical access which has reduced our wait time by 27 percent since April (inaudible).

We have invested in a number of different professionals. We now have physician assistants for the very first time in this province being trained. We have emergency medical responders who are being trained in this province. An app won't fix that, but boy, will it fix a lot.

In the meantime, we're spending money on things like emergency and urgent care, where nurse practitioners, physicians' assistants, waiting room care providers are all there

to support emergency work. We've invested incredible amounts of money in our Emergency Health Services system. An app will fix many things, but we have a tranche of money that's coming to support Nova Scotians as we transform health care.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

ECC: COASTAL CONSULTATION RESULTS - RELEASE

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I believe the question was for the Minister of Environment and Climate Change. We have recently witnessed in Nova Scotia some of the largest climate disasters on record. These climate emergencies have highlighted the vulnerability we are facing in our province with the tragic loss of homes from fires and floods and more, and inconsistent planning across our province.

Instead of implementing the Coastal Protection Act, the Province has scrapped it and abdicated responsibility, despite members of this government on record, all voting for it and supporting it in 2019. Now this government has taken its typical approach and has downloaded the responsibility to a different order of government.

It doesn't make sense to why this government has decided to reverse its support for protecting our coast and waiting until after consultation, unless there is something in the consultation we're not aware of. Will the minister finally release what was revealed in consultation?

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: I want to thank the honourable member for the question. Climate change is the issue of our time. That is why the first major piece of legislation this government introduced was the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. From there we released the first climate change risk assessment that outlines the hazards that Nova Scotians will be impacted by because of climate change. Of course, we've implemented the climate change plan. Now our most recent action plan is the coastal action plan, which looks to support informed decision-making for property owners, works with our municipal units for zoning, and deploys immediately coastal action. We have listened to Nova Scotians . . .

IAIN RANKIN: Speaker, the fact is they're obviously not following their climate action plan because they had a commitment to actually implement the Coastal Protection Act. What does that say about the rest of the plan that the minister is so passionate about? How can he be so passionate about what they're doing on coastal protection and the environment when they won't release the findings of this consultation and his decision to actually remove pending protection for 13,000 kilometres of coastline? That includes the most sensitive ecosystems we have in our province, whether it's the sand dunes - the Premier can laugh all he wants - and allow wealthy landowners to build rock walls on these most sensitive - on saltwater marshes, et cetera.

[2:15 p.m.]

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Speaker, we are absolutely focused on working with our municipal units to ensure coastal protection. We are focused on listening to Nova Scotians. In the process of listening to Nova Scotians, we know there is a diversity of opinion on how coastal protection should take place. Our government is absolutely focused on protecting the environment and you saw that when we protected Owls Head. I know the Liberal Party at this moment might be a little distracted by covering up misuse of funds, but we know on this side of the House we are focused on climate policy, implementing good climate policy, and implementing the coastal action plan.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect on a new question.

ECC: REMOVAL OF COASTLINE PROTECTION - EXPLAIN

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Speaker, I find it funny that the minister is talking about one small section of land and coastline when he has effectively removed the rest of the coastline of Nova Scotia from any protection. All this government can come up with is less than 1 per cent of land protection in this province so far in two years. When our government came in, with over 2 per cent - actually more than quadrupled - what this government looked at for conservation efforts.

Is he really going to tell this House that there are some people in this province who are asking him not to pass the Act, except for wealthy landowners? When we hear from municipalities and when we hear from environmental experts that they want this Act proclaimed? Who is he trying to protect with this move?

THE SPEAKER: Before we continue, I will ask the Minister of Environment and Climate Change to retract his words “cover up.”

The honourable member for Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

IAIN RANKIN: I retract that term and I will replace it with “conceal.”

THE SPEAKER: Go ahead, please.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: With respect to the honourable member’s question, the outcome here with the coastal action plan is to support property owners to make the most informed decision about their property. There is a diversity of opinion on this topic. I have had many government MLAs here on this side of the House express to me different perspectives on how coastal protection should take place. I have a question for the honourable member. When he had the privilege of serving as Premier of this province, why didn’t that member enact that piece of legislation?

IAIN RANKIN: The member knows that there's time that has to be put into putting regulations in place so that we get the Act right. He just explained that it's important to listen to Nova Scotians. We supported the Act, and at the time, they supported the Act. Now we're looking at a government that is backtracking on protecting our coastline. If he won't release the consultations - we tried through FOIPOP's and we got a decision from them that we're not entitled to any of what has come out in consultations. Surely the minister can tell us anything, or even a breakdown of who was for and against. He mentioned some MLAs he heard from who are against the Act. Which MLAs? Which regions of the province do they represent where they're against protecting their coastline in their constituencies?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Speaker, this government has always acted and will continue to act in an open and transparent way. That is why we've listened to Nova Scotians. We know there is a diversity of opinion. We have a coastal action plan that is a balanced plan that respects the rights of property owners, that gets them the information they need to make the most informed decision about their property, to help them identify the hazardous areas.

Speaker, as far as I'm concerned, that party over there is in no position whatsoever to talk to anyone about openness and transparency, given the scathing Auditor General report.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

DHW: HOGAN COURT PURCHASE PRICE - EXPLAIN

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness. In the Auditor General's report on the Hogan Court hotel deal, it was revealed that the highly unusual and concerning transaction was negotiated with a developer who didn't even own the property and then included \$500,000 to cover the developer's deed transfer tax after they bought and flipped the hotel to the Province.

My question is - and I think we would all like to know this - why is the government paying this developer's tax bill?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: We continually talk about Hogan Court, and I'm so pleased to be able to stand up and talk about that first-in-the-province transition-to-care facility. This is a monumental change. I can appreciate that they've . . . (interruption).

THE SPEAKER: Order. We're all a little bit too loud in here today. We're going to start again.

The honourable Minister of Health and Wellness.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Thank you. I'd like to thank the members opposite for just helping me prompt my response there. I might have missed that opportunity if they hadn't said something.

We are really pleased with this development. There was a right of first refusal that informed how we proceeded with the project. We bought this facility so that we can get more care faster to Nova Scotians, particularly our seniors who are waiting in hospital. There are things we can absolutely learn from the Auditor General's report. We have accepted them. Certainly the last Auditor General's report had said that I was going too fast and doing too much, and I will take that any day over other . . .

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, many may find it hard to believe, but despite spending a massive amount on this shell of a hotel, the government missed a pretty important part: the driveway. Shockingly, the government's new overpriced hotel doesn't even have road access. Instead, this government had to negotiate service and access agreements with the developer to make up for the omission.

Why did the purchase of this hotel fail to include a driveway, and how much are we paying the developer for road access to our own building?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: If the only thing the member opposite can find wrong with Hogan Court is that it doesn't have (interruption). The only thing we're talking about today is a little driveway. I feel confident in our ability to put in an adequate driveway that will help families pick up their loved one and take them home after they receive excellent care in a transition-to-care facility.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

MAH: RENT SUPPLEMENTS - INCREASE

HON. KELLY REGAN: Last year, this government quietly reduced and restricted requirements for rent supplements. For years, you could qualify for the program if you spent 30 per cent or more of your pre-tax income on rent, but last year, the government decided it needed to restrict access to those spending 50 per cent of their pre-tax income on rent. As a result, many people were excluded from the program.

Since then, the cost of living and the cost of rent have only increased. Many more people need help to pay their rent. My question to the minister is: In this year's budget, will the government reverse the punitive decision on the rent supplement requirements and increase spending on the program?

HON. JOHN LOHR: The reality is, when we came to government, the rent supplement program was about a \$10 million program that served about 2,000 individuals. It's now a \$52 million program that is serving 8,500 individuals. That program has grown

under our watch substantially. We are very proud of that program; we have one of the most successful rent supplement programs in Canada.

We realize the need is great out there. One of the things we've done - which is not really related to that but in my opinion fits the same venue - is the Secondary and Backyard Suite Incentive Program. We recognize if we put in a secondary suite somewhere and add to the actual amount of stock of housing, those people get the same benefits as . . .

KELLY REGAN: Speaker, they talk about an increase in demand for the program, but they don't connect the dots there. The reason there's an increase in demand for the program is because people can't pay their rent. They need help. Instead of restricting access to the program, they should be increasing the program further to make sure more people can qualify for it. They should go back to the 30 per cent rule instead of this 50 per cent rule. It doesn't make sense.

My question to the minister is: When will this government support people who need housing support by investing more in the rent supplement program and reversing last year's punitive, cruel decision?

JOHN LOHR: As the member might recall, in 2021 this was a 50-50 program - the federal government and the provincial government. Right now, this is \$42 million us and \$10 million the feds. The feds come in - and I've asked them that a number of times - they come in and our program changes. We have their support. That's the reality.

We're working hard to make this work for every Nova Scotian. At the end of the day, we realize the only real solution is more supply. That is why, on a number of fronts, we are investing in Nova Scotians, in Nova Scotia, to support more housing on the ground - as in 25 new modular units, which will be ready by June-July of this year. The historic 222 public housing builds. We are working hard to increase the . . .

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

MAH: RENT INCREASES - EXPLAIN

BRAEDON CLARK: We've heard a lot from the government side already today - from the minister and from the Premier - about investments in housing and how much they are building more homes faster. Yet the numbers tell a very different story. There are 300,000 renters in Nova Scotia, thousands of them in my riding of Bedford South, and they are falling farther and farther behind. That is not my opinion. That is a report that I will file here that showed Nova Scotia led the country in rental increases last year at 19 per cent, year over year.

My question to the minister is: Are the highest rental increases in the country something to be proud of and a sign that their plan is working?

HON. JOHN LOHR: Speaker, we recognize the stress across Nova Scotia in housing. The reality is that more people are coming to Nova Scotia. We welcome immigrants. I'm the son of immigrants. We want to have more people here. We want to see our province grow.

We know our demographics are changing; we are getting younger. These things are all so positive, but it puts stress on the housing situation. We recognize that. That's why, as a government, we've continued to invest in that. In fact, we saw a 25 per cent year-over-year increase in new starts in 2023 in housing.

We're working hard to make that happen. We recognize that, at the end of the day, this is a supply issue. We're working on many fronts on that. We're adding building inspectors. We're training more young people to be in all the trades we need. Thank you, Speaker. I see a little red circle.

BRAEDON CLARK: Actions speak much louder than words - actions that we have not seen from this government. We have not seen a change in the rent supplement program, which would make a big difference.

We have not seen the creation of an enforcement unit with residential tenancies, although this government has had a report on their desks for over a year now, but they will not say - the Minister of Environment and Climate Change was talking earlier about how transparent and open they are.

The Minister of Service Nova Scotia has had that report for a year, and we haven't seen a word of it, so I wonder how transparent and open that is.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: We know that the creation of a new compliance and enforcement division would be a new thing to Nova Scotia. We want to make sure that, if that's something the government does, we understand how to do it correctly and understanding that, through the Residential Tenancies Program, we're always looking at the lens of balance, through the balance of rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords.

The member opposite did say something about action speaking louder than words. It made me think a little bit about yesterday's unfolding of events and what the Auditor General pointed out in concealing the actions of - under the previous government, concealing the misuse of public funds. We can talk about misuse of public funds, we can talk about - all right, I'm going to sit down.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South on a new question.

[2:30 p.m.]

SNS: RES. TENANCIES ENFORCEMENT - START

BRAEDON CLARK: Again, as the Leader of the Opposition said earlier, I think what we are focused on here on this side of the House is what's really going on in people's daily lives and what they care about. What people care about is, Can I afford the rent? Too many are saying, No. What people really care about is, Do I have a family doctor? And 150,000 are saying, No. People think, Can I afford my prescriptions? Do I have a place to live? These are the questions Nova Scotians ask. These are the questions that Nova Scotians have gotten a resounding answer from this government, which is, No, we aren't going to help you. I'll ask the minister: When are they going to get the help they need, particularly on Residential Tenancies enforcement? Let's stop talking about balance and let's start talking about doing something.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: I look forward to debating the Opposition's bill pertaining to Residential Tenancies and the compliance and enforcement unit. I've spoken about that at length, and we'll have that opportunity later on. Our approach as a government on this side is demonstrated under the leadership of this Premier and all cabinet ministers. In fact, all of our caucus is listening to the concerns of Nova Scotians and is actually acting on them and giving more money in their pockets and acting on the concerns that we see every single day. There's going to be a lot more in tomorrow's budget.

Contrary to the Liberal Party's approach of concealing and obstructing, we're targeting to get money into the pockets of Nova Scotians and not keeping money out of the pockets of Nova Scotians, public funds. We could talk about the Liberal carbon tax that they're trying to get out of the pockets of Nova Scotians as well.

BRAEDON CLARK: We hear from the minister constantly that he wants to balance the rights of tenants and landlords. Obviously, that is self-evident, but I'd remind the minister that this proposal to create an enforcement unit, which many other provinces in Canada have, which you could copy if you wanted to from Ontario, for example; they have a great system. This is a proposal that is supported by both landlords and tenants.

Documents that we've obtained through FOIPOP show that there was a consultant's report that recommended that training and testing of this system would happen in December and January with the intention of the system to go live next month, March of 2024. I would like to ask the minister: Is he going to follow through on the advice of his own internal report and have a system in place next month?

COLTON LEBLANC: Governments of all stripes conduct reports on how to do things. I could point out in my time in Opposition when I was calling on the former - plural - ministers of health to act on a report they had that pertained to ambulance wait times and paramedics, but I digress.

What I would say is pertaining to the report that we've obtained and that we've engaged those professionals is how such compliance and enforcement could be implemented here in Nova Scotia. What I would also caution the member opposite based on things I've read in the media from both tenants and landlords is perhaps their understanding or what they think that a compliance and enforcement unit should be or would be in Nova Scotia may not be exactly what it should be.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

SNS: INCENTIVIZING EVICTION - STOP

GARY BURRILL: My question is for the minister responsible for Residential Tenancies, whom I think should hear this tweet this week from Adsum for Women and Children: "So far today we've had anxious calls from 7 families with a total of 17 children who are facing eviction or the end of a fixed lease on Thursday . . . It's very disheartening . . . Makes you want to throw up every time you say 'no'."

Speaker, by refusing to curtail the abuse of fixed-term leases and by allowing new tenancies to be exempt from the rent cap, the government is in fact incentivizing landlords to evict these seven families and thousands like them. Does the Minister not see that the pain of all these families is directly caused by the government's incentivizing of eviction?

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: Of course, any time a tenant is faced with an eviction or the end of their lease, it certainly causes some stress for them. As a government, that's why we are taking steps to build upon the true solution for our housing crisis - and that's more housing.

Under the leadership of the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, we're making significant and unprecedented investments in housing. I certainly appreciate the feedback from the members opposite. We're always looking at the Residential Tenancies Program for ways we can balance the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords.

We've heard, pertaining to the rent cap, that we needed to make some changes. That's why we did that last year to protect tenants, but also to give a little bit more buffer to the smaller landlords as well.

GARY BURRILL: Oh my, Speaker. We used to talk about fixed-term leases not very long ago as a loophole around the rent cap. But they're not a loophole anymore. They're a broad open barn door, which the government is holding wide open for landlords to go get new tenants, who they can then charge above the rent cap. We've got a 5 per cent rent cap, but rents actually went up last year by 12 per cent. Does the minister not see - certainly there's no reflection of an understanding of seeing this in his earlier response. Does the minister not understand that as long as the government does nothing to curtail fixed-term leases, all we've got is a no-cap rent cap here in Nova Scotia?

COLTON LEBLANC: I'll go back in time to Spring 2023, when we brought amendments to the Interim Residential Rental Increase Cap Act. Again, we recognize that we need to balance the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords. (Interruption) I know the NDP don't want to hear the message of balance. But again, we recognize that we need to protect tenants during this time as we invest in housing. (Interruptions)

THE SPEAKER: Order. The Minister of Service Nova Scotia has the floor.

