



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Karla MacFarlane

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First Session

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2024

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House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 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. The first thing I would like to address before we move on is the NDP late debate for this evening. It is submitted by the MLA for Halifax Needham, and it reads:

Whereas rates of school violence are rapidly rising, with 17,234 incidents occurring last school year at an increase of 25 per cent from the year prior; and

Whereas this week alone there have been two significant incidents involving weapons in schools across the province; and

Whereas this government's commitment to examine the school code of conduct is only "one piece of the puzzle," and this Budget did not deliver on resources needed to address school violence;

Therefore be it resolved that this government urgently work with educators and school communities to develop and sufficiently resource a provincial school violence prevention strategy.

Before we move on, one other thing I would like to address from yesterday. I made a ruling respecting unparliamentary language used by the honourable member for Kings South during Question Period, and required that he retract the comment, which he did.

Following Question Period, the honourable House Leader for the Official Opposition asked me to clarify exactly what the honourable member for Kings South had been made to retract. I reviewed Hansard to confirm the exact language. The statement in question was: "For \$6 million in the pocket of one friend of the Premier?"

Per the rulings of Speaker Murphy of March 9, 2020, and of my predecessor, the honourable member for Victoria-The Lakes, on November 3, 2022, in determining whether language is unparliamentary:

the Speaker takes into account the tone, manner and intention of the Member speaking, the person to whom the words at issue were directed, the degree of provocation, and most important, whether or not the remarks created disorder in the Chamber. Thus, language deemed unparliamentary one day may not necessarily be deemed unparliamentary on another day.

Furthermore, remarks that question the integrity, honesty or character of another member are never in order. Please see the ruling of Speaker Murphy on April 29, 2015.

In this case, I observed a succession of increasingly questionable language being used in both the asking and answering of questions. With the remark by the honourable member for Kings South, which verged on questioning the integrity of the Premier, if not outright doing so, the atmosphere in the Chamber began to go from being acrimonious to being disorderly.

The ruling on the unparliamentary nature of the language is context-dependent. The same language in a less charged atmosphere, or used in a different way, might not be considered unparliamentary. I would encourage all members to avoid language in their questions and in their responses that can be construed as a personal attack if they do not wish to be called to order.

I also note that the honourable Minister of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage opined during his response, and before I could rule on the language used by the honourable member for Kings South, that he - the minister - thought the language unparliamentary. I would gently remind all members that there are no points of order permitted during Question Period - or points of privilege, for that matter. If a member thinks that order has been breached, the member should rise on a point of order after Question Period concludes. Thank you.

We will now begin the Orders of the Day.

The honourable member for Antigonish.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I'm doing so at the earliest opportunity, and I'm tabling the document to which I will refer.

Speaker, during Question Period on March 1st, the member for Annapolis said: "I'm happy to have volunteered on physician recruitment the last number of years and will continue to do so."

Since then, the member for Annapolis and I have received an email. The Soldiers Memorial Hospital Foundation has asked the member to clarify in the Legislature what they call a non-relationship with them, because he has a negative and political messaging that has been a detriment to the morale at Soldiers Memorial Hospital, to the point where they couldn't invite him to events.

THE SPEAKER: Order. I don't believe this is a point of order. What I would ask the member to clarify is, what exactly did the member breach?

MICHELLE THOMPSON: Based on the information that I received from the foundation at Soldiers Memorial, my feeling is that the member breached in that the veracity of his statement was not there. In respect of the rules and traditions, and in the interest of transparency, I would like the member to correct the statement as he was asked by the Soldiers Memorial Hospital Foundation.

THE SPEAKER: From what I understand and what I've heard, the member for Antigonish is implying or accusing another member of misleading the House. By my understanding, it would have to be by a substantive motion of notice. Again, can you clarify? Are you accusing another member of lying?

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: Based on an e-mail that I received from the Soldiers Memorial Hospital Foundation that was addressed to the Leader of the Official Opposition and myself, they feel that facts were misrepresented in the House. I would like the member to clarify that as a result. Yes, I feel that he has misled the House by articulating his relationship with Soldiers Memorial Hospital Foundation.

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order. Just give me one moment, please. Thank you.

Order. Order, please. I will indicate to the Chamber that this is not a point of order. It's a disagreement of facts. As well, accusing another member of lying, as we all know, is unparliamentary in this Chamber.

Order. I would like the member to stand, please, and retract those comments.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: I don't recall saying the word "lying." I said that he misrepresented the facts as outlined. It may be semantics, but . . .

THE SPEAKER: "Misrepresent" is the same thing as "lying" in this Chamber.

Once again, I ask . . . Order. Order.

The honourable member for Antigonish has the floor.

HON. MICHELLE THOMPSON: I will retract that statement and the document has been tabled for people to make their own decision about whether that is the case. I will retract the statement.

THE SPEAKER: Thank you. We'll 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 petition has been signed by a number of residents of Windsor Street and Windcrest Terrace in Halifax Chebucto. I have signed it also.

THE SPEAKER: The petition is tabled.

PRESENTING REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS, AND OTHER PAPERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: In connection with a later Member Statement, I beg leave to table a document called “Memorializing People’s Park through poetry” from the *Halifax Examiner* on January 9, 2024.

[1:15 p.m.]

THE SPEAKER: The paper has been tabled. Any further tabling of reports, regulations, and other papers?

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION

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

RESOLUTION NO. 937

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: J’indique par la présente intervention que je proposerai prochainement à l’Assemblée législative l’adoption de la résolution suivante:

Attendu que le français est parlé en Nouvelle-Écosse depuis plus de quatre siècles et que nos communautés acadiennes et francophones apportent une contribution vitale à la richesse et à la diversité de la population néoécossaise; et

Attendu que l’engagement du gouvernement vis-à-vis l’éducation en français langue maternelle est inscrit dans la loi depuis l’automne dernier, dans le cadre de la Loi sur le Conseil scolaire acadien provincial; et

Attendu que le gouvernement continue d’apporter son appui au programme de français langue seconde dans l’ensemble de notre système d’enseignement public;

Il est donc résolu que tous les députés de cette assemblée se joignent à moi pour célébrer la Semaine de l’éducation en français et adressent leurs remerciements à tous les membres du personnel éducatif de langue français de la Nouvelle-Écosse pour les efforts qu’ils ont fait pour assurer le dynamisme et la vitalité de la langue française et de la culture acadienne et francophone.

Madame la Présidente de l’Assemblée législative, je vous demande l’adoption de cette résolution sans préavis et sans débat.

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

Whereas the French language has been spoken in Nova Scotia for more than 400 years, and our Acadian and francophone communities are vital contributors to the rich and diverse fabric of our province; and

Whereas the government's commitment to French first-language education was cemented in legislation last Fall with the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial Act; and

Whereas the government continues to support robust French as a second language programming throughout our public school system;

Therefore be it resolved that members of this Legislature join me in celebrating French Education Week and thanking all Nova Scotia French educators for keeping the French language and Acadian and francophone culture alive and well in our schools.

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.

The honourable Minister for Community Services.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Before I do this notice of motion, I spent almost two decades in care, so I want to say a special thank you to social workers the late Beth Hamilton and the incredible Charmaine Tanner for all they've done for me.

RESOLUTION NO. 938

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

Whereas social workers give hope and support to people across the province who need help, whether it's through services provided by our government or community organizations; and

Whereas social workers advocate for and help their clients navigate the availability of resources they can access; and

Whereas March is National Social Work Month, with a theme of Seven Points of Unity, where social workers reflect on the seven shared values that guide individual and collective journeys of truth, reconciliation, equity, and inclusion;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of the House of Assembly join me in recognizing National Social Work Month 2024, thanking Nova Scotia's dedicated social workers for all they do for people in our province, and reflect on our values and journeys through truth, reconciliation, equity, and inclusion.

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

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction. Today in the Gallery, we have dozens of brave women who are standing with me to introduce the Find It Early Act. They have shared their stories with me; we have shed tears. They are here representing their daughters, mothers, nieces, aunts, cousins, best friends, and grandmothers who have been touched by breast cancer.

I am going to ask them to stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.
(Applause)

I just want to say I'm humbled by their presence today, and I thank them so much.