COLTON LEBLANC: We know that the true solution to the housing crisis is more housing. But we've also heard from the smaller landlords that the 2 per cent rent cap wasn't enough and that we had to make that change. That's why we've acted. I hate to hear the members opposite paint all landlords with one brush and all tenants with one brush. Again, we're looking to balance both.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

MAH: CB STORM IMPACT RELIEF - PROVIDE

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, climate disasters are hurting people all over Nova Scotia. We've heard of the devastating impacts from those who have lost their homes. The historic snowfalls have hurt businesses and families alike in Cape Breton. Saralyn Gillan and Adam MacKenzie are one example of a family with significant damage to their home due to water damage through their roof and ceiling.

Firefighters told the family that they should not stay there any longer due to the water damage. However, with such low vacancy rates and the high cost of rent, they have nowhere they can afford to go. My question to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing is: What are families like Saralyn and Adam supposed to do when their place is uninhabitable due to a storm, and they have nowhere to go?

HON. JOHN LOHR: We recognize that we had a traumatic 15, 16 months with Hurricane Fiona, wildfires, and floods, and it has impacted many Nova Scotians. That's why we were very prompt in opening up the DFAA portals for Hurricane Fiona and the floods, and more recently, we opened up a DFAA portal for the wildfires. We recognize the tremendous stress this puts on Nova Scotians. We are working through that process on almost 4,000 applications, which is a daunting challenge for our Emergency Management Office that we are working through.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I do want to say to the minister that the DFAA is important for those past events, but my question is: What's coming after the snow that we just had in Cape Breton? We know that the storm in Cape Breton has financially impacted many people, and there's been no financial response from the government to help Cape Bretoners.

Now this family's friend had to start a GoFundMe page to try to find a new place for this family to live. Families like Saralyn and Adam need the financial support to at least find somewhere temporarily while their rental gets fixed.

My question to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing is: Why has the government not provided any financial relief to those who have been displaced due to this storm in Cape Breton?

JOHN LOHR: What I can tell you is that in this House we are very aware of the issues across the province from these types of storms. The DFAA portal has certain rules and regulations on it, and actually we are looking into announcing that we will open the DFAA portal for snowstorms.

However, I will say that it is a somewhat different portal with somewhat different rules on it, but nevertheless we will see if it's something that we do in partnership with the federal government. Unlike this government, which took four months to open up the DFAA portal for Hurricane Dorian when it was exactly what that was intended for, which was flooding, and took a long time - actions speak louder than words. We're doing what we need to do. That government's actions on the recent Auditor General's Report - they speak louder than words too.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

DAE: STUDENT HOUSING STRATEGY - RELEASE

LORELEI NICOLL: Speaker, one thing that is quite perplexing is that in the new memorandum of understanding within the universities, the government is directing the universities, HRM, and CBRM to work together to address the housing shortages for students. We agree that there needs to be collaboration among the universities and governments to address the student housing need, but the provincial government can't just avoid all responsibility when it comes to student housing. One way this government has avoided responsibility is by failing to deliver on their own promise: a student housing strategy. The government promised it last Spring, but we have heard excuse after excuse as to why it hasn't been released.

My question to the Minister of Advanced Education is: When will the student housing strategy be released? If action is planned, a date would be good.

HON. BRIAN WONG: We've been writing the student housing strategy for two and a half years. We started writing the student housing strategy with an announcement of three Nova Scotia Community College builds. We continued to write the student housing strategy when we announced \$5 million toward the Tartan Downs project. We continue to write the strategy with \$3 million toward the Atlantic School of Theology student housing. We continue to write the story when we put in, with our bilateral agreements - which are

very important, and I hope to have an opportunity to talk about it - the 50 per cent provisioning rate for residences.

LORELEI NICOLL: The student housing strategy, as I mentioned, was promised to be a guiding document. Leadership provides guidance on how best to address the housing strategy for our students in this province. They are struggling. If they are able to find housing close to their school, it is often incredibly unaffordable. They deserve leadership.

Student groups have been calling for this strategy from this government, and yet this government can't even release the student housing strategy. It's being worked on for two years. They themselves are in a leadership role, and they promised this strategy to our students.

My question to the Minister of Advanced Education is: Why is the government making everyone else do the work, and not taking any responsibility for student housing? Why is the government failing to provide leadership?

BRIAN WONG: I think leadership is doing, not writing things down on a piece of paper. I agree that a student housing strategy will guide us, but we have done so much. Had we waited, we would not have the Nova Scotia Community College ready to open at Akerley campus. We would not have the student housing at the Stellarton campus ready for the next school year. However, we may have seen that the grand opening of the very important Nova Scotia Community College in Cape Breton, in downtown Sydney, would have had student housing attached to it.

In the end of it all, we are focused on developing student housing. We are not focused on . . .

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

DHW: AMB. SERV. STANDARDS - IMPROVE

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: My question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness today. Cumberland North residents continue to contact me upset because of the lack of emergency ambulance services available. Sometimes an ambulance never shows up after they call 911, and sometimes an ambulance shows up after waiting for hours. It is causing great duress for patients, for their family members, and for paramedics who know they are leaving their communities left unmanned without any emergency ambulances. It's also causing great duress for first responders, firefighters, RCMP, and police. Cumberland County has many EHS detachments that are left often without any staffed ambulances in the entire county.

THE SPEAKER: Question?

[2:45 p.m.]

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Will the minister please outline for the House and the people of Cumberland North what her department is doing to find ways to hold Medavie accountable to meet the standards outlined in their contract?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: We certainly have worked very hard at the Department of Health and Wellness in our EHS division. We are really moving into the role of regulator more so than we have in the past. We have spent a lot of money on fleet infrastructure, making sure that we have a variety of different options. The clinical transport operators have freed up a number of paramedics. We have implemented fixed-wing aircraft that actually have put over 5,000 hours of ground ambulances back into the system.

We work very closely with our first responders - certainly the Medical First Responder Program. We have been working with them on a regular basis to understand their needs and understand how we can best support them. Most importantly, we have a physician and a nurse who work in the medical comms centre to support people in the field.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: In this situation, despite all of these reassurances, the situation is not improving. That is the challenge, and it's been close to three years now since the government has been put in place. As we are all aware, just two weeks ago in my colleague's area in Annapolis we saw three children waiting on the side of the road after an MVA, waiting for hours. I will table this article. It's just the latest in high profile cases drawing public attention to this problem.

Minister, why is the government not looking at taking over control of ambulance services and removing it from this private company that is clearly not meeting the needs of the people of this province?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Certainly, this is a contractor that we inherited from our former government, and we are working very hard with EMCI and EHS to build a more robust EHS system. We have made record investments. We have actually, in the month of January, hired over 35 new people into the EHS system as a result of a fairly negotiated contract with these individuals. The nurse and the physician now have access to a video link that they can now actually see what is happening in the field. We are testing trying that with a good GoodSAM camera.

We are working in each community. We need to have a static system. We are increasing a number of funding opportunities, and I look forward to speaking about them in the budget process over the coming days.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

EECD: SCHOOL LUNCH PGM. - IMPLEMENT

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. I don't know about the member across the aisle, but I can't focus on an empty stomach. We can't expect children to be able to learn with growling tummies. Yet, despite the patchwork of pilot programs, despite the selfless workers, school staff, and community members, we know that many children are still going hungry at school.

The scale of this issue goes beyond a few scattered salad bar pilots, granola bars, and crackers. Can the minister tell us when we will see a universal school food program in Nova Scotia?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: We have been focused on increasing access to food in schools since we took office. We recognize the importance of children having access to healthy, nutritious food in their school environment. We have been adding programs, we've been adding funding, and we are going to continue to do that work.

SUZY HANSEN: I only asked: When will it happen? I mean, I think there should be a timeline. There should be a plan in place to tell us today, tomorrow, next week - and that is not the answer that we received. I would love to have the answer.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time allotted for Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers has now expired.

OPPOSITION MEMBERS' BUSINESS**PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING**

THE SPEAKER: The honourable House Leader for the Official Opposition.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Thank you, Speaker. We will now move into Opposition Business for the day. The first bill we are going to call is Bill No. 412.

Bill No. 412 - Residential Tenancies Act (amended).

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: Speaker, I am very happy to speak here this afternoon to Bill No. 412, which is a bill that I originally introduced, I believe, in October 2022. We're a year and a half away from that, and unfortunately still talking about it. I wish we were talking about a system that had been in place for several months now, but unfortunately, we're not.

I'm glad we got a chance to talk about it in Question Period today. I'd be curious

to hear the minister's thoughts if he is willing to speak to this when it gets to the government side. The basics of this bill is to create an enforcement and compliance unit within the existing Residential Tenancies Board in Nova Scotia.

As I mentioned during Question Period, there are about 300,000 renters in Nova Scotia, so we're looking at at least 30 per cent of the population. Obviously, that varies from region to region. In my riding, for example, the majority of my constituents are renters, so it's a huge concern there in Bedford South, and across Nova Scotia.

All of us have been in rental situations before, I'm sure. Sometimes you get a great landlord, you have no problems, and everything is peachy. Sometimes you get a landlord who is less than ideal - to be kind. Maybe you are a landlord. Often you have great tenants: they pay the rent on time, they keep the place clean, and they are easy to work with. Sometimes you have difficult tenants who might not pay the rent on time, who might damage the property, or who might not move out when they're supposed to move out.

When those collisions inevitably happen - and they do when we're talking about 300,000 renters - there needs to be some kind of mechanism to resolve a dispute quickly, easily, and in a way that feels fair to both parties. That's kind of the baseline of any kind of system of justice, which is what the Residential Tenancies Board is supposed to do.

Unfortunately, that system is fairly broken. That is a position that both tenant advocacy groups and landlord groups agree on, which, as you might expect, is rare. Often landlord and tenant groups are kind of on the opposite sides of a debate, which is why, when I started as the housing critic and I met with groups, I was impressed that there was a level of agreement here on the need for an enforcement division.

As I mentioned in Question Period, this is not a new idea. This is not a novel idea. We're not reinventing the wheel here or doing something that has never been done before in Canada. Many provinces have functional, effective, efficient, and fair enforcement divisions within their residential tenancies. Ontario is a great example of an existing system that is working, and has many provisions that would be very helpful to both parties. For tenants, I think the provisions where - in Ontario there is a registry where you can go online and you can find out - oh, this person I am talking to as a landlord has seven violations of the Act in the last year, so maybe I'm going to look somewhere else. That simple thing alone would prevent disputes, because you never go into a lease with a landlord who might cause problems down the road.

As I mentioned, the government has in their possession at least since August - although we haven't seen it, we would love to see it. I have a news report here from the CBC, August 30th of last year, indicating that they've paid a consultant thousands of dollars, I'm sure, to look into the need for an enforcement unit in Nova Scotia. Not surprisingly, they have said yes, we should have a tenancies enforcement division in Nova Scotia.

They have said, as I mentioned earlier, that the ideal timeline would have been to have testing of the system - because you'd need a new IT system to manage this - in December 2023 and January 2024, with the intention for this system to go live in March 2024, which is obviously two days away. We're two days away from March, so I am very concerned that we're not going to meet this timeline, and I think that is obvious.

I hope, when the minister or a government member speaks to this bill, we can get an explanation as to why we have had a report in government hands for at least six months now. That's a long time. That's half the year. Six months we've had this report in our possession, and we haven't done anything with it. I am confused because the minister in the past has spoken publicly to media and in the Legislature indicating - I think I'm not misrepresenting his position - that he supports the concept of a residential tenancies enforcement unit.

I know he mentioned today that it may not be what it first appears. I hope he can elaborate on that point because it appears to me that this is a no-brainer, simple, and transparent. There will be more access to information; an easy, relatively low-cost solution.

If you think that any kind of tenant - let's take a mid- to low-income tenant - I was dealing with a constituent of mine who lived at the former Bluenose Motel along the Bedford Highway at the bottom of Larry Uteck. The building is gone now. It has since been demolished, but there was someone living there who was evicted without cause. It was an illegal eviction. Fortunately, in her case, Dalhousie Legal Aid Service was able to help her and do some really great work. It took months. In the end - I may not have the figure exactly right - I believe she was awarded somewhere in the range of \$10,000 to \$13,000. That is a rare circumstance. Nine times out of ten, if not more, the tenant will give up because they don't have the resources, the willpower, or the financial means to go through with months of heartache, stress, and cost. In the case of a landlord, perhaps a tenant moves, changes their phone number, doesn't respond to e-mails, or is hard to get hold of. The landlord can also be inconvenienced, at least, by a system that is slow.

The biggest problem with the current system is that it is not at all clear who is actually responsible for enforcing disputes or agreements. Is it the police? Well, we don't really think so. Is it Small Claims Court? No, we don't really think so. Is it Residential Tenancies? No, they say go to the police or go to Small Claims. It's kind of a circle of despair, and nobody is happy or feels good at the end of that process.

We have, in the provincial government, effective, efficient, and fair enforcement divisions in all kinds of other areas of life. I know that the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Environment and Climate Change, Public Works and others have means of enforcing the law if you're dumping toxic materials into a waterway, if you are hunting an endangered animal, or if you are doing anything of that nature. Yet we do not have a functional enforcement system for where you live, which is probably the single most important thing in your life and determines so much of everything else that's going

on.

Having secure, safe, affordable housing bleeds into every other aspect of your life - your physical well-being, your mental well-being, your chances of being successful in your career, and your personal relationships. All these things are strengthened if you have somewhere to live and if you feel safe and secure. If you don't, all those things inevitably suffer to one degree or another.

[3:00 p.m.]

This entire saga, since I introduced this legislation a year and a half ago, has really been one of confusion and frustration for me, because in the House we often have ideological, philosophical, or political reasons for disagreeing. That happens sometimes, and that's fair ball. But in this case, I just don't get it. I really just don't get it.

I hope the minister can shed some light on what the delay is, what the reasons for not doing this yet are, because it seems to me that - I don't want to speak for the members on the NDP side, but I know that this is something they've talked about as well. I know that they think this should happen as well. Members in our caucus obviously do. The minister has spoken favourably of this.

Why does it have to be so hard? Why does it have to be so slow? Why does it have to be expensive to get a consultant to give you a report and then sit on it for six months, miss deadlines that they're suggesting, and not have a system in place to help the 300,000 Nova Scotians? In every single one of our constituencies, there are hundreds, if not thousands of renters, and inevitably there will be disputes. Inevitably, sometimes those disputes will not be resolved easily, quickly, or fairly.

To have a system in place that gives a sense of security to a tenant when they begin a lease, and to a landlord when they sign a lease with a tenant, is a simple thing that will help - not solve, obviously, but will help move our housing crisis in the right direction. When we have rental increases of double digits - and Halifax rent was up 11 percent year over year - that's hundreds of dollars a month.

People are obviously incentivized to stay in their current apartments, because if they move, they are no longer subject to the rent cap, and therefore you could be looking at \$500, \$600, \$700 more a month. So they're incentivized to stay where they are, which is a difficult situation if where you are is not somewhere you want to be, because you're perhaps renting from a landlord who's making your life pretty difficult.

Again, this is a common-sense bill to me. This makes sense. We all seem to agree that this is something we should do. I would urge the minister to provide clarity as to why this hasn't been done yet, and to give us a clear timeline so that we know when the 300,000 renters in Nova Scotia - and the landlords as well - will have some clarity and a system of

enforcement that actually works. With that, Speaker, I would move second reading of Bill No. 412.

THE SPEAKER: Thank you for doing that.

The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Thank you, Speaker. It is the case, as the member for Bedford South has indicated, that something entirely surprising has happened in the field of residential tenancy in Nova Scotia around this issue. It was just a few months ago that commenting on this issue - it actually happened that Joanne Hussey, then a community legal worker with Dalhousie Legal Aid with a specialty in tenants' rights, and Kevin Russell, the executive director of the Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia, agreed on a subject. I'm quite certain that this has never happened before, and I'm reasonably certain that it's not likely to happen again - but it did happen.

What they agreed on, in an altogether rare convergence of tenants' and landlords' interests being articulated, was the subject of this bill. They agreed on the need for an enforcement and compliance unit in residential tenancies in our province. Here's what Joanne said. These quotes are from media interviews, and I'll table them.