Bill No. 423 - An Act to Expand Breast Screening for High Breast Density Patients. (Rafah DiCostanzo)

Bill No. 424 - An Act to Ensure Public Accountability with Respect to Unproclaimed Legislation. (Gary Burrill)

Bill No. 425 - An Act to Secure Family Physicians for Nova Scotia. (Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin)

Bill No. 426 - An Act to Increase Access to Addictions Services. (Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin)

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

NOTICES OF MOTION

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

RESOLUTION NO. 939

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

Whereas the current budget is imposing a freeze on income assistance for non-disabled persons for the third year in a row, during which time, since these rates were last adjusted in May 2021, shelter costs have inflated by 19 per cent and food inflation has been 21 per cent; and

Whereas as a direct consequence, the budget imposes a real inflation-adjusted income decrease of, for example, \$30.11 per month on a single parent with a single two-year-old child and a real inflation-adjusted income decrease of \$20.22 per month on a single adult; and

Whereas as a further direct result of this freeze, the standard income assistance payment for someone without a home to pay for essentials such as food and necessities will remain unadjusted at \$380 per month or \$12.66 per day;

Therefore be it resolved that the House instructs the Standing Committee on Community Services to consider this deep violation of the human right to an adequate standard of living and instructs the committee to bring in a bill providing for the ending of the

freeze on income assistance rates for non-disabled persons in Nova Scotia.

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

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

I hear several Noes. The notice of motion will be tabled.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants West.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Speaker, before I begin my statement, I would like to beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Yes, please do.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: In the Speaker's Gallery, I'm honoured to introduce several members of the Brooklyn Fire Department Auxiliary who are joining us here today. We have Nancy Canavan, Gaye Crowell, Laurie Pike, Vivian Pineo, and Bev Tetanish. I would ask that you all rise and help me give them a warm welcome in the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants West.

BROOKLYN FIRE DEPT. AUX.: 60TH ANNIV. - CONGRATS.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I stand today to congratulate our very own Brooklyn Fire Department Auxiliary, which celebrated 60 years of service this past Fall. The auxiliary is made up of all walks of life, united by a shared commitment to service and community.

The auxiliary is always ready and willing to make your wedding magical, your celebration of life beautiful, or any event they facilitate nothing short of memorable.

Over the years, the auxiliary has consistently supported our firefighters and community. That was especially critical when we faced the devastating floods this past Summer. Their support and the tireless hours they spent preparing food, not only for everyone involved in the recovery efforts but also the community at large, was one of the most extraordinary things I have ever witnessed.

This group of individuals is to be admired, and I wish to thank them for their selflessness and their dedication. They are a true testament to the difference volunteers can make.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

SUPPORTERS: BREAST CANCER RISK ADVOCACY - RECOG.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Speaker, I rise today to thank my colleagues in the Chamber from all sides who gave me their time to advise them on the elevated risk to women with dense breasts. We are talking about close to half the women in Nova Scotia who have dense breasts.

Cancer in women with dense breasts is often discovered when a woman feels a lump after a normal mammogram. These are called interval cancers. They are larger, more aggressive cancers and later-stage. Women are more likely to need chemotherapy or mastectomy and are more likely to die. Dense breasts increase the risk of interval cancers.

In 2019, Nova Scotia became the second province in the country to lead in informing women that they have dense breasts. However, in Nova Scotia they are denied supplementary screening. Instead of encouraging women in Nova Scotia to find their cancers early, our policy denies them ultrasound, MRI, and any other screening technology available in other provinces.

Many more cancers could be detected early, as it was in my case, and many other women in Nova Scotia would not have to endure difficult, invasive treatment like mastectomy, radiation, chemotherapy, and the burden of lymphedema.

I want to thank, in particular, Jennie Dale and Dr. Paula Gordon for their tireless and continued efforts to bring awareness and advocacy to this issue across Canada. I ask the House to join me in acknowledging Dense Breasts Canada.

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

SUGAR HEALTH: ONLINE RESOURCE - RECOG.

LISA LACHANCE: Speaker, I rise to recognize an initiative that is filling a province-wide gap in health information. Nova Scotia's Sexual, Gender, and Reproductive Health Registry & Warmline, or SUGAR Health, is run by Sexual Health Nova Scotia and funded by Health Canada.

As the only registry of its kind in Nova Scotia, SUGAR Health connects community to essential sexual, gender, and reproductive health care, forges links between health care

providers and clients, and empowers practitioners with resources to elevate their sexual, gender, and reproductive health information.

[1:30 p.m.]

The online registry is a searchable database at www.sugarhealth.ca of clinical services around the province that offer sexual, gender, and reproductive health care. You can search by location or service and check out clinic hours and contact information, or you can contact Sugar Health by texting or calling 1-888-299-2066.

The funding for the SUGAR warmline runs out at the end of the month, March 2024, leaving a gap for Nova Scotians. We hope Sexual Health Nova Scotia finds support to continue this essential service.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Passage.

DEROZARI, BIANCA & JOE: OPEN MIC HOSTS - RECOG.

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: Speaker, I rise today to recognize Eastern Passage business owners Bianca and Joe DeRozari for hosting two open mic music nights each month. Pulling community members together to share and build friendships through music is a dream come true for Joe and Bianca. Their Coffee, Tea & Sea shop in Fisherman's Cove in Eastern Passage serves as a wonderful meeting place for these kitchen party evenings.

One evening they hold their music night open mic, and the second evening is an open gospel hour. Both nights offer fun and laughter in a feel-good, carefree, and welcoming atmosphere. Everyone is welcome, and if you play a musical instrument, even better, and you are encouraged to bring that along.

I ask all members of the Nova Scotia Legislature to join me in recognizing Bianca and Joe DeRozari for their dedication to the residents of Eastern Passage and for bringing our music community together in such a creative way.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Thank you, Speaker. I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Yes, of course.

ZACH CHURCHILL: I bring the attention of the House to the West Gallery, where we are joined by folks from the Strongest Families Institute: Darcy Comeau, VP Finance - I would ask the individuals to rise when I mention your names - Elizabeth Hines, Senior

Director, Client Services; Breanna Pottie, Senior Research and Program Development Manager; and Jenna Bridges, Senior Field Services Manager.

I would like to welcome these folks to the House today in recognition of World Teen Mental Wellness Day. This organization has been instrumental in advancing the health of Nova Scotian youth and their families, and I am happy to move to my statement.

THE SPEAKER: Welcome. Thank you for joining us today.

The honourable member for Yarmouth.

STRONGEST FAMS. INST.: MENTAL HEALTH CARE - THANKS

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: The Strongest Families Institute is an award-winning charitable organization that leverages technology and skilled staff to deliver evidence-based programs to children, youth, and families dealing with mild to moderate mental health issues. They are a proud Nova Scotian company whose roots began with clinical trials at the IWK Health Centre.

The Strongest Families Institute removes barriers to mental health care because families know that accessing this care is not easy. They use technology and highly qualified staff to deliver quality mental health services for children, youth, adults, and families when and where they need them. Families receive skill-based educational offers, demonstrations, and weekly telephone coaching. These innovative, telephone-based services eliminate geographic, economic, and social barriers that families often encounter when accessing timely care. Their programs are backed by over 20 years of social science research, resulting in proven and effective services.

We thank the Strongest Families Institute for their creativity in helping to reduce barriers facing families struggling with access to mental health care. Their innovative model of care is expanding much-needed availability to mental health services for younger Nova Scotians. I know they are making an incredible difference in the lives of so many people. I'd like to thank them all so much on behalf of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

BREAST SCREENING: POLICY CHANGE NEED - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, I rise today to call on the government to change the policy regarding follow-up breast screening for people with dense breasts. Currently in Nova Scotia, people with breast density category C or D - that is the densest breasts - are made aware of their breast density. That means that when they get a regular mammogram, any signs of cancer or other issues could be obscured by the dense breast tissue.

The problem is that in Nova Scotia, if someone has dense breasts, they don't have access to screening that could detect the cancers accurately and prevent the spread of the disease. I represent a woman in Dartmouth North - and probably many women in this situation - whose cancer was undetected because they couldn't get access to follow-up breast screening, and now are in stage IV before they are diagnosed.

Cancer, if detected early, has a much better chance of being defeated. A person's quality of life is generally going to be better with less treatment. Cancer is cheaper to treat if detected early.