She said: "I think we know that there are repeat offenders in the system, whether they're tenants or landlords, and so having a proactive body that's looking at that to be able to actually enforce the rules that already exist in the Residential Tenancies Act is really important."

Here is Mr. Russell: A compliance and enforcement unit "is sorely needed to resolve landlord-tenant issues, particularly with issues of serial repeat offenders of the Residential Tenancies Act."

We in the NDP also have a bill before the House on this subject, Bill No. 325, An Act Respecting Enforcement of the Residential Tenancies Act, which has been put forward by our leader and which, although it differs in some smaller details, is substantially parallel to this Liberal piece of legislation.

We have here in this bill, in this subject, a real focus of agreement of all parties, of all sides, with the exception of the government. What is being agreed upon by all parties and all sides on this subject is that the rulings of the Residential Tenancies Program should be accompanied by some timely, enforceable teeth, which they don't have at present, so that when people go to Residential Tenancies with an agreement, say, with their landlord, they can have real confidence that the ruling that comes from that hearing is going to be enforced, with the force and the clout that a citizen would normally expect from this kind of an administrative quasi-court.

That's not what happens now. What's happening now is if the tenant has a disagreement with the landlord and they take the matter to Residential Tenancies, this goes through a mediation and then to a hearing. The Residential Tenancies officer assigned to the hearing makes a decision - it's called an order - and the order then, for its enforcement, must go through Small Claims Court, a process that can take months and be costly and not always, even at that, necessarily result in a remedy to the situation.

Other provinces have systems that are more effective and sensible. In B.C. and Ontario, particularly, there are actual enforcement mechanisms within the residential tenancies system. In other words, there is no Small Claims Court or anything like it or parallel that needs to be involved. These enforcement units can, and they do, impose fines for non-compliance.

This is very important because in a tight housing market that means that these compliance units serve as an effective counterweight to the imbalance of power - I will say again, the imbalance of power - in favour of landlords that a restrictive rental market causes.

The absence of a Residential Tenancies enforcement and compliance unit in Nova Scotia is particularly difficult for us in our present rental housing situation. I need to explain a little bit of background about this. When the Liberal government of Stephen McNeil first introduced the rent cap in 2020, the rent cap was set up so that it applied to all residential rental situations - continuous tenancies or new tenancies - all of them, regardless.

Within days, however, the Liberal Cabinet altered this and restricted the new rent control measure so that it applied only to continuous tenancies, with new tenancies being exempted. This took place at a time - a situation which has continued until the present - when landlords have been facing intense inflationary pressures and they have not uncommonly realized disappointing returns on their property investment as their costs for things like insurance and taxes and heat, et cetera, have continued to increase. Therefore, as a result of this taking place in the context of a rent cap system which does not apply to new tenancies, landlords have been put in a situation where they have been experiencing pressure, by the way the rent cap is designed, to find some way to evict their tenants so as to be able to charge rents in excess of the cap in order to restore their otherwise declining investment returns.

This deeply relates to the current bill in this respect: Landlords have found lots of ways to accomplish the object of renewing their tenancies - fixed term leases, renovictions, pet evictions. These are some of the ways landlords have undertaken, over the last three and a half years, to encourage their tenants to move on.

However, one other way that landlords are accomplishing this purpose, that is less well known, is by landlords failing to provide adequate maintenance as a way to pressure a tenant into leaving. This kind of eviction by maintenance stealth is far more common

than you might imagine. A tenant contacted me recently, for example, about how their rental company would not adequately deal with leaks in their home. As a result, they had three different ceiling leaks every time it rained, and this went on for a year and a half. No surprise, before long they had recurring mould, so the parents decided that the family had to move. Then the parents were shocked to discover that the unit rented to new tenants for \$900 more than what they had previously been paying.

Similarly, it's not at all rare in Halifax to be discussing these matters and hear people speak about leaving their apartment, and maybe they'll say something like, Well, I've not being evicted, I'm not being renovicted or anything like that or whatever, but I am tired of having a door that won't lock, and I am tired of having a stove that doesn't work, so I'm just moving on my own to another place - I've got another spot.

Now, you don't need to be an economist to know what is going to happen to that rent as soon as those people go out the door. A proper enforcement and compliance system would address exactly this. A proper enforcement and compliance system in Residential Tenancies would mean that if that family had had Residential Tenancies on the case about those leaky ceilings, or if Residential Tenancies were on the case of that lock I was speaking about, or that stove, it would mean in that circumstance that enforcement officers with the power to impose fines for non-cooperation could ensure compliance with these fundamental standards. The result would be that fewer tenants in Nova Scotia would leave their rental units in frustration, and as a result, more tenants would be protected by the protections of the rent cap.

Now the recommendation for the enforcement and compliance unit comes from a report commissioned by the provincial government to look into this issue. This report was received in the middle of 2023. One of the things the report recommended in August was that the new enforcement and compliance unit be in place by this March - that is, by the day after tomorrow.

As with so many issues related to housing, Speaker, the government here has fallen far short of the mark.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister for Service Nova Scotia.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: It's a pleasure to rise in my place to speak to Bill No. 412, Residential Tenancies Act (amended) respecting administration and enforcement.

I want to reassure all Nova Scotians and members of this House that our government is very well aware of the challenges being faced in our rental market. It has been debated over the past couple of days so far, and I'm sure we'll have plenty more opportunities to do so throughout the remainder of this sitting.

There are challenges being faced by both tenants and landlords. I think that's at

least one thing that all three parties can agree on, after listening to feedback from the members opposite.

I know earlier I spoke about the requirement - the need for balance. I heard some mumblings and grumblings, and I won't point fingers at where those rumblings and grumblings may have come from, but it is the reality. It is the reality when we look at any element of the Residential Tenancies Program. The Residential Tenancies Program works. Apparently, there are folks in this Chamber who do not believe that it works but I want to reassure Nova Scotians that there are dedicated folks who work within my department who strive to do the best they can do to administer this program.

I'd highlight the fact that we were able to reduce hearing wait times. Back in September they were upwards of eight weeks, and now they're around four weeks, Speaker. That's due to the commitment and the hard work of the staff, some levers that we're pulling to make the administration of these hearings quicker, and also understanding - and I think it's fair to recognize - that there are instances where there are more egregious acts that may be committed by either a tenant or landlord, and we strive to do what we call an early adjournment so that those types of cases that are brought forward are addressed more quickly.

Again, the program is designed that it's reporting-based. Either a tenant or a landlord comes to the program and makes a complaint, submits an application to the program, and then it's heard. A little bit contrary to what's in the piece of legislation as presented by the member opposite about pretty much going out and patrolling for non-compliance. I don't think that's something that perhaps would be appropriate and furthermore the reference to police being involved in such a compliance and enforcement unit.

What has been said by members opposite pertaining to both tenants and landlords agreeing to a compliance and enforcement unit - yes, there has been mutual agreement from both parties that they agree that there needs to be, or they think there should be, a compliance and enforcement unit, but as I started to reference in a question during Question Period, or an answer during Question Period, and even some feedback received through my department, my understanding is that those groups perhaps have a misunderstanding of what a compliance and enforcement unit would achieve and that both tenant and landlord groups believe that a compliance and enforcement unit would result in the enforcement of directors' orders. That's not something that an enforcement unit does and it's not something that any other enforcement unit does in the country.

The member opposite said many other provinces or territories have this. In fact, there are only two, between Ontario and British Columbia, and that it's a simple fix. The reference that it's being a simple fix, I respectfully disagree with. There is nothing within the Residential Tenancies Program that could be perceived as a simple fix. We're dealing with, as the member opposite - my colleague from the Liberal party - spoke about, hundreds

of thousands of tenants and thousands of landlords and they all have different scenarios and lived experiences and issues that they're dealing with and challenges that they're dealing with. Again, I do want to avoid the reference in this Chamber that all tenants are the same and all landlords are the same.

[3:15 p.m.]

I spoke earlier about some of the reasons why last Spring we amended in this House the Interim Residential Rental Increase Cap Act. It was previously 2 per cent. That is and continues to be a temporary solution as our government makes significant investments in housing. That is the solution to the housing crisis. We've heard references to a low vacancy rate in this province and I would argue, and perhaps agree with some members opposite, that the low vacancy rate being experienced in our province is having a negative impact on different elements of the Residential Tenancies Program.

That said, that's why, under the purview and leadership of the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, we are taking action to build more than 40,000 new units over the next five years. The creation or the potential creation of a compliance and enforcement unit is not going to be the silver bullet for fixing a housing crisis. Those other provinces that I referenced earlier that have a compliance and enforcement unit, they are dealing with housing challenges as well. I think that is very important to recognize.

Speaker, we continue to engage. My department continues to engage with both tenant and landlord groups to hear their feedback. We are not sitting on our hands. Again, the first piece of legislation that I brought forward as Minister of Service Nova Scotia was amendments to this Act. I noted it before and I know members opposite have said it before as well - it's not a closed book, and it is not a closed book. The fact is that the marketplace, the landscape of housing, is ever-changing, based on unprecedented population growth.

We know there are challenges with population growth, but we are accepting those challenges because we know that there are opportunities and that's why there are cross-government efforts to address and work on solutions to address those opportunities to build up our province. The challenges we are experiencing today within Residential Tenancies, within the Department of Health and Wellness, within Municipal Affairs and Housing, within Public Works, Environment and Climate Change, and Natural Resources and Renewables - all the departments - did not happen overnight, as well.

I do want to caution - and I don't want to go down the road or the rabbit hole of leaks, documents, and reports - ever so briefly on the report that the government commissioned. The mandate of that report was: How? If government decided to do a Residential Tenancies compliance enforcement unit, how could it look? Not when should it be put in place and how could it be put in place. It was more, what should it look like?

I just want to put those statements on the record, based on feedback that the

members have shared this afternoon. Based on - I won't go into where, perhaps, they have found that information. It was noted by my colleague of the NDP, pertaining to renovictions - this was a topic that's been discussed many times in the last couple sessions.

Our government took action to put in a process, recognizing that infrastructure such as apartments and rental properties do have a life expectancy. At times, whether it be a vehicle, a home, roads, or any other piece of infrastructure that we're talking about, there's maintenance to be done, and sometimes that building or that road has to have a big overhaul.

That's why our government took action to put into place a formal process that limits when renovictions can happen. I urge all members of this House to share the information about that process, because at times I've felt that it was being lost and that the members opposite were going to constituents and saying, Tough luck. There's no way out of this. If you get an eviction notice on your door, that's it, that's all. That's not the case.

When a tenant is faced with an eviction notice, they can contest that and submit an application to the program - a program that's designed not to have any legal representation. I understand there are folks who need that extra help, and I know a number of our colleagues here in the House do assist their constituents who have to go through that process.

For the record, since we brought forward those amendments to the Act and proclaimed them - I think it came into force Spring 2022 - there have been 282 applications and 44 applications for renovictions that have taken place. I want to reassure Nova Scotians that the program does work and the process does work.

The member opposite did speak about pet evictions - or evictions pertaining to pets. I've talked about that in the Chamber before. If a landlord decides to change a policy during a lease, again the tenant can and should apply to the program if they disagree with that, at which point the program officer will adjudicate and decide if it is considered reasonable or not reasonable.

In that, there has to be evidence as in any other part of a hearing. Is it reasonable or not reasonable? I don't want to give personal examples, but there could be instances where it is reasonable that a certain animal is causing damage to an apartment, and then that's considered appropriate for certain circumstances. I just want to put that out there.

Bill 412 talks about educating and raising public awareness of landlords' and tenants' rights. I hope that all members of this House, if they haven't already shared information pertaining to the program, that they do. I'm more than happy to share that information. My department is continuing with our education and awareness program because, before you start enforcing something, you have to know the rules.

If I'm a new driver, that's why I have to read the Nova Scotia Driver's Handbook to understand the rules of the road: what certain signs mean and what the speed limits are. It's my responsibility as a driver on the road to know those rules. That's why in a program that we've made, I'd argue, significant changes over the last couple of years, there were a lot of tenants and a lot of landlords who may not be aware of that. That's why we're doing our targeted education awareness campaign online, on social media, and on Google, and that's had high uptake.

We'll continue to do that and we'll continue to work with different organizations - from both tenant and landlord organizations. I've even met with Students Nova Scotia, as part of their awareness week, and offered to work with them to ensure that their folks have access to that information.

Again, pertaining to giving verbal or written warnings to a landlord or a tenant, I don't see such a compliance and enforcement unit being sort of a Wild West where police, as it's referenced in the Act, are patrolling the streets of Nova Scotia to sort of knock on doors and do those types of assessments.

Again, the current program works. It is called a self-referral program - or not referral, but you have to make a complaint. As I've noted earlier, we're taking steps to reduce the wait times. The Premier says more and faster for health care, more and faster for a Residential Tenancies Program, in hearing and wait times. We're working to do that as quickly as possible.

Again, I want to make the point that the silver bullet here for the Residential Tenancies Program is not a compliance and enforcement unit. The challenges we're experiencing today are not going to all be solved by a compliance and enforcement unit. There are issues that are being compounded by the low vacancy rate, and yes, we've seen a high record - the highest record - of new builds last year, but that was dampened a little bit by population growth and newcomers to our province.

I share the sentiment with my colleague, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing: We welcome newcomers to our province. We need them. We need health care workers. We need skilled tradespeople. We need these people to come to our province to help build up our province. We are a province of opportunity, and as a government, we recognize that potential. As a government, we're ready to support Nova Scotians and implement those solutions that are going to unleash that potential.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

LORELEI NICOLL: I've enjoyed listening to all sides on this, but it's interesting: I still wear the hat of a municipal councillor for 12 years. What propelled me to run provincially was to help the people in the issues that they deal with day-to-day that the municipality cannot respond to. I'm referring to the calls that we received with regards to

landlord issues and tenant issues.

The police often get called. The police are told they can't do anything. Bylaw officers are called. They are told they can't do anything. The people, in their frustration, guess who they call next? Their elected officials.

[3:30 p.m.]

If there is an awareness campaign, I certainly would like to know about it, because while everyone was speaking, I'm like, Who are they going to call? Who are they supposed to call? No situation is the same, we know that. But for 15 years, I've been discussing and hoping to see a solution to, in that balance, seeing adequate housing provided.

The NDP member spoke about doors falling off and things like that. That's inadequate housing. To have it go before the Residential Tenancies Program is a very long, long process. By the time a door could get fixed, that person is without a roof over their head.

I don't understand the reluctance of the government to actually explore - just explore - what it would possibly look like to have an enforcement unit that would create that balance at arm's length from government, that would support tenants as well as landlords. The government's own consultants said that it was needed. This is the third time that we've tabled this, so that speaks to the very fact of how important we feel that this bill is. We want this government to take it seriously.

Tenant advocates have said that this would be a good thing. Landlords have said that it would be a good thing. The current board and legal aid can't keep up with the demand, and this government needs to do something about it.

We have enforcement to protect the environment. Why don't we have enforcement to protect our rental housing in a tight housing market to balance the rights of the landlords, the property owners, and the tenants? No one seems to know - and I can't tell you how many conversations I've heard from residents over the years asking: Why would I go to the Residential Tenancies Program? They're not going to help me. They've all said it.

I just don't understand why they can't explore the idea. I don't think I would use the rules of the road analogy as a means of supporting not doing anything, because there are a lot of people out there not following those rules - a lot.

It's critical, and we want to grow the population. We've said that. If people in Nova Scotia don't know who to turn to to protect them and give them adequate housing, what about the people who are new to our community and country? Who are they supposed to call? Many of them are living in inadequate housing. That's just not right.

The fact that the government is not willing to even explore what we have seen Ontario and B.C. do - we talk about not reinventing the wheel, but I don't see why you can't just sort of consider it.

On that plea for consideration, I move to adjourn debate on Bill No. 412.

THE SPEAKER: I recognize the motion to adjourn debate on Bill No. 412. Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Official Opposition House Leader.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, the next bill we're going to call is Bill No. 405, the HST Reduction Act.