It only makes sense that we offer follow-up screening to all people with breast density C and D. I urge the government to change this policy as soon as possible.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Glace Bay-Dominion.

GLACE BAY EMERG. DEPT.: REOPENING - THANKS

JOHN WHITE: Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to announce that Glace Bay General Hospital's emergency department is now open three days per week, Monday to Wednesday. In July 2021, the department was closed due to unavailability of physicians and staff, resulting in the Glace Bay emergency department only being open four days in June and July that year.

In October 2022, after being closed for more than a year, the emergency department in Glace Bay was reopened two days a week. Doctors said that having the Glace Bay emergency department open two days a week was a godsend, so the additional day is only viewed as continued progress. Every day that the Glace Bay General Hospital is open, a regional hospital experiences a decrease in registration numbers. Staff, patients, and constituents are extremely thankful.

Residents have reported to us that they are looking forward to seeing the emergency department eventually open full-time. They take comfort in the assurance that it's now open Monday to Wednesday.

On behalf of the residents of Glace Bay, I want to thank the Department of Health and Wellness for the continued progress.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

COMM. DE DEV. DE BANGOR: SAWMILL PRES. - RECOG.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Speaker, I rise today to recognize the tireless efforts of the Commission de développement de Bangor, caretakers of Le Moulin de Bangor, as they continue to work to repair the site's damaged dam and prepare the museum for reopening.

Dating back to the late 1870s, Le Moulin de Bangor holds significant historical importance as one of the few remaining operational water-powered turbine sawmills in North America. The Commission has successfully organized two fundraisers, including an afternoon event at the sawmill site and a supper theatre, demonstrating the community support for their cause.

With continued assistance, the site aims to restore its functioning sawmill and establish an interpretive centre. I call upon all members to recognize the Commission de développement de Bangor for their dedication to preserving this unique community asset. Merci.

THE SPEAKER: The honorable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GOYETTE, SUE: PEOPLE'S PARK POEM - RECOG.

GARY BURRILL: There are many types of poetry, Speaker - poetry in books and poetry that is spoken, and there is public poetry of the sort that HRM Poet Laureate Sue Goyette presented when in December she inscribed her poem "Memorializing Meagher Park On Your Way Home" on a board and hung it on the fence of Meagher Park at the corner of Dublin Street and Chebucto Road, formerly known as People's Park, which was, for an extended period, the major homeless encampment in the city.

The poem extends respect for the experience of those who lived in People's Park before it was fenced off, and reflects on what it is to live in a city where some live in tents and others live inside.

Shortly after it was put in place, the poem was taken down, but others copied and replaced it two days later. Since then, Governor General Award-winning poet Annick MacAskill has published the poem as a limited-run pamphlet with the proceeds going to Out of the Cold. Says Goyette in an interview about the poem: "And as we're talking about this, rents continue to rise."

THE SPEAKER: The honorable member for Colchester-Musquodoboit Valley.

GIBBS, ANDREA: JIM KENNEDY AWD. RECIP. - CONGRATS.

LARRY HARRISON: Speaker, I rise today to recognize a former constituent of mine, and someone I consider to be a friend, Andrea Gibbs.

Andrea was the recipient of the Jim Kennedy Memorial Award for 2023. The Jim Kennedy Memorial Award is awarded annually to those clients of STEPs on Arthur who work well in the face of work and personal challenges, initiate tasks and duties above their daily tasks, display a genuine interest for people and helping others, have good attendance, and are experiencing an ongoing health challenge or issue.

I can't think of someone more deserving of this award. Andrea epitomizes these criteria in her everyday life. I ask the members of this House to join me in congratulating Andrea Gibbs on receiving this award, and wishing her godspeed in her recovery process.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

CHARTERIS, BARB: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Today I want to recognize Barb Charteris. She's been a resident of Timberlea for over 30 years, and she recognized the growing number of families in the community struggling with food insecurity, especially in the last two years.

To start with, she began hosting a free luncheon at the Trinity United Church in Timberlea once a month. The idea of the luncheon was to offer a relaxing atmosphere where people could come to enjoy a free meal with fellow BLT members. Although the luncheon is free, the monthly event received plenty of generous donations and has grown in popularity.