Bill No. 405 - HST Reduction Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Our party is advocating to reduce the HST by two points. I'll remind the House that the HST was increased by two points, from 13 per cent to 15 per cent, by the previous NDP government, a government that I served in opposition to as well. That was done at a time of population decline and economic decline in the province. It was done to bring in more revenue to try to keep up with increasing pressures on government services. We are now in a very different circumstance here, Speaker.

We on the Liberal benches really believe that the tax regime in Nova Scotia is regressive, and that it's punitive to people for doing things that we actually want them to be doing. We have gone, in two short years under the Houston government, from being one of the most affordable places to live to one of the most expensive in the country.

Not only have we led the country in increases in rent, which is up 13 per cent this year and 21 per cent the year after, but this is clear evidence that the government's rent cap regime is not working - particularly for anybody new coming into the rental market, either coming in through immigration or young people who are graduating and looking to get out of their parents' houses. We have seen the power rates in this province skyrocket since the NDP were in power as well, back in 2009 to 2013. We are seeing the costs of food, the costs of goods - the necessities of life - and services increase. We have seen the highest increases across the board in many areas in the whole country, and we still have the highest

taxes here in Nova Scotia.

What this is doing to people is a very concerning thing. I'm speaking to a fixed-income senior who can't pay their power bills, can't afford their medication, and also can't afford to downsize out of their single-family home because they'll get hit with losing their property tax cap and pay more taxes - if they can even find a place to live that's affordable.

I'm speaking to working-class families that have two incomes coming in to the household who are struggling to make ends meet and feel that they are falling behind financially because of these increased costs that they are experiencing. I'm talking to young people from one end of the province to the other who are actually losing hope in being able to afford a future here. The housing market has become unattainable for them. Life is expensive, and they're wondering whether they are going to be able to have the same quality of life that their parents had here in Nova Scotia, or if they can even stay here and build a life and build a family here.

It's the working-class and middle-class people who fall through the cracks in situations like this, when the cost of living is going up. It's the people whose tax dollars are funding government services, funding income supports, funding specialized grants for those who are financially insecure. It's this group of people who are starting to really struggle here in Nova Scotia. People who are labourers, blue-collar workers, administrative assistants - everybody is feeling the pressure of this moment right now, financially, and it is impacting their quality of life. It's impacting health care outcomes for people, as we see poverty rise, homelessness rise, as well as food insecurity rise in this province.

One way we can provide broad-based relief and financial support to those folks who, again, are paying the bulk of our taxes here in Nova Scotia, is to make sure they're not paying the highest sales tax in the country on the goods and services that they need to survive each and every day. This is not a commitment that we take lightly. We have done the costing on this. We've worked with economists on this. This would cost about half a billion dollars a year.

The savings to the average two-income family home would be about \$1,350 a year. That could be two to five power bills that this HST cut would cover. Think of folks who are trying to build new housing units, either in their basements or onto their homes, or to build developments. This is a cut on every single piece of equipment that they would need, all the supplies, and the labour. This is a good policy that we can actually afford to do right now, because this government has had a windfall in taxes and revenues - \$3.4 billion dollars in unexpected revenues have been collected by the provincial Treasury over the last two years. The Minister of Finance and Treasury Board was shocked about this - couldn't believe their good fortune. By the way, a lot of that is coming from the federal government that this government enjoys attacking while they take all their cheques and squander them. And \$2 billion of that comes from the HST. We are talking about a change to lowering taxes that the Province can actually afford right now. We are not in a period of fiscal

decline, population decline, or economic decline - although we'll see if the government manages to change that, because they certainly don't have an economic policy or agenda in this province.

We are talking about taking a fraction of the additional taxes and revenues that have come in and giving that back to people, helping to make life affordable in a really meaningful way each and every day, every time they take their credit card out, every time they take cash out of their pocket to pay for the things that they need to live - food, pet food, sporting equipment, stud wood, plywood, nails - all these things that people are paying the highest taxes for in the country. We can change that - we can afford to change that right now. In fact, I don't think we can afford to not do this.

I am worried about the generational issue that is developing because of the affordability crisis here in this province. Again, we've gone from being one of the most affordable places to live in the country a few short years ago - it wasn't that long ago that the cost of living was low here - to one of the most expensive places to live in the country. We are now rivalling some of the biggest provincial jurisdictions in the country that have had a high cost of living for a long time. - the highest rental increases in the country. Some of the highest power rate increases. People are still paying the highest taxes, and we don't have to pay the highest taxes here anymore.

I will say that this is also a regressive tax. Taxing people on consumer goods is regressive, just like it is to tax income. Think about it: We are punishing people through the tax system for doing things that we actually want them to do. We want them to be more productive. We want them to earn more income. What happens when that happens? Because we are the only province that does not address bracket creep, they lose more money in taxation to the province.

We want people to be consumers. Our economy is driven by consumer behaviour. We are seeing a retraction in consumer spending right now because of the high cost of living. Charging people the highest taxes in the country on consumer goods - the necessities of life - is a regressive thing to do.

This is impacting businesses as well. We have consulted with the CFIB on this. They have done surveys with their membership. Independent small businesses in this province - 50 per cent or more of our economy is driven by these folks. These are the folks who are struggling the most right now to deal with the cost of living. The big corporations are doing fine; many of them are doing better as a result of the current situation. It's the small businesses in each of our communities here in Halifax that are really struggling with the cost increases on the things they have to purchase to do business and on the labour that they have to pay for.

Sales tax is in the top five most harmful costs to small and independent business in this province. They have told us that through surveys - the CFIB has told us that. One of

the most harmful taxes in this province to our small business community is the HST, which was increased by the NDP between 2009 and 2013, during a period of decline. We are not in that period anymore. We've seen growth. The government opposite will take credit for that growth even though it happened in the years before, from an economic perspective, with increases in exports and sustainable population growth that wasn't overburdening all our systems and infrastructure.

I know that the government will assert that if we're going to cut taxes, that means the Liberals are going to cut services. That's not true. As I mentioned, we would argue right now that we can afford to do this because of the additional revenues that this government has brought in: \$3.4 billion in unexpected additional revenues. It's massive. They suggest that we have to cut things. We don't.

Let's look at where some of this money is going. I really believe that this government is squandering hundreds of millions of dollars to chase headlines and to get political pressure off them to issues manage instead of actually achieving results for people in this province. We see it in health care, where the government pats themselves on the back every single day about how great a job they are doing, while 153,000 people don't have a family doctor, the emergency departments have never been in a worse state, and wait times to see specialists and book MRIs are twice the national average. We see it when they brag about their spending on housing and poverty, while poverty rates and homelessness rates are going up and housing stock isn't keeping pace with the growth of our population.

I want to look at some of the specific spending that this government has done: \$464 million in spending to deliver what we were told would be a nursing retention and recruitment bonus - \$464 million dollars. We were told that would get 2,000 nurses back into the system. What did it do? One hundred forty-eight nurses; \$464 million to increase our net population of nurses by 148 people. Is this good return on investment? The evidence would suggest not.

I think it's going to be up to \$80 million on the most expensive hotel that's ever been purchased in this province. The most expensive hotel that's ever been purchased, that was half done, and that according to health care experts couldn't accommodate the health care needs of patients. To put that into perspective, that cost - just at the \$50 million level, before the untendered contract was awarded - \$735,000 per bed. Is that a good return on investment? Compare that to a hotel that was sold shortly after for a much lower price - that hotel cost \$45,000 per bed. Are we getting good returns for our investments? I would argue not.

The apps that we're paying for through untendered contracts - let's look at the Happipad app. Last time I looked, that cost \$1.3 million. It achieved 4 leases for people - 4 leases for \$1.3 million, \$325,000 per lease. What a broker fee that is - in an untendered contract.

[3:45 p.m.]

Speaker, I cannot allow this government to sit there and say we have to make cuts to services and we can't afford to reduce taxes right now in Nova Scotia, because the evidence suggests we can. The numbers suggest we can - \$3.4 billion collected in unexpected revenues.

Because I know the government's going to mention this - the carbon tax. Yes, that has increased the cost of living. Guess who's benefiting the most from that? The provincial government that's charging HST on top of the carbon tax. It's all smoke and mirrors. We have a population that is falling behind financially. We have working-class people who are not making ends meet. We've got a generation of young people coming up who are losing hope of affording a future here. We have a government that so far is turning a blind eye to the real issues that matter - the real cost pressures on people - like paying the highest taxes in the country on their hard-earned income and on the purchase of every single good and item they need to survive and live.

We are in a position right now to provide financial relief to Nova Scotians, whether it's a fixed-income senior, a working family, or a young person who's going to be trying to make ends meet, find a place to live, and get by here in Nova Scotia. We've got an opportunity right now. If this government moves and supports this motion, this piece of legislation to cut the HST, we can start doing that important work of making life more affordable here. We can start doing that important work of supporting those working-class people and those middle-class families who are struggling as hard as anybody else right now in this province. If we move on this, young people who are going to be coming up into our workforce - we can ensure that they have a more affordable life here as they pay less and less for all the things they need to live. We can do that if we have some vision from this government, if they move this bill and reduce the cost of taxes to Nova Scotians and help make life more affordable here.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: We welcome the opportunity this afternoon to talk about the cost of living challenges that Nova Scotians across this province are facing and the ways that this government could be - but isn't - helping.

The costs of all essentials have been rapidly rising - everything from power and food to fuel and housing. Everyone is feeling the pinch. The cost of groceries increased over 6 per cent last year and 13 per cent the year before. Last year's Food Banks Canada Report Card noted that 53 per cent of people in Nova Scotia feel that they are worse off than they were a year ago. This is a higher percentage than in any other province.

Power rates have increased 13.6 per cent in 2 years, and families are struggling to make ends meet. We agree that people need a break. That's why we've been putting

forward ideas for years to help average Nova Scotian families facing rising housing costs, food costs, energy costs, and with wages that just aren't keeping up. Ideas like removing unnecessary vehicle fees - the renewal sticker, for instance - or rent control and other renter protections.

We've been advocating for a living wage, so that people are able to afford the necessities of life. We've advocated for free birth control and free menstrual products. We've advocated for low-income power rates and to ban power disconnections. We want to expand the HomeWarming Program and we want to end pharmacare co-payments. All of these are things that can be done so quickly by this government.

We want a universal school food program. We've suggested increasing and indexing the Affordable Living Tax Credit. We want a seniors income benefit, the likes of which every other jurisdiction aside from P.E.I. has in this country, where seniors are not expected to apply year after year. We want paid sick days, and to stop tip theft. We want to increase and index HARP. We want to ensure that programs and investments have a gender lens, and take into account the potential and needs of our diverse communities, our Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities, 2SLGBTQIA+ folks, and newcomer populations.

That's why we've been talking for a while now about cutting the HST entirely off all grocery products. Again, folks, this is a quick and easy change that would make a big difference for Nova Scotians. It's why the Nova Scotia NDP government removed all provincial tax off family essentials - including children's clothing, footwear, diapers - and all provincial tax off power bills and home heating. This is all because we believe that Nova Scotians trying to afford the essentials need a break from increasing costs.

The Liberals were unsupportive of these measures. It wasn't that long ago that Stephen McNeil voted against taking the HST off power bills and home heating. In fact, the Liberals voted eight times to tax home heating and energy. I think many Nova Scotians like us are skeptical of these big promises Liberals make in Opposition. The Liberals have been promising a gas tax cut since 2009, and despite eight years in government with Zach Churchill in Cabinet, this never happened.

THE SPEAKER: Order. You can't use members' names. I ask that you refer to them by their title.

The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I apologize. Thank you for the reminder. Despite eight years in government, the Leader of the Official Opposition was in Cabinet, this never happened. Why would Nova Scotians trust him on this? I would like to table that.

We're also skeptical about the math that Liberals are using here. Estimating that

people will save \$650 per year is based on the false presumption that we all spend equally. Those with more disposable income will spend more, and will therefore benefit more than others from an HST cut. A cut to the HST will give more money to people buying luxury goods than the families who deserve the break.

We heard some of the pushback after this was announced last month. Lori Turnbull, the director of the School of Public Administration and an associate professor of political science at Dalhousie University, said that this plan to cut HST is unlikely to have a major impact on the affordability crisis in the province, and that it could be seen as missing the mark to give something to people who largely don't really need it, and put the province at risk of not being able to provide the same level of service. I'll table that as well.

We heard last month from the Liberal Leader that people need to eat, people need clothes, people need phones, people need the internet - and we agree. We propose that no groceries should be taxed. Children's clothes already don't have the provincial tax on them at all. We could also be looking into removing the provincial tax from other essential services and products, the way the New Democrats did on power bills, which would help more people more directly.

I also want to highlight the reality that sales tax is a massive revenue generator for our province, last year bringing in \$2.3 billion in revenue. Revenue loss at this scale is undeniably going to mean cuts somewhere else. I'm curious where the Liberals are proposing these cuts to take place. Do they want to cut spending on health care? Housing? How would this revenue loss impact our ability to create a universal school food program, our ability to hire more family doctors, or build enough affordable housing? We're looking to the Liberals to explain what they're hoping to accomplish here.

Our caucus is in favour of increasing affordability for Nova Scotians, but we recognize that not all Nova Scotians are in similar positions. The measures that the Liberals are proposing would disproportionately benefit those with higher incomes, and disproportionately disadvantage those in the middle class and those with lower incomes.

There's lots to do that can help Nova Scotians who need it most, but cutting the HST isn't one of them.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings West.

CHRIS PALMER: I am very honoured, as always, to rise again in the House today to speak on Bill No. 405. I could just say that I echo everything that the member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island said, but I will expand on a few things.

I would like to say, Speaker, that Nova Scotians want their governments to be responsible. They want them to have a balanced approach when it comes to spending the public purse. They know that they want their government to address a lot of the services

and the government initiatives that are important to them. That's why I'm proud to be part of this government. This government knows that it is truly important to recognize the fiscal responsibility while at the same time addressing the needs that people have. We want to be good stewards of the financial purse.

We were very upfront with Nova Scotians when we came to power. We told them that after years of neglect of spending in health care, after years of neglect in spending in long-term care, after years of neglect in spending in our roads and infrastructure, after years of neglect in spending in housing, that it was time to catch up. We were very upfront with them, and we told them that we would have to invest in those programs to give them the services that they truly deserved, and Nova Scotians have been responding to that.

I think it's important to understand the implications of what reducing the HST by 2 per cent would have, and the impact it would have on Nova Scotians. As has been mentioned, the decrease in HST revenue would equate to a projected loss of about \$500 million, jeopardizing the sustainability of critical government programs.

I would like to maybe ask a few questions here. I know it's been mentioned that we always want to look at fiscal responsibility and have a chance to pay less in taxes. Who doesn't want to pay less in taxes? Everyone wants to do that, right? But if I had to go back to the people I represent - go to the Village of Greenwood, for example - and say, you know, the investment in your community in lighting around Civic Field that is going to give the residents of that community extended hours for recreational use, and investment in their trail system - if I had to go back to them and say, well, I don't think we can do that now because we've had to reduce the HST by 2 per cent, I'd have a hard time doing that. I don't think they would appreciate that.

My wife, for example, is an X-ray tech at Soldiers Memorial Hospital. If I had to go to my wife and say that we can't do important investments in infrastructure and diagnostic imaging at Soldiers Memorial Hospital right now because we had to cut the HST by 2 per cent, I don't want to tell my wife that. Maybe the member opposite would like to do that, but I'm not going to tell my wife that.

I have a community of people who've been lobbying for a brand new long-term care place in Berwick - Grandview Manor. If I had to go back to the community I represent and say, sorry, we had to reduce the HST by 2 per cent, so we can't get those 144 single units to give your mother and your grandmother dignity, that wouldn't be good.

I had the privilege of having 5.5 kilometres of the No. 1 Highway through Aylesford last year. If I had to go to the people I represent in Aylesford and all through my community and say, you know what, I can't get those 5.5 kilometres of road for you this year because we had to cut the HST by 2 per cent, that wouldn't go over very well. Would it go over very well? (Interruptions) No, it wouldn't.

[4:00 p.m.]

We're looking at investing in the Town of Berwick with infrastructure spending that's going to help with their wastewater improvements. If I had to go back to the Town of Berwick and say, sorry, we can't make that investment in your community because we had to cut the HST by 2 per cent, that wouldn't go over very well, would it?

The Cambridge Interchange, for example. We have a proposal - a development on the Cambridge Interchange - that's going to provide access from the Waterville Michelin plant right out to the highway. It's going to save the No. 1 Highway lots of wear and tear. If I had to go back to the people that we represent and say, sorry, we can't have that Cambridge Interchange anymore because we had to cut the HST by 2 per cent. That wouldn't go over very well either.

If I had to go back to a lot of the strawberry producers I represent and visited with the Minister of Agriculture and say, well, a lot of the environmental issues you had last year around crop damage because of flooding, sorry, tough luck, there's nothing for you because we had to cut the HST by 2 per cent, that wouldn't go over very well in my community either.

There's another section of Highway No. 1 that's going to be coming through Coldbrook where the members from Kings South and Kings North represent. If they had to go back to their constituents and say, sorry, we can't get that Highway No. 1 paved this Summer because we had to cut the HST, that wouldn't go over very well either.

I just highlighted a few of those things, and here we are on a day where we just had announcements of the most generational investments in diabetes care. I am proud to be part of a government that put that in place. If we had to say to those families, sorry, we can't do it, we had to cut the HST by 2 per cent, what kind of responsible government are we really being?

There are lots of ways this government is addressing affordability. We understand the concerns and the issues that Nova Scotians are facing right now, but they also want us to be real. They want us to be responsible. They want balance.

Let's talk about the Seniors Care Grant for a second, which assists our vulnerable residents by providing funding for things like health care services for your health and wellness like foot care, physiotherapy, and mental health support; home heating like furnace oil, natural gas, propane, firewood, wood pellets, and electricity; home heating repairs, and regular heating maintenance; home cleaning; organizing when helping with downsizing and moving. Is this a program that we really want to cut because we cut the HST 2 per cent?

The Province also administers HST rebates for the provincial portion of the HST

on home heating, and it's important to note that is only the provincial part that is not there. The federal government still has their portion of the HST on home heating. Maybe our members across the aisle want to lobby the federal government in eliminating that as well for Nova Scotians.

We have a First-time Home Buyers' Rebate. We have rebates for personal items like children's clothing and printed books. To increase housing supply, the Province recently announced it will provide a rebate for the provincial portion of the HST for multi-unit, purpose-built rental housing in Nova Scotia. These are all things we're doing to help Nova Scotians in tax relief.

We're also looking at the More Opportunities for Skilled Trades program we put in place. That is a program helping so many Nova Scotians under the age of 30. They're working in the trades. Originally that was a program that was just going to be people in the skilled trades, but this government realized that it was an important incentive to keep people in this province, so we increased that tax rebate on the first \$50,000 of income to not just the skilled trades, but to nurses. We expanded it to the film industry, which is growing in our province. A little reminder that the previous government cut film incentive programs. This government is bringing them back, and they're coming back to this province to produce films in their droves.

These programs that I've outlined help many, many thousands of Nova Scotians. I don't know if the Opposition would want to cut anything from the health care budget. No. They didn't do anything to really improve health care when they were in government. Maybe if we looked at things like our investments in CCAs. Could we go back to CCAs and say, "Sorry, we can't give you a big wage increase because we had to cut the HST by 2 per cent?"

Speaker, we know that Nova Scotians realize they want a responsible, balanced government, and that's exactly what they're getting from this government right now. It's important for long-term financial planning to the Province that it has a stable revenue source. It is crucial to acknowledge the revenue raised through the HST. This is the second largest provincial revenue source, which our government uses to support programs and services. These are important programs and services that residents of Nova Scotia rely on.

Our budget will be released tomorrow, you may have heard. I'm sure it will contain even more measures to assist hard-working Nova Scotians. These are the people our government continues to invest in.

My parents told me that money doesn't grow on trees. And maybe the folks across the aisle, maybe they didn't get that same lesson. But I think if money doesn't come in, money can't go out, so it can't go to those programs that Nova Scotians want and need. They ask us to be good financial stewards of the purse. They ask us to be responsible; they ask us to be balanced. They ask us to be prudent with their dollar and be accountable.

Money the government receives from the HST is fundamental in sustaining essential services, and reducing the HST wouldn't just affect existing programs, it would also hinder our ability to finance future initiatives that benefit Nova Scotians all over the place. This is the future of our children and our grandchildren. I don't want to go home and tell the residents of Kings West that we are no longer willing to support all those projects I mentioned earlier. And I don't think members across the aisle would want to do that in their constituencies either.

There's only one government, let's be clear, that has introduced a punishing consumer tax in Nova Scotia. That is the carbon tax. During this time of inflation and one of the biggest affordability crises of our time, the federal government launched a punishing consumer tax on the people of Nova Scotia.

I look across the aisle and ask, "Are they standing up to their federal cousins and fighting for our residents who are suffering?" If the member opposite would like to table a bill titled, A Bill to Lobby the Prime Minister to Get Rid of the Carbon Tax, we might be willing to support that. (Laughter and applause)

On this side of the aisle, we remain dedicated to ensuring the well-being and prosperity of our Province, now and for future generations. The member opposite, he says that this is the time when we can explore a reduction in the HST. Well, I guess the eight years when he was in government, that was never the time. It's a little disingenuous to believe that now he thinks this is the time.

Speaker, to conclude, I'd like to again say that it is important to acknowledge the role played by the HST. This is the second largest provincial revenue source, which our government uses to support our programs and services. HST rebates allocated to the public sector, charitable organizations and individuals are fundamental in sustaining essential services and improving the life of Nova Scotians.

I would like to say that it might be time. There is a lot more we are going to be doing, but I have full confidence in our Premier. I have full confidence in the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, and I believe the people of Nova Scotia have the full confidence of their Premier and their Minister of Finance and Treasury Board to administer the finances of this province, and we'll continue to do that in a responsible and accountable manner. We want to thank everybody out there for continuing to put their support in our government.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: Thank you, Speaker. It's a nice switch to see you in the chair instead of the other way around, right?

We're here today talking about the Liberal plan to cut the HST by 2 per cent. As

my honourable colleagues have mentioned, we had the opportunity to have that shift around when the NDP were in government. They decided that instead of having that reduced by 2 per cent, they would in fact increase it. That was an unhappy time. They didn't get re-elected. Maybe that was why. I don't know.

Here we are, we have this bill, and we're seeing where the chips fall - who is in favour of it and who is not. We have heard from the NDP that they would like to do a number of things. We heard my honourable colleague mention those. I think recently they had something about removing the HST on certain foods. So I started keeping track of how much HST I'm actually being charged when I go to the grocery store and admittedly don't buy a lot of prepared foods. It didn't have a big effect on me, but for some Nova Scotians, it might, and that might be helpful, but it is nowhere near what people would get back with this particular proposal. The average that Nova Scotians would see is about \$650 per person. Think about a household and how much that would be.

We have heard a lot of fearmongering from the other side. We would have to get rid of this. We would have to get rid of that. We couldn't do this. We couldn't do that. What the government could do is actually spend responsibly instead of purchasing a half-finished hotel for the most that we have ever seen in this province - untendered, without the Fire Marshal's Office doing an assessment of it, and then issuing another untendered contract to do the renovations for a clientele. They didn't even know who the clientele was when they started out. Just for those who have never served on Treasury Board, I can tell you that when you're doing a procurement - it was drilled into our heads by the civil servants - if you start making changes to a project after you have started, that's when costs skyrocket. These folks just threw money at a problem.

I don't know if it was because the Premier said, We need an "announceable" for Monday morning, so get the deal done. I don't know, but my gosh, you could have saved a whole lot of money on that one procurement. Have they apologized for it? Have they agreed to listen to the Auditor General? Have they stepped up and owned their mistakes? No, they doubled down and said we had to do it that way. They did not have to do it that way.

They could have actually had the Fire Marshal's Office come in and say whether this was an appropriate building for the purpose before they paid for it, but they decided not to do that. They could have listened to the architects about whether this was an appropriate building. We could turn this building into apartments, but it would be really expensive. Sometimes you have to actually listen to the people who know what they're talking about.

These folks keep touting how much they're spending. We're spending this. We're spending that. That's great, but the truth of the matter is that you have to spend smart. This government has not been smart at all about how they have been spending. It's irresponsible. It's not prudent. In fact, my honourable colleague just said Nova Scotians want us to be

prudent. We have not seen prudence. I don't know where she is. She has gone. Prudence has left the building.

Meanwhile, we see this government standing up and bragging about what they're doing. They have more than doubled the number of people on the Need a Family Practice Registry wait-list. That's after the Premier went around the province talking to all the Chambers of Commerce and saying, Yes, the list isn't right - having used the list and said it was a crisis when it was at 72,000. Now suddenly the list isn't right.

[4:15 p.m.]

What have they done? They have doubled the number of people who do not have a family doctor. There are more people in Central Zone alone on that list today than there were in the entire province when they took over. Heck of a job, Brownie, as George W. Bush would say. Not somebody I quote a lot. You're doing a heck of a job.

More people without the care they need. Ambulance wait times through the roof in areas all across the province. Heck of a job, Brownie. Prudent spending. Wow.

Today we see that Community Services is going to do a one-time payment for community services recipients of \$150. If you spread that out over a whole year, that's \$12.50 a month. Historic. I mean, wow. What are people going to buy with it?

When we look around our province now, people are asking themselves, Am I better off today than I was when these guys took over? And the answer is a resounding, No, it is not. I don't know who the Minister of Health and Wellness is talking to, but I'm here to tell you that our offices are filled every day with people who are very unhappy. Look around your community. Places that never had a food pantry before - they're popping up all over. Why are they popping up? Because there are people who need them. That didn't happen before. We didn't need that. But they're everywhere now, and they're not just there because they're the new in thing. They're there because people need it.

It's not just food they're coming for. They're coming for the basics of life - toiletries, period products. As my honourable colleague mentioned, wouldn't it be nice if some of those were available in government buildings so people could even come in and get them? But no, they're not.

The average Nova Scotian is going backwards under this government. We have before us a proposal that would help families. They don't like it. Instead, they fearmonger. I mean, imagine this: A hotel where they spent \$735,000 per bed - I don't think that even includes the furniture yet - and a regular hotel was \$45,000 per bed. Imagine. And there's an app for everything. It's like it's the latest trendy thing. We've got an app for that. We've got an app for that. You could have gone on a website to make your appointments. They didn't need to spend \$12 million on that.

They could have redirected that to helping Nova Scotians who actually need help. They chose not to do that. They flung money out the door to Happipad. It's \$12 million so far for the health app. Now we hear there's another coastal app that's going to help people. Instead of actually having a plan, it's going to be a patchwork. It's going to be, Hey, whatever goes in this area. Or maybe it's who you know, because there are lots of places in this province where it's who you know, and then something got smoothed out.

Certainly, Nova Scotians looking at Hogan Court are asking questions about, well, who benefits here? Is it Nova Scotians paying \$735,000 a bed? The minister of Health and Wellness says it's worth it at any price. I'm not sure that's right. It's important to have a place for transitional care. The minister is right. That's important. It doesn't mean you throw the rules of good procurement out the window, but that's what this government has done, and they're unrepentant about it: We had to do it. We couldn't call in the Fire Marshal's Office for a walkthrough, because that would take time.

They're going to have to do so many renovations to that building that it won't open on time - it didn't open on time. This is a government that keeps their friends close and their close friends closer, and people benefit.

There's a whole thing in English literature criticism, *quo tendis* - where is it going? We have to ask ourselves about the money, where is it going? Where is it going with these folks? It's their friends, it is not to Nova Scotians. It is not to people living in poverty - \$12.50 a month for a one-time payment, that's not who it's going to. It's appalling, but this is what we should expect from a government where the Premier thought, when hundreds of Nova Scotians lost the money they had put towards their oil to keep them warm all this Winter, when they lost that - and trust me, I had people from the constituencies of government members coming to see me about this and saying, What can I do?

One guy I know lost \$1,800, and the Premier compared that to losing your gym membership. This is a guy who's retired, his wife is retired. They're so careful with their money: they budgeted for it, they paid in advance, and the only thing they got from the Premier was, Well, yes, that's too bad. We can't help them.

This government has made all kinds of choices, and it could make a choice to make life easier for Nova Scotians. It could reduce taxes to the tune of \$650 per person in a household. You could almost get a tank of oil - wouldn't that be a novel thought? They chose not to do that. Instead, they're putting out untendered contracts, doing things they know - that they're warned are going to cost them more money, because they don't want to reduce taxes. God forbid you should leave middle-class, working-class Nova Scotians with more money in their pocket, because they wouldn't know how to spend it. "We know how to spend it better" is their attitude.

Tomorrow, the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board will stand up, and there'll be lots of clapping, and they'll congratulate each other, and isn't it the greatest budget ever?

But Nova Scotians know that all these announcements they're going to be making, all this money that's going out the door, that's coming out of their pockets.

We have Nova Scotians who cannot pay their rent. We have Nova Scotians who cannot buy their medications. We have Nova Scotians who are going to food pantries and food banks for the first time in their lives, and the government of Nova Scotia is going to give them a one-time payment of \$150 and pat them on their head and say, There you go.

The government could cut taxes. The government could increase income assistance more. But they've chosen not to. That pretty much tells you all you need to know about this government.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Official Opposition House Leader.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: It's an important debate. I'll keep my comments for now. I am going to move to adjourn debate on Bill No. 405 - HST Reduction Act.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is to adjourn debate.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Official Opposition House Leader.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: The third and final bill for the day, I'm going to call Bill No. 409 - the Income Tax Act, an Act to Amend to Reduce Income Tax.

Bill No. 409 - Income Tax Act (amended).

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

FRED TILLEY: I move Bill No. 409 for second reading.

I want to start off my comments today with an article by Jay Goldberg, Interim Atlantic Director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. He said, "Nova Scotia Premier . . . is the only first minister in all of Canada deliberately profiting off inflation."

What Mr. Goldberg is saying is that in all of Canada, Nova Scotia is the only province profiting off the backs of its citizens in a time of high inflation. The reason that we are profiting off the backs of Nova Scotians during this time of high inflation is because Nova Scotia refuses to index income tax brackets to inflation, affectionately known as bracket creep.

During my question to the minister yesterday I referred to it. So that we can fully understand what bracket creep is, it is when the tax brackets don't creep up like your income does during a time of inflation. I use the analogy of an undergarment or underwear creep. When that creeps up on a person, it's uncomfortable and it hurts.

In this particular case, the fact that we're not indexing tax brackets is hurting Nova Scotian families. It's hurting seniors when they get a slight increase in their federal pensions. It's hurting the working class. It's hurting everybody because income is creeping up, but the brackets are staying the same, pushing people into a higher tax bracket. Hence, they're paying more taxes to the provincial government, which can result in hundreds - I think that number they quote is \$635 for the average family - that we pay more in taxes.

It all forms part of this \$3.4 billion windfall that this government has seen, that they aren't sure where it's coming from. Well, part of that is coming from indexing tax brackets. That's where part of this is coming from. If we were to index tax brackets in Nova Scotia, that would put about \$125 million back into the pockets of Nova Scotians.

We've heard the member previous, when talking about a reduction in HST, and he says: Well, if the Opposition could tell us, what should we cut in order to make that up? I'll tell you what to cut: Cut out some of the darn apps that we've produced this year.

We've produced - as you've heard our leader say: We've got an app for this, we've got an app for that. Well, Nova Scotians have an app-etite for more money in their pockets. Not a Happipad, or not another app for coastal protection, for which the government should be doing the protection, not an app. Nova Scotians need more money in their pockets.