The luncheons have raised enough donations to build two community pantries in the BLT area. One is already up at the Timberlea Dental Centre, and the next one, we are partnering to go up at my office. The pantries contain dried foods, non-perishable items, and toiletries. They're open 24/7 with a note that reads "Take what you need and give what you can."

Barb approached the BLT Christmas food drive team for help, guidance, experience, and expertise on the project. Our office worked with those two founding members of the food drive since its inception, and know the exceptional work of this community group.

There are many volunteers involved in this. I'm going to thank all of them in the future, but today is about Barb. Thank you, Barb, for all you do to help people.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Yes, please go ahead.

SUZY HANSEN: I'd like to draw our attention to the gallery across. I have a student visiting who is also working in my office. Her name is Natasha Ferguson, and she is a political science student at Dalhousie.

I'd like all members of the House to give her a warm welcome. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome.

The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

FERGUSON, NATASHA: OFFICE TEAM MEMBER - RECOG.

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, I rise today to recognize Natasha Ferguson. Natasha is a mature student, and a mom of two beautiful children.

She is currently a Dalhousie student studying political science with a minor in philosophy. Natasha has served on the Senate Discipline Committee as a student representative, the Senate Learning and Teaching Committee, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Academic Appeals and Student Matters Committee as a student representative, and the Student Senate Caucus as the women's representative.

She has strong political views, and is a wealth of knowledge. I'm extremely excited to have her here with us and to join me as well in my office.

I would like all members to join me in welcoming her here today. I'm extremely grateful to have Natasha join me on my office team.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Eastern Shore.

SHUMAN, DAVE: WOOD CARVING - THANKS

HON. KENT SMITH: Speaker, I rise today to bring recognition to Dave Shuman of Musquodoboit Harbour for his artistic talents and his spirit of generosity.

Dave, a local artist and master wood carver, sells wooden comfort birds. These comfort birds are made from a variety of different woods, have a smooth finish, and act much like a worry stone. They are used for relaxation or anxiety relief.

All proceeds from the sale of the comfort birds are donated to Eastern Shore Mental Health. This organization offers resources and support for anyone living with a mental health challenge, and for family members and friends who are interested in talking, sharing, and learning. They regularly host peer support groups, and funds from the sale of the comfort birds help make this possible.

I ask that all members of the Assembly join me in thanking Dave for using his wood-carving abilities to create a beautiful product that positively impacts community mental health efforts.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

WORLD SPAY DAY: NEUTERING PETS - RECOG.

HON. KELLY REGAN: February is recognized as Spay/Neuter Awareness Month, and World Spay Day is celebrated annually on the fourth Tuesday in February.

This global event raises awareness about the importance of responsible pet ownership, and encourages pet owners to take action. This specific date is chosen to draw attention to the importance of spaying and neutering pets during a time when many animals begin to reproduce in the Spring.

[1:45 p.m.]

I'd like to congratulate a Bedford business for participating in World Spay Day 2024. Bedford Highway Veterinary Hospital spayed and neutered four cats over the morning of February 27th, and they noted they had their hands particularly full that day. I want to thank them and all the veterinary clinics that participated in World Spay Day for doing their part to prevent unplanned litters, thereby reducing the number of stray animals out in the world. Well done.

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

SHAW, ROBBIE: MHFNS AWD. RECIP. - CONGRATS.

LISA LACHANCE: Speaker, I rise today to honour Robbie Shaw, the 2023 recipient of the Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia's Outstanding Senior award. The Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia recognizes exceptional individuals who have had a positive impact on their communities at their annual Let's Keep Talking event hosted by Bell Let's Talk.

Robbie is well known for his positions in education, business, health care, and volunteer fields in Nova Scotia. He received this award on account of his courage to speak publicly about his struggle with Alzheimer's and depression and the challenge of facing mental health issues as a senior. Robbie speaks about how he manages his treatments and continues to stay involved in his community as well as in his social life, inspiring others to do the same.

I'd like to conclude by congratulating Robbie Shaw on his exceptional achievement.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

DIONNE, CODIE: CA WORK - RECOG.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Speaker, I rise today to welcome Codie Dionne to my constituency office. Codie officially took on the position of part-time constituency assistant last week. She has been a casual employee in our office since October, and I am pleased to say that Codie has agreed to come aboard and work alongside me.

My long-time constituency assistant, the incredible Kelly Gomes, is retiring in May, and Codie will step into her shoes as the full-time CA. After working with Codie for only a few days, Kelly knew instantly that she would be an excellent fit for our office. Codie's compassion and empathy are apparent in her dealings with the people of our community, and she is always willing to listen and work to find solutions for the issues they face.

I am excited to have Codie work with us in the best community in Nova Scotia, and I know she will be a huge asset in our office. Welcome aboard, Codie. Looking forward to times ahead.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

ENABLERS: NEW NSCC BLDG. - RECOG.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, as many come into Sydney, they'll notice the beautiful building that is going to be the new NSCC Sydney Waterfront Campus, scheduled to open this year. I recognize everybody who's been involved with it, whether they're the staff from NSCC or the folks who have been working on the construction for all these years. It's really wonderful. The relocation of the community college was really the catalyst for change for our community. We're all excited, whether an employee at NSCC, a future or current student, or the local business community.

It's really transformed Sydney forever, and I rise in my place to thank everyone who was heavily involved in making sure that happened. It's going to be an exciting time when it opens this year.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

COUCH OF HOPE: MENTAL HEALTH CARE - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, in the absence of a truly universal mental health care program in Nova Scotia, accessing timely and affordable or free mental health care is a significant challenge for Nova Scotians - a challenge that is being alleviated in part by a not-for-profit in Dartmouth, the Couch of HOPE.

In 2020, when founding counsellor Michelle Labine and her colleagues noticed that their sliding-scale counselling spots were all full, it became clear that more radical action was required. At the same time, Michelle's group practice was hearing from Master's of Counselling students who needed clinical practicum hours, and that's when Couch of HOPE was born. Clients dealing with stress, anxiety, depression, addiction, trauma, relationship issues, grief, life transitions, and more meet with a counselling therapist intern who is supported by a practicum supervisor and professor.

In 2023, Michelle was named the United Way Invisible Champion for her work with Couch of HOPE. Recently, Couch of HOPE partnered with the North Grove to offer appointments to people there on site.

I ask the House to join me in expressing my deep gratitude to Michelle and the whole Couch of HOPE team for doing their part in making mental health care truly accessible in Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Digby-Annapolis.

O'NEIL, CINDY: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

HON. JILL BALSER: Speaker, I rise today to recognize an extremely devoted volunteer in my constituency. Her name is Cindy O'Neil. For years, Cindy volunteered with many organizations that involved her kids, such as Digby Neck Consolidated School, the School Advisory Council, Digby Neck Community Development Association, and Clare-Digby Minor Hockey Association.

Once Cindy's children were older, she started to volunteer for other organizations, including the Digby Relay for Life, the Digby/Annapolis Christmas Daddies, the Admiral Digby Library and Historical Society, Maritime NHL'ers For Kids, Digby Scallop Days, and the Digby Splash Park Society.

I cannot describe how important it is for communities like Digby to have volunteers like Cindy. I know she inspires so many, including me, to give back to our community and serve and support valuable organizations whenever we can.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings South.

ACADIA VOLLEYBALL TEAM: CH'SHIP WIN - CONGRATS.

HON. KEITH IRVING: It's with great pride that I rise to celebrate a historic triumph in the volleyball court by the Acadia Axewomen clinching their first Atlantic University Sport women's volleyball championship.

Their resounding victory over the Saint Mary's Huskies in three sets (25-18, 27-25, 25-22) marks a watershed moment in the program and for our university community. The fervent support of a sold-out home crowd in Wolfville propelled the Axewomen to an early lead, which they fiercely defended throughout the match, led by the indomitable Jenna Lake, whose stellar performance earned her AUS playoff MVP title.

The Axewomen displayed unparalleled skill and determination. Supported by the strategic prowess of centre Charlotte Dean, the defensive prowess of Rebecca Dorsey, and the dominance of middle Erica Fisher at the net, the Axewomen exhibited a master class in teamwork and tenacity.