Everything costs more. Food costs more. Housing costs more. We've seen property taxes increase. Everything is stretching beyond its limits, and sooner or later, Nova Scotian families are going to be stretched out of their homes, they're going to be stretched out of the ability to provide healthy food for their families. It's time that this government join the other provinces and territories and the federal government in Canada and end this practice of bracket creep.

I will table this document at the end. Jay Goldberg says that by failing to index income tax brackets to inflation, the government "has been raising taxes every year by pushing taxpayers into higher tax brackets even though they can't actually afford to pay more." The Canadian Taxpayers Federation recognizes it; Mom and Pop, who are struggling to make ends meet, recognize it; seniors recognize it. And while I'm on the topic of seniors, in my constituency alone I met with so many seniors who were no longer eligible for the Seniors Care Grant. We heard the Seniors Care Grant touted as an answer to this. Well, there's another thing that we're not indexing to inflation: the income levels.

As seniors get a \$300 increase in their federal pension, they lose on \$750. It's a net loss to them. On top of that, you add the bracket creep going up in income. They pay more

tax. On top of that, to refuse to cut the HST, they're paying more again. When is this going to stop? We need this government to do the right thing. We put the solution on the floor: the solution is to pass the bill to end bracket creep in Nova Scotia.

[4:30 p.m.]

We've heard about the historic budget that's coming out tomorrow. I certainly hope that there's something in there around bracket creep for Nova Scotians, because if not, it would be a real travesty for the government to spend here, spend there, with zero or very few results. I've had conversations with people in the health area who said, Fred, you wouldn't believe it: everything we ask for is a yes. We want this - yes, here you go. We want that - yes, here you go. That is not strategic spending; that is throwing it at the wall, hoping something sticks, and improving our numbers. Well, we know the numbers aren't improving. That's fact.

One hundred and twenty-five million dollars in the pockets of Nova Scotians, which would then be pushed back into our economy. Right now, people are making that decision: Should I buy more food, or should I get my medications? Should I get the medications, or should I put fuel in my tank? What should I do with my money, because it's stretched so thin?

By reducing the number of - we heard that one app cost \$12 million. There's 10 per cent of the revenue that would be reduced by increasing bracket creep. The point of the matter is that not everybody in the province - people in the province can't afford groceries, let alone a smartphone to use the government-produced apps. Maybe if we increase bracket creep, somebody could have a phone that they could access their health records. Maybe they could have a phone that could get an appointment at the doctor's office.

Right now, people are more concerned about feeding their families, about heating their homes, about getting their medications to make them healthier - \$653 more in the pockets of Nova Scotians, that's what we're talking about.

Could you imagine - \$653 doesn't sound like a lot, but that's \$1,000 in earnings. It's a heck of a lot more than \$100 given out to people if they meet certain criteria, or \$12.50 a month. It's necessary to increase all these social programs because people really are struggling.

In my office alone, we'll need to get that revenue somewhere. I would argue that if we used appropriate financial measures, we would be able to survive on the budget that we have, let alone a \$3.4 billion increase in revenues. Which is great for our government, because the government can, without restriction, just start spending all over the place.

If they actually listened to the Nova Scotians, and actually listened to the experts, they would see that reducing bracket creep would have a huge impact on the lives not only

of the most vulnerable people in our province, because they certainly could use help as well, but we're talking about working families.

Two people in a household, working to try to make ends meet, looking for side gigs to bring in extra income into the family, and when they do that, what happens? They don't spend it in the economy. They pay more in taxes to the provincial government because it puts them into a higher tax bracket.

I would urge this government to put their own bill forward that will reduce bracket creep, because it doesn't matter who does it at this point. Nova Scotians will be the ones to benefit. Just like today we saw - from this side of the House, we've been advocating since we were all elected in 2021 for continuous glucose monitoring. We all have constituents whom that's going to help.

The government put their own bill together and are going to pass that through this Legislature so that people will benefit from that, and that's a good thing. I welcome things like that because it helps Nova Scotians, but here is an opportunity, by reducing bracket creep, to help all Nova Scotians.

We hear this government say: We're targeting, we're targeting, we're targeting. Well, how about we take an opportunity to target everybody? The two things that we put on the table this session, reducing HST by 2 per cent, helps everybody. It helps the most vulnerable. It helps the working families. It helps seniors. It helps everybody.

Indexing income tax brackets helps everybody. It puts more money in your pocket that maybe you could then use for small businesses, or it will help you survive these months of the Winter when things are colder and you need more fuel for your furnace, or more power to heat your home.

Speaker, again, we're the only province in Canada, the only jurisdiction - with the highest tax already, highest property taxes, highest HST, highest income taxes. Let's do what's right for Nova Scotians. Let's give them a little break in their pocketbook. Let's index income tax brackets. And while we're at it, let's reduce the HST.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm glad to rise to speak to Bill No. 409, amendments to the Income Tax Act. As we have been discussing, costs of everything are rising right now, and Nova Scotians are being pinched at every turn. Nova Scotians are struggling with the increasing costs of power, food, fuel, housing, and more. That's why our caucus continues to push for real support for Nova Scotians.

Indexing tax brackets is one piece of this puzzle. We know that Nova Scotia is the only province that hasn't taken action on this, and it's costing Nova Scotian families. That's

why our caucus has also recognized this need, and I tabled similar legislation before this House.

In the face of huge cost of living increases, we have to give Nova Scotians a break, and this is one way the Houston government could do that quickly and going forward.

We've talked many times in this House about the report from Food Banks Canada, which was released last year and embarrassingly, gave Nova Scotia a failing grade - the worst across the country. The report condemned this government for taking minimal steps to address the issues of high poverty and affordability difficulties.

A key recommendation from this report was the need for income bracket indexing to immediately improve material conditions for low- and middle-income earners. To quote the report: "Indexation should be introduced as a priority in the next provincial budget and extended to all provincial programs, for both revenue collection and credits and income supports." I'll table that. I suppose we'll have to wait until tomorrow to see if this government took these recommendations to heart.

The other area that we need to look at in terms of income tax is the basic personal exemption limit. Again, in Nova Scotia we're alone in the country. We haven't increased it. It's clear to see where the gap is if you have a look at how out of sync our basic personal exemption numbers are with the federal government. I think we can think about that. The federal government, for instance, is up to \$50,000.

It's somewhat akin to what the MOST program was aiming at. So far, the MOST program has done the least. It's not meeting expectations. We've had very disappointing results. We talked a lot about ideas we have around making the MOST program more, in terms of thinking about why we have the limit on folks under 30, suggesting that that's a very gender-blind approach to making policy. Other folks who also might take longer in terms of their post-secondary journey really aren't able to benefit.

If we raised the basic personal exemption amount, we would actually be extending MOST to lots of folks in Nova Scotia. If this government truly believes in the types of outcomes that they're trying to get from the MOST program - again, the MOST program that's doing the least - then actually increasing the basic personal exemption would be one step toward those outcomes.

We need to be talking about indexing other government benefits and programs, like HARP and income assistance. The purchasing power of frozen income assistance rates has reduced every year - every year that this government fails to act. Failing to index this program is, in essence - and has been for the past two years - an annual cut. We had been hoping for meaningful increases to income assistance amounts. It is simply unbelievable that we wouldn't actually see an increase after the last few years. We want to see this in the upcoming budget.

I have to say, we're quite concerned by seeing the announcement today of the insulting \$150-a-year top-up, I suppose, for folks on income assistance. This is not indexing, this is not overcoming the distance that people have fallen back to, in terms of their income assistance rates. It is actually kind of unbelievable.

[4:45 p.m.]

I am assuming that this one-time announcement means that we're not going to hear in tomorrow's budget that there's a substantial increase to income assistance rates and other types of support and that they will be indexed going forward.

We can increase and index the affordable living tax credit that helps families when they need it most because the income threshold for this credit has been stagnant and not adjusted to inflation. The annual investment continues to decline every year.

We've also been calling for the Heating Assistance Rebate Program to be indexed annually. This program, which offered a \$1,000 rebate to many Nova Scotian families in 2022, recently saw its eligibility and benefits clawed back by this government.

While we're talking about other ways to support Nova Scotians with cost of living pressures, let's look to pharmacare fees, so that seniors and families don't have to choose between affording medication and affording food, or a universal school food program, so that every kid has access to healthy, nutritious lunches at school. I understand that this government says they are working on it, but especially when we're thinking about investments in children and their well-being and their development, the clock is always ticking. So taking your time to look for a solution is letting down, at this point, several years of students, and we don't want to let down a whole generation.

Let's not forget that the Liberals have only been in Opposition for two years. Before that they held government for the better part of a decade. Their government did none of these things, yet now claims to be concerned with the rising cost of living. This was a government that administered cruelly small ESIA rates. For eight years this government, the Liberal government, allowed landlords to hike rents to whatever they chose. It cut the Nova Scotia Insulin Pump Program that helped families afford the cost of diabetes care. They did not implement a universal lunch program.

This bill would index tax brackets to inflation, but they didn't do this while they were in government. After many years of Liberals and Progressive Conservatives making tax cuts to benefit large corporations, we need to be having a bigger conversation, a conversation about fairness and really helping the thousands of people who need it. Corporate taxes, wealth taxes, inheritance taxes, deductions - these are some of the important parts of the conversation of what we want our tax system to look like and who should benefit.

Our caucus is in favour of re-examining our tax system to make sure it is working for average Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak about the prospect of indexations of our income tax system. It's a wonderful idea. Is it realistic? I honestly don't know. Clearly, I don't have the insight into the finances of our Province that our Minister of Finance and Treasury Board or the Premier have. I do clearly recall the demise of many of the critical services in Nova Scotia, such as health care, long-term care for seniors, affordable housing, to name a few, as a result of the previous government's passion to balance the budget.

Just a few minutes ago the member for the Liberal Party suggested that the province could survive without \$125 million - survive. That's just it, Nova Scotians survived for the previous eight years but just barely. We want Nova Scotians to thrive. They survived for years; we recognize this as a challenge, but we really want them to thrive.

Speaker, I am very much aware of the changes since the Honourable Tim Houston became premier: the decision to invest in our residents, after recognizing the declining ability of current provincial essential services, the fact that there had been very little actual action to grow and to build health care infrastructure, as well as invest in human resources. We all know about the great investments in health care. The investment that we have made in a long-term plan for long-term care beds for seniors, I think speaks for itself. It's starting to turn a corner to build both our physical structures and increase the beds, but to again invest in much-needed human resources.

Think about this: When we came into office - I was hoping that the Minister of Seniors and Long-term Care was here so that I could get the exact number - there were around 400 empty beds in long-term care centres because nobody had the foresight to staff them. There was no staffing for them, clearly as a result of a fixation on a balanced budget.

Our government chose not to invest in deficit budgets. We chose to invest in our people. I could go on and on about this investment in our residents, like today's investment of over \$7 million to provide continuous glucose monitoring - my colleague mentioned that earlier - as well as to remove the age cap for insulin pumps.

Were you aware that there are over 100,000 people in Nova Scotia who suffer from diabetes? Previously, the member across the floor told me that somewhere along the line, the Liberals cut that. The question becomes: Can we afford it? Well, I hope so.

I surely hope that when the time comes that a decision is made to remove the bracket - I guess is the right way to explain it - that Premier Houston and the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board MacMaster are in charge of the finances of this province.

With respect to de-indexing, typically the rate of indexation is set based on the previous year's 12-month Consumer Price Index average. It's expected that eliminating brackets would cost the treasury \$123 million. That was confirmed by the member earlier. He said that we could survive without the \$125 million. I think it's expected - it might drop a little bit in 2024. Hopefully inflation will go down a little bit. It costs \$25 million for every 1 per cent of inflation with respect to the Consumer Price Index.

We couple that with the recent announcement that the Liberal Party would, if elected, reduce the HST by 2 per cent, or approximately \$500 million. Overall, around \$625 million less for the treasury of this province.

Where will we be then? Will we be back to the days of balanced budgets, no investment in our province and our residents, while all the great work our government has done starts to erode away? I sure hope not.

There is no doubt that this government is mindful that Nova Scotians want tax relief. We are analyzing how much budget flexibility we have for indexation, given the multiple priorities that government is facing.

I have pretty near 10 minutes left, and I can see that everybody over there is enthralled. I just want to move to another topic here - a question that was asked earlier today. The question was: Who in this caucus would stand up in support of the new Coastal Protection Action Plan? I'm one that will probably stand up in support of that action plan. I'm the one who will proudly stand . . . (interruption).

THE SPEAKER: Order. I'm sure the member is just taking a long approach at getting back to the bill, but I'd just like to remind him that we're speaking to Bill No. 409, the Income Tax Act (amended).

The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: With all due respect, Speaker, I've sat here this afternoon and listened to everything from - whatever, as people digressed from the subject. I don't recall what it was. There were other speakers who spoke on the Coastal Protection Act today during debate on these last three bills. I guess maybe make a ruling on that.

THE SPEAKER: Again, I'll just remind the member that we are speaking to the Income Tax Act and remind him to stick to the bill.

The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: Surely, there will be some costs associated with the Coastal Protection Action Plan. Yesterday in this House, an accusation was made that I take very personally. It was said that Minister Halman had ignored the majority of Nova Scotians

and listened to the minority of private landowners. Minority of private landowners - those are the people who actually own the land, and deal with the erosion, and know what they're talking about. Think about that for a minute. Ignore the people who own the land, listen to the people who have no skin in the game, just an opinion, who maybe drove by, looked at a beach, or travelled to a rural community for a day or two and enjoyed our quality of life. Trust me, I will be playing that clip many, many times over before I'm done . . .

AN HON. MEMBER: Get back on the tax bill.

TOM TAGGART: I am back on track. These are the same people who championed the Biodiversity Act. There was some financial impact to that too. The people who wanted . . .

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North on a Point of Order.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, I've been witnessing what's been going on in the House for the last several minutes, and I've heard you rule and ask the member to speak on the bill that we're debating at the moment. Since you've asked him to do that, there has been no shift in his speaking, and he's talking about all kinds of other pieces of legislation. You gave him the benefit of the doubt. You suggested that maybe he was taking the long way around to get to his point on this bill. It does not seem like that's happening, and it doesn't seem like he's listening to you.

THE SPEAKER: Order. I have been a bit more flexible today, if you've noticed, in some of the conversations that have been happening. In all fairness, I've asked the honourable member to stick to the bill. Sometimes it's a long way, sometimes it's a short way around it, but I just remind him that we are speaking to the Income Tax Act, an Act to Amend, Respecting the Indexing of Tax Brackets.

The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: I will respect your request, and I will recall that some time in the very near future as others like to stray from the topic at hand. I'll bring that to attention.

Anyway, I guess in closing, I just want to say, again, that this government is not interested in surviving. We're interested in thriving.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings South.

HON. KEITH IRVING: I just wanted to put on the record in response to my colleague, that the previous government, in fact, held power rates basically flat, raised the basic personal exemption by \$3,000, and put \$100 a month into income assistance under my colleague's term as Premier - my colleague, the member for Timberlea-Prospect. It's

important to note the success of finding balance in the last government, as we balanced budgets, and were able to help those who needed help.

[5:00 p.m.]

Bracket creep - what is it? If your wages go up with inflation, if you don't adjust the bracket creep upwards with inflation, the government collects a bigger portion of your wages. In other words, Nova Scotians pay more tax if we do not increase bracket creep. Why is this an issue now particularly? It's one thing to have bracket creep when we have low and almost non-existent inflation - and we had quite a long period of time of low interest rates and inflation at 1 per cent. Why it is becoming so critical now is in the last three years, we've had inflation rates of 4.1 per cent, 7.5 per cent, and 4 per cent. Roughly 16 per cent of Nova Scotian wages is needed to increase just to keep up with the cost of living.

Unfortunately, without bracket creep, the government is taking 16 per cent just by not adjusting bracket creep from Nova Scotians in their taxes - an effective 16 per cent increase to taxes for Nova Scotians. I don't think this has been mentioned, but it's a critical fact - Nova Scotia is the only province now that doesn't increase bracket creep. The only province. P.E.I. was with us until last year. If you look at our neighbouring provinces and you do a jurisdictional scan of our brackets, you can see how we, as a province, are known for being the highest-taxed jurisdiction in the country.

In Nova Scotia, our first tax bracket, which we have not moved for more than a decade - I haven't been able to go back and find out how long it's been. It might be 20 years, I've heard. Our first tax bracket is \$29,500. In New Brunswick, it's \$49,958. In Newfoundland and Labrador, it's \$43,198. In P.E.I., that didn't do the indexing, they're still at \$32,000 - but they're still ahead of us. In Ontario, it's \$51,446.

So here we sit. Our first tax bracket is less than \$30,000, and we charge tax of 8.79 per cent. Going back to Ontario, they charge 5.05 per cent on that first tax bracket. It's considerable. We're the only ones that are not indexing, and we're falling further and further behind the tax brackets of other provinces.

What does that mean for a Nova Scotian? You make \$30,000 a year - that's our minimum wage. Nova Scotia will collect almost \$2,500 in tax. If you live in Ontario, Ontario collects \$1,700. We pay 45 per cent more than someone in Ontario. If you make \$50,000, you'll pay 72 per cent more than in Ontario at \$5,350, and if you make \$100,000 in this province, the government will collect 56 per cent more tax than in Ontario. People moving from Ontario are shocked with our tax rates here.

It is time to index inflation. The federal government indexes inflation in every province in this country. Now there's a lot of talk - questions being raised by the government. "Can we afford it?" They have listed a laundry list of things that they're doing.

Fair enough. They're making choices. We've suggested that some of their choices are very poor and a waste of money. But this government is now collecting \$3.4 billion more than three years ago - \$3.4 billion. That's 30 per cent more in three years. From Nova Scotians, we are collecting \$2 billion of that. Personal income taxes - this government is taking \$1 billion more each year than three years ago. One billion, thirty-two million dollars. Thirty-five per cent more taxes from Nova Scotians in three years, when inflation's moved 16 per cent.

When Nova Scotians go out and spend in this province, they pay HST on almost everything. The government is now collecting \$600 million more than 3 years ago. I think the government is saying Nova Scotians appreciate all that tax - all of their tax dollars being taken from them - because government is making progress on things that are important. I think where we differ is we are not seeing that progress.

We believe Nova Scotians want some of their money in their pocket to spend wisely instead of wasting money on untendered contracts that are not showing results. If you ask Nova Scotians if they are better off than three years ago, they are not. On top of that, they are spending \$2 billion of their hard-earned money to give to this government. We should have the best health care system in the world, but we can't claim that.

The government officials provided - my colleague referenced the number of \$125 million that came from government officials. Ending bracket creep is \$125 million when the government is collecting \$2 billion more than three short years ago. The other way to look at this is that that \$125 million that has been identified, when we don't address bracket creep, is an increase now in this upcoming year of \$125 million more in taxes. You are increasing taxes without announcing it or telling anyone. You are increasing taxes by 3.4 per cent by not indexing our tax brackets.

I hope the minister, in his speech, shares with Nova Scotians and is transparent that if he is not increasing or adjusting the tax brackets to inflation, that he will now collect 3.4 per cent or \$125 million more from Nova Scotians in higher taxes. What is the government's response to this idea that is long overdue and particularly relevant in times of high inflation? The government's response from the Premier is: There will be no major tax reform until health care is fixed. Nova Scotians need to ask the Premier: When is health care going to be fixed? He is not committed to any date on fixing health care, and how do you define when health care is fixed? It's a pretty lofty promise that is clearly not being met.

The Premier is effectively saying that we will increase taxes every year as your wealth is eroded by inflation. What are the outcomes when you take more and more and more tax from Nova Scotians? Poverty - people making \$15 an hour are basically at the poverty line and you are taxing them more. Lack of competitiveness for our province. My colleague to the right of me has a friend who moved from Ontario and is paying \$9,000 more in provincial tax for moving here.

We did have an era when costs were lower in Nova Scotia than Ontario. I think we can admit that those times have changed. The price of our housing, the price of our food - it is no longer a cheap place to live. We are now uncompetitive with the rest of the country, as we dig deep into Nova Scotians' pockets, to then throw the money around without tenders, without outcomes. Nova Scotians want some of that money back. They deserve it.

With costs skyrocketing in Nova Scotia, the highest taxes in the country that are going higher by 3.4 percent, as I've just stated - with bracket creep hidden from the public, we run a risk of out-migration. These are negative outcomes for our province. They will affect our economic growth.

Open up a business in Ontario, and I don't have to pay \$9,000 more to my employee to cover the taxes that the provincial government is taking. How can we be competitive in this country with the highest taxes? Our party is putting several ideas out there. This is one of the least expensive ones: \$125 million on \$15 billion of budget.

It's time for the Government of Nova Scotia to start being fair to Nova Scotians. Stop raising Nova Scotians' taxes by the concealed use of bracket creep, untransparent to the citizens. A hundred and twenty-five million dollars more in taxes that you are going to be taking from Nova Scotians. Three point four per cent increase in taxes, with no announcements about it.

We in the Opposition will continue to fight for Nova Scotians and for fairness in taxation. Thank you.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I'm pleased to stand in support of Bill No. 409. I have a bill on the Order Paper that's very similar, and I support the end of bracket creep here in Nova Scotia. As many speakers have already said, we are the only province left in the country that does not index our income tax brackets. Many people believe that this is unfair to the people of Nova Scotia, especially over the last 12 to 24 months, given the rate of inflation. So I do stand in support of this.

It's interesting, I think. Here in this House, I have a unique position being an independent and just listening to all the words of those here in the House. I want to share - and I will table this document - something that I got out of Hansard, and it's from April 10, 2015. It's a quote here I'm going to read, from our Premier on bracket creep.

Premier Houston says: "My question for the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board. I'm going to begin with some words from the..."

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order. Just want to remind the member to speak through The Speaker, as you are not to use member's names.

The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: My apologies for that.

The member for Pictou East. This is a quote from April 10, 2015, during Question Period, I believe:

My question is for the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board. I'm going to begin with some words from the now-Minister of Agriculture from way back in 2013. At that time, the now-Minister of Agriculture pointed out that bracket creep makes a huge difference to people's personal income tax and drives people out of the province.

He went on:

Nobody really looked at the numbers and saw what was going on here, because they're talking about a huge increase in personal income taxes. The now-Minister of Agriculture was pretty concerned about bracket creep back then so my question for the minister is, does the Minister of Finance and Treasury agree with her Cabinet colleague's opinion that by not addressing bracket creep, the McNeil government saddled Nova Scotians with a huge increase in personal income taxes?

I apologize, Speaker, for using the word McNeil. Can I say that? I'll go on to read another, the supplemental part of the question from our now-Premier:

I want to remind the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board of some of the now-Minister of Health and Wellness's words when he was also pretty concerned, when he said, "Not dealing with bracket creep means the NDP has been very accepting of a natural bracket movement that allows for additional tax increase year after year."

The McNeil government has made the same decision today; it's \$30 million of additional tax. My question for the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board is, does the minister share the concern of her Cabinet colleague, the Minister of Health and Wellness, or does she agree with the NDP that we should just let bracket creep continue?

I'd like to table this document. Just reminding everyone here that our current leader here for the Province spoke several times, if you look through Hansard, in support of ending bracket creep here in Nova Scotia. I am very hopeful that tomorrow when we see the budget

tabled here for the Province, that we will see fairness for Nova Scotians. Nova Scotians deserve to be treated fairly when it comes to their taxes. People work hard for the money they earn, and they deserve to keep as much of it as possible.

[5:15 p.m.]

Many people here in the House today have already spoken about the significant increase in revenues that this government has seen, and we've all seen the PR around that around the province, all the announcements of money being passed out, kind of like you're on Oprah Winfrey: You get this, and you get this. When you're a hard-working Nova Scotian and you work hard for your money, and you see so much of that money being taken off in taxes, the people of Nova Scotia expect our government to use their tax dollars responsibly, in a way that they know is being planned.

When we see announcements made for this project and this project, and you hear comments from universities and other people getting this money, saying, We didn't actually know we were getting this money, this is great. It shows Nova Scotians that there's very little to no planning. People expect more.

It's also interesting from my vantage point, sitting here in this House as an Independent, just listening to the member opposite talking about, there's no plan to balance the budget. That's quite shocking to me, considering when you read the mandate or the mission of that particular political party, I believe - at least when I first joined - it used the comments, "being fiscally responsible."

Most people believe that being fiscally responsible is you balance your budget. We all have to do it in our own homes, and I would say some of the comments the Colchester North member - when he was referring to not balancing the budget, I believe we have a responsibility to our children. I'm a grandmother now, and I don't think it's fair that my grandchild is going to be saddled with the debt from this government.

I think most Nova Scotians, most taxpayers would expect that a Progressive Conservative government would table a balanced budget. I think that is what most people would expect. I am surprised, but maybe tomorrow we'll see the right thing and we'll see a balanced budget for the people of Nova Scotia, we'll see a responsible budget that we as the people, as a government, will spend within our means and will use people's tax dollars responsibly.

The reality is, I'm sure the members opposite are experiencing the same thing. The phone calls, the visits that we get to our office are from people who are really struggling, and they don't have a lot of faith in government. I'm sure we all get it. They are pretty cynical about the way governments perform. They say, You probably don't really care about me, but I just want you to know that I can't afford my groceries; I've had to start using the food bank for the first time in my life.

Two weeks ago, I had a meeting with some board members of the local food bank, and they were giving me an update on their usage numbers. They said that for the first time ever for the Amherst Food Assistance Network, over 10 per cent of their users are seniors. They said never before - seniors were not part of the population who were forced to use a food bank in order to put food on their table and feed themselves.

It's very sad that the people who built this province, worked all those years to now be in retirement, and thought they had planned to be able to take care of themselves, but due to inflation, taxes, and all these reasons, they don't have enough money to feed themselves and are standing in line to get food at the food bank. These are the realities.

I'm sure everyone in this House is listening to the people in their constituencies as well. The people I am talking to in Cumberland North are having a hard time. I'm telling you, they are hard-working people, and they expect government to use their tax dollars wisely.

My husband and I have four adult children, and I am very proud to say they are all off the payroll - as of last month, the last one, finally. It's quite interesting listening to them now that they are getting their paycheques, and they see how much money is being taken off their paycheques for taxes, then come to this government to decide how it is going to be used and spent. Until you become a grown-up and start earning your own money, you don't always realize how much money is actually going to taxes.

I do want to add before I close, Speaker, that I do support this bill. I believe, as an MLA, as a nurse, as a mom, and as a grandmother, that people deserve to keep as much of their hard-earned money as possible. We know in health care that the number one determinant of health is income. When people do not have enough money to feed themselves, to pay their bills, and to put a roof over their heads - to have a home or to pay rent - their health suffers.

As a government, you cannot speak out of both sides of your mouth and say that you are trying to improve health care but actually continue to take away so much money from the people of this province that they cannot afford to feed themselves properly and cannot afford to put a roof over their heads. Those are the most basic needs that determine one's health.

As I close, I would like to encourage the government to not just end bracket creep but also increase basic personal tax exemption. We have the lowest in the entire country. That means Nova Scotians start paying income tax before anyone else in the entire country of Canada.

We need to look at our taxes - other areas of taxation. I know some members opposite, and I hope they have pushed the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board that it will be in the budget tomorrow to end tax on used vehicles. People pay enough taxes, and

every time it is sold, we should not be continuing to pay taxes on used vehicles. A lot of the people who suffer from having to pay taxes on used vehicles are lower-income people – seniors - because they cannot afford to buy new vehicles.

We should also be seeing more help for our seniors: removing the late fee on the Seniors' Pharmacare and removing the co-pay. Right now, many seniors are forced to work past age 65, yet when they apply for Seniors' Pharmacare they are actually punished because they've stayed in the workforce longer. That needs to stop. Seniors need to stop being penalized for staying in the workforce past age 65 simply because they have to in order to afford to live.

There are many ways - removing the tax on tax - the fact that we put the HST on top of provincial motor fuel tax, federal excise sales tax, carbon tax. The fact is this government has the ability to change that and has not. Tax on tax, in my opinion, is just wrong. That is something that this government could take action on and change.

We need to find ways to be supporting the people of this province to make it so that they can afford to live in this province. One of the ways of doing that is ending bracket creep. I encourage the government to do so.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Official Opposition House Leader.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I will adjourn debate on Bill No. 409 - Income Tax Act (amended).

THE SPEAKER: The motion is to adjourn debate on Bill No. 409. Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Official Opposition House Leader.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: That concludes Opposition business for the day. I'm going to pass it back over to the Government House Leader to announce business for tomorrow.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Speaker, that concludes government business for the day. I move that the House do now rise to meet again on Thursday, February 29th between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m.

As we all know, Thursday is budget day, so following the budget, Daily Routine and Question Period. Business will include second reading of Bill No. 404 and Bill No. 407.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is that the House rise and meet again on Thursday, February 29th. The hours will be 1:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We have reached the moment of interruption. The notice of topic for late debate was submitted by the honorable member for Sydney-Membertou. I will read that once again for everyone's information. It is:

Whereas one in three visits to food banks are children and youth, and no significant action has been taken to address the needs to increase food security for children and youth; and

Whereas the provincial government has made \$3.4 billion in revenue but has not taken meaningful action to support children and youth in the last two and a half years with the rising cost of living, inflation, and food prices at record levels;

Therefore be it resolved that more children and youth are facing food insecurity by this government's inaction on addressing food insecurity for children and youth across the province.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION UNDER RULE 5(5)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

GOV'T (N.S.): FOOD SECURITY - PROVIDE

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, I'm happy to get up for a few minutes on this important topic submitted by our caucus for the late debate tonight. It's really something that we've talked about in this House for years now.

We're approaching the end of Year 3 for this government. As we've heard in other debates tonight, and what is fact, is a government that has had more revenue than any government in history, really. When you see the money that has come in through revenue, through taxes, when you see the money that has come through federal government

transfers, it's pretty significant, not only the amount of money that has come in, but their decisions, as we've also heard about tonight, to deficit-spend.

They say it's about fixing health care. It's actually kind of ironic because they talk about deficit spending and they're very critical of a federal government that deficit-spends. I actually find the way that the government operates when it comes to money is very similar to what the NDP were in 2009. Some people agree with that, some people disagree, but the point I want to make with that is about what we're talking about tonight and that's our kids.

[5:30 p.m.]

I always said this during my time in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and it is really kind of my philosophy in life and for many of the people around this room who have children themselves: As MLAs, we're always engaged with different organizations that work with children in our communities. The easiest thing we can do - the most tangible thing, I believe, that we can do is feed our kids. It is.

There's no magic formula that comes with it. There's no tax break. You can look at it in different ways, I guess. I don't want to take anything off the table. But ultimately, what I've said, and what others have said, and what my colleagues in the NDP have said as well, is that is one of the main things we can do to battle this historic cost of living crisis that families at all levels and all income levels, in some capacity, are dealing with. We have a chance to - a blanket policy to make sure that every kid gets breakfast and lunch in our schools. Imagine two square meals a day, knowing that you're taking that cost away from families.

We're seeing the statistics of how young - of how the age has dropped when it comes to people who are accessing food banks. The government - we've been talking about this for three years. There has been a pilot, which is great. I hope tomorrow in the budget that pilot is expanded. I think it's one of the easiest things that this government could have done by now: implement this across our schools. I always go to the schools because that's where our kids are. We know our kids are going to be there every day. That is the easiest way, in my experience, to distribute the resources that are necessary.

We've had this conversation about a school lunch program before. The Minister's talked about it too. If a kid is looking to access food, we always did whatever we could to make sure that happened. But we don't want people asking, and that's the other part of this too. We know kids are going hungry because there's a fear to ask for help. We're seeing that if they're not getting it at school, they're going to the food banks. Nobody should have to ask for help, for food, especially our kids.

We know that our kids are in school. We know that our kids are there every day. We know that is the easiest way we can support them with food. I just think it's the easiest - you talk about historic budgets. How historic would that be if you came out tomorrow

with a universal lunch program? I'd be amazed. That's something we would all celebrate here. As my colleagues have said, the feds are ready to move on this. I've had the conversations with them about national funding - multiple conversations with my colleagues in Ottawa about it. I hope that they're having those conversations with the department.

I've got to put my coffee cup down - and the Speaker's laughing at me, and I don't blame you. (Laughs) No, it's good. It's a Cape Breton thing. You sit there with a cup of coffee in your hand. Something a little stronger, usually, but we're in the Legislature - although that's probably happened before. You get a good Michelob ULTRA. You know what I mean - anyway.

The point I want to make is that this is an important debate. I've been talking about this for years. I really - as I said, this is one of those moments that, if I'm on the government side, to feed our kids breakfast and lunch at school would just take so much pressure off the entire system. It would take so much pressure off those wonderful organizations that are out there volunteering and raising money for these food banks that we know these kids are trying to access. We could take all that pressure off, and they could help other people in the community, because the kids would be going to school and they'd be getting a breakfast and they'd be getting a lunch. That would be awesome. What a moment in the budget, if that happened tomorrow.

As my colleague reminded me, P.E.I. and Manitoba now have it. There are two provinces that now have it. I'm hoping by the attention and the discussion over the last three years of this that tomorrow that pilot project will be expanded. It was very positive. There were some schools around Cape Breton that had that. It was very successful. It was very successful. (Interruption) Something's funny. I'll just wait until they're done.

Tomorrow, that's what I hope for. If anything else in the budget, if we can do stuff for our kids, that would be fantastic. Anything we can do to help our children in communities across the province, we should be looking at it.

Daycare is important. That was important to all of us, to make sure that we got to \$10-a-day child care, because we knew kids were being left behind. Pre-Primary, under the direction of my leader, gave every four-year-old the same opportunity regardless of where they came from, that they all had the same shot.

The universal breakfast program was also brought in by this government to help support - we saw the feedback. I do want to give thanks to the many volunteers who helped with those breakfast programs as well. It's not just the schools - there are great service organizations across the province that make sure that those programs are successful.

All these things, all these points that I'm making, all these initiatives, they all matter. And now this government has a chance to build on that. They have a chance to take

that pressure off the cost of living for families, and they have the ability to put a meal in the belly of every child in our school system. It doesn't get more tangible than that when you're building a budget. It does not. That would be a signature move legacy piece for this government, if they did that tomorrow, because that would matter to every family that has school-aged children in this province. No matter what their situation is, no matter what circumstances they come from, there would be no more asking questions by kids to teachers, I'm starving. We know that happens. We also know that some don't ask the question, and they go hungry. That's terrible, and I've seen it in my own experience.

That's not a shot at anybody here, Speaker. The point is that we that we know that there are families with kids who are scared to ask for food. They should never have to ask for it. We have more kids going to food banks. We can take all that away tomorrow by announcing a universal lunch program in our schools. That pressure can be taken off families, and it can be taken off of those service organizations so they can help other people. We can keep less of our youth trying to access food through our food banks, and build on a foundation of support that we all know is necessary in a time when families are struggling. Families are hurting, and they're looking for some sort of support. We can look at them and tell them that their kids are going to get fed.

With those words, I thank you for the opportunity. I hope it's in the budget tomorrow.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to be very blunt, and I know that folks know I'm passionate about a number of things - children being one of them. We need to open our eyes, because they are our future, and if we want them to be productive citizens, we have to start investing in our kids.

Nearly a quarter of Nova Scotians can't consistently and reliably afford healthy and nutritious food. People are struggling, and at a very deep level, to meet their daily needs. Nearly over a third, or 35.7 per cent of children in Nova Scotia, are living in food-insecure households. The data shows that the highest percentage of people living in food-insecure households are Black and Indigenous.

We need a targeted approach to address all the systemic issues and the root causes that lead to food insecurity. Too often we look to food as the solution, but food insecurity is not a problem rooted in lack of food. It's an issue that is rooted in inadequate income.

Last month, we met in Community Services Committee and Nick Jennery, the executive director of Feed Nova Scotia, was one of our presenters. These are a few of his words. He said:

“In 2017, at the Standing Committee on Community Services, we

stated, 'We cannot feed our way out of this crisis . . . people in need do not have enough money to pay for the basics such as food.' In 2022, we appeared in front of the Public Accounts Committee and said, 'The problem isn't just that food has gone up. It's that income hasn't kept pace.'

"A year ago in 2023," - where I was sitting as well - "we appeared again in front of the Standing Committee on Community Services and said, 'Lining up at a charity for a basic human right is not food security. People need income.'"

I'm going to read what he said:

"We've been sounding the alarm for many years, and here I am again today" - which was on January 11th - "telling you that 2023 was another record-breaking year for food banks in our province. We've seen a 26 per cent increase in food bank usage across Nova Scotia during this past year. Some regions are being completely overwhelmed. Cape Breton food banks, for instance, have seen a 50 per cent increase year over year in the number of people they are serving - 50 per cent. Seventy-seven per cent of food bank clients listed the high cost of housing and food as their reason for needing support. This has increased from 48 per cent just two years ago."

These are very recent numbers that we need to be aware of because these are wonderful service providers. They are doing amazing work. The expectation for service providers to do the work of the government is absolutely absurd.

They also said that "food banks across the province are being faced with a difficult choice of either giving out less food or turning away new clients. As we've all said, telling government that food insecurity in our province has reached new highs is not new. People need more income and affordable housing to live a healthy and dignified life."

We know that the root causes need to be addressed before we can see any improvement in the quality for Nova Scotians. These are the questions that were mentioned. He said:

What do I need to say to all of you for there to be real, measurable action taken to reduce food insecurity in our province? We are too focused on outputs and not outcomes. A program is launched here, a one-time top-up over there. Even in our own case, we're measuring kilograms and funds raised. But when you look at people, that's the outcome. That's what we all need to focus on.

When we talk about people, we talk about how it's so important for us to make sure that folks are being taken care of. That's our responsibility as a government, to pick up where we need to pick up for those folks who really need us, which brings me back to the conversation about the universal school food program because our children are our future. Our children and our youth are going to be the ones who are sitting in these seats. They're going to be our doctors, they're going to be our lawyers, they're going to be our teachers. They're going to be everything, and everything that we want them to be, but we need to start investing in them so that they can actually be capable to do that work.

The matter of the school food program, we know - and everyone else here knows - that the Nova Scotia NDP has been calling for such a program for years now. I remember being a candidate on the campaign run, and this issue was huge because the previous government - the Liberal government - failed to take action on this matter. The program that the NDP campaigned on would have provided at least one meal a day during the school day, with an emphasis on foods that are locally produced, nutritious, and culturally appropriate. We introduced this legislation - actually, it's sitting on the Order Paper - last Fall, but action has not been taken.

The problem has been apparent all along. The problem is simply becoming more visible now. Between 2020 and 2021 in Nova Scotia, there was a 35.7 per cent increase in the prevalence of all children living in households experiencing moderate to severe levels of food insecurity. Think about your kids. Think about how they would feel not being able to have dinner this evening, or not having breakfast in the morning. Think about the amazing feeling that a kid would have at school, having a warm, hot meal, a meal that's nutritious. Something to keep them thinking for the day and focused on their school.

What remains from the previous Liberals to the current Progressive Conservatives is a lack of action from those in positions of power. My understanding is when we are leaders and we are in positions of power, we actually can help make decisions. I don't see decisions being made in regard to our children's food insecurity, in no way, shape, or form. Since this government was elected, food costs have gone up exponentially. This year alone, average food costs were found to have increased by 11 per cent across the province. We all know this; this is not a surprise. The increase in costs has not been matched by an increase in the average spending power of Nova Scotians.

Families with young children are struggling. We hear every day from folks who call us, who email us, and who come to our office to tell us all the hardships they are experiencing and the crises that are happening. Food insecurity is on that list. It's at the top of the list. In 2021, Nova Scotia was the province with the second highest rate of children living in food-insecure households, at 31.4 per cent - second only to Prince Edward Island.

I know the Progressive Conservatives want to be the first at everything, but I want the government to know that having a failing grade and being second-highest is not something to celebrate. I hope that when we put forward some bills, have discussions, and

talk about changing the lives of Nova Scotians, that we do that with this in mind. Today there are roughly 52,000 children in Nova Scotia who do not have enough to eat - and fully eat. One-third of all Nova Scotians accessing food supports are children. To bring these numbers into reality, Loaves and Fishes, a Sydney-based food bank, reported earlier this year rapidly increasing demand, with young families making up a significant number of clients.

[5:45 p.m.]

Volunteer and donation-run school food programs across the province are reporting increasing demand as well. I am very disappointed to hear that Feed Nova Scotia is providing food boxes to schools, which was not the indication that was given to me by the minister when I questioned about food insecurity by children in schools. I was really irritated by the fact that I heard this in a Community Services Committee meeting from an executive director who also feels that it shouldn't be happening.

The bottom line is that many kids in this province are hungry, and they do not have adequate access to food. We know this. Action on a school food program should be taken just on this fact alone, but if this government remains unmotivated to take action on the basis of pure human need, I will elaborate a couple more reasons why investment in school food programs is a smart public policy. Universal school food programs are good for stimulating the economy. Universal school food programs reduce costs for families, leaving more money in their pockets. Furthermore, universal school food programs save money.

The Auditor General's report from 2022, *Healthy Eating in Schools*, backs this up. It warned that if healthy food recommendations were not addressed, the ultimate health care costs would be in the billions, and we know that we do not have the capacity for excess health care needs right now. That is why the report called for a comprehensive school lunch program. We need to invest in our kids.

At this point it should be clear - very clear - that it is simply reckless to not take action on this matter. Kids are hungry right now, and the pain of that hunger is going to be felt by this government for years to come. The Liberals came late to the game, and the Progressive Conservatives are now dragging their feet on the implementation of the federal-provincial universal school food program - which we could do ourselves because we are the Province - but the NDP has known all along that action was needed. I look forward to the day when every child in school in this province has access to nutritious food. I only hope that day comes sooner rather than later.

THE SPEAKER: I just want to make sure that the honourable member did table documents that were quoted. Okay.

The honourable Minister for Community Services.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I want to thank you, Speaker, and obviously in your previous role - in your previous position - thank you for all the hard work you've done there.

What we have heard a lot about here today is blame. In my lifetime, all three parties have been in power, and all we see now is finger-pointing. The NDP is saying the Liberals didn't do it, and the Liberals are saying the Progressive Conservatives didn't do it. Everybody has had a kick at the can, and now, when people go to the other side, when they are in Opposition, things are going to be different.

I truly believe that Nova Scotians are tired of this. It is one thing to say that you are going to do something when you are in Opposition, and then when you have the ability to do it, not to do it. The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development continues . . . (interruption). If the member has something to say, the member can stand up.

We know that the breakfast program is extremely successful. We know that we are continually defunded. It's in every school. I've seen first-hand what it's done for our schools.

I also want to give a shout-out to Nick Jennery and Feed Nova Scotia for the incredible work that they have done over the years. I don't know where we would be as a province without the hard work and the support of Feed Nova Scotia and Nick Jennery. I've met Nick on several occasions. I plan to meet with him soon, and we're going to have a conversation.

We continue to support our food banks right across Nova Scotia. We want to make sure that Nova Scotians have access to healthy food - that they have access to food. We're going to continue to support the food banks right across Nova Scotia.

I do want to talk about some of the programs that were kind of announced, but nobody is really talking about it and looking at it, especially around the most vulnerable Nova Scotians in this province: people living with disabilities; people who may, for all kinds of different reasons, not be able to work. They just received \$300 extra a month, which is almost \$4,000 a year, which is the largest increase in any income assistance program in this province's history.

I do want to give a shout-out to the former Minister of Community Services and the member for Richmond for all his hard work. I'd love to say that I got all this done in 48 hours, but the truth is that the member for Pictou West and the member for Richmond got the ball going, and really got it over the finish line.

I'm excited for tomorrow's budget, and I'm excited to see the reaction. I'm excited to see what Nova Scotians are going to say. We are starting to see some of the things today, like the over 100,000 Nova Scotians now who have been impacted in a positive way by the

announcement around diabetes - something else that has been called on for years.

I remember when one of my children was just starting school, and I had a gentleman approach me and explain to me the difficulties and the expenses around diabetes. You advocate, and you advocate, and you advocate. But today's the day. Today's the day that those Nova Scotians, 10 per cent of this population, are going to get money back in their pocket because of the leadership of this Premier, of the Minister of Health and Wellness, and of this government.

There's been good work all around. Let's not fool ourselves. No government comes in and - there have been things done on all sides that have been great. I've said it before and I'll say it again: For me, this is about doing what's right for Nova Scotians. Doing what's right for the people we represent, and making sure that we're giving them the best opportunity in life to succeed.

That includes people who are experiencing financial difficulties, whether low-income, working-class Nova Scotians or middle-class Nova Scotians who go to work every single day hoping to get ahead - trying to pay for their kids to go to hockey, putting gas in their car at 18 cents carbon tax. It's going up to 32 cents, folks. It's going up to 32 cents. This is what we know.

I had a good conversation with a friend of mine, Rick Jollymore. He owns a small business. One of my best friends. It's costing him thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars a year. He said, "It's taking food out of my family." He said, "It's stopping me and preventing me from hiring new people." It has a real impact.

We know that no government can do it alone. We're going to need provincial help to implement some of these programs, for the funding for these programs. It's kind of confusing to me sometimes, and I've been on all sides of the aisle here, and who knows how long I'll be here. You can make the comments all you want, but who knows? We are all only here for a moment. As much as we want to think that we are safe and locked in, we've got to take advantage of this moment and do what's best for Nova Scotians, and what's best for the people we represent.

What I will say is that thousands and thousands of dollars are coming out of small businesses and large businesses' pockets, because of an 18 cents - soon to be 32 cents - carbon tax. Where do you think that goes? How do you think they recoup that cost? They are going to recoup that cost from the products they sell.

I heard some of the ideas last session about taxing. I've heard the term where the third party is attacking the Opposition, but one of the things the third party did say is that they want to put a tax on empty lots for developers. So say they get in power and that happens. Who is going to pay for that? Do you think it's going to come out of the pockets of the developers, or do you think it's going to be on the price of the units?

We've heard about creating different scales for power rates - just throwing the idea out there. So if one person gets a discount - the working class and the middle class, are they going to have to pay for it? Absolutely. What we heard from the third party was that's just a rounding error for those people - literally the words that were said - that's just a rounding error for the working class and middle-class people of Nova Scotia. That's what we heard.

In a time of high inflation, in a time of taxes and carbon taxes, and everything that is happening, we just need a little sanity here. That's what we need. We need to put people first. Everything you do has to be a people-centred approach. That's what we need when you make the decisions.

It's one thing to say: Balance the budget, don't raise this and get rid of this and do that. I'm not an accountant, but if you're saying to cut taxes and then raise programs but run a balanced budget and don't run deficits for the children of the future, I just don't know how this all balances out in my head. To be frank, I have only Grade 10 Math. I graduated high school back in the day when all you needed was Grade 10 Math, so maybe I'm missing something here. Maybe they can explain this to me tomorrow.

What I'm saying is that you can't go at it alone, and these programs are great programs. We want to make sure that we do the best for everybody, but we need help. We do need help.

I hope there is a federal budget coming. I hope we'll see some of that money. I hope we'll see some of that money for these programs that individuals want here in Nova Scotia. What I would say to the federal government is that you have a willing partner here in Nova Scotia, you just have to help us with the finances, help us with the money, help us with the implementation. Surely if you could do it for a breakfast program, you can do it for everything else. Speaker, I want to thank everyone for allowing me to stand in my place.

THE SPEAKER: Thanks to everyone who stayed and participated in debate this evening. We stand adjourned now until Thursday, February 29th from 1:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Thank you.

[The House rose at 6:00 p.m.]