I ask all members of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly to join me in congratulating all players, coaches, and trainers of the Acadia Axewomen volleyball team and wish them all the best at the upcoming nationals.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ARHS GIRLS BASK. TEAM: COMP. PERF. - CONGRATS.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Today I rise to congratulate the Amherst Regional High School senior girls basketball team, who hosted provincials this past weekend in Amherst. The ARHS senior girls played hard and finished their season by placing second in the province. Thank you to the coaches and to the parents who support these young women.

I want to acknowledge the graduating team members: Sykora Hussey, Megan Teed, Cassidy Sangster, Hana Shimizu, and my niece, beautiful Hailey Johnson. I wish each of these five young women the best in their future in sports, in studies and in their chosen professions. I'm proud that Amherst hosted these provincial competitions, and that our area was able to welcome people from all over the province.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please, go ahead.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I draw the members' attention to the gallery behind me, where we are joined by Sandra Mullen, president of the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union, and Hugh Gillis, first vice president, who are here with their correctional workers outside and came to watch a little bit of the show today. Please offer them the warm welcome of the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Queens.

DOUCET, NIKKI: NEW SOCCER CEO - CONGRATS.

HON. KIM MASLAND: I rise today to recognize and congratulate Nikki Doucet on recently being appointed the new CEO of Women's Professional Game soccer in England.

Nikki was born and grew up in Liverpool, Queens County, and has been making her presence known in the world arena on many levels. This is an outstanding achievement by Nikki, and it comes with a huge portfolio of responsibility. She is charged with leading women's soccer into a whole new era in terms of the way it is structured, how it is governed, its marketing, the revenue streams it generates, and importantly, how players, staff, and fans are treated and cared for.

It is with such personal pride that I wish Nikki the very best in this new and exciting venture. With her own background in elite sport and having worked previously for world-renowned organizations, I know she'll be an amazing success.

THE SPEAKER: Before we begin, I want to remind everyone that whoever stands up is whom I recognize. There is no order to statements. I know everyone would like to see it go here, here, here - but there's no order. If I don't see you, if you're not standing up, I recognize the person I see. End of story.

The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

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

MAIER, AMANDA: INTEGRATIVE HE(ART) WORK - RECOG.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Today I rise to recognize Amanda Maier, the owner of Integrative He(Art) Work and Osteopathic Clinic located in Fairview-Clayton Park. Amanda's curious and hard-working nature led her to receive a diploma in massage therapy, and in 2020, a Bachelor of Science with Honors in Osteopathy.

In her daily practice, Amanda adopts a client-centred approach that offers a unique perspective on illness. She firmly believes that effective treatment and healing often entail dismantling pre-conceived notions and rebuilding the individual piece-by-piece towards wholeness.

Beyond her professional pursuits, Amanda finds joy in travel, wine culture as a certified sommelier, and writing. Her debut novel independently published in March of 2023 showcases her creative spirit and storytelling prowess.

Amanda's diverse talents enrich our community in many ways, and I ask all members to join me in thanking her for her significant contributions to Fairview-Clayton Park.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

CORR. OFFICERS: SHORT-STAFFING - RECOG.

SUZY HANSEN: I rise today to recognize our correction officers working in our correctional facilities across the province. Correction officers play a crucial role within our justice system. Earlier today, folks were outside the People's House rallying together to have their voices heard.

Corrections officers are critically short-staffed, putting their safety and the safety of those they are supervising at risk. This work is crucial, and shortages of staff make it more unsafe. Corrections work is a career that folks are very proud of, and being short-staffed is unsafe for staff and clients. If the staff working in correctional facilities aren't safe, then no one there is safe. In solidarity, NSGEU.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sackville-Cobequid.

STEPHEN, HEATHER: ACHIEVEMENTS - CONGRATS.

HON. STEVE CRAIG: I rise today to both recognize and congratulate Heather Stephen of Lower Sackville. Heather is a former Canadian World Cup athlete, a passionate author who has written and published two books and has a third on the way, and she and her husband Alex own and operate Apartment 3 Espresso Bar in Lower Sackville.

Her years of athletic training and dedication developed and grew her resilience and determination, resulting in winning a World Cup medal, becoming the published author that she is, and now running a much-beloved community coffee shop. Heather's love of coffee and people is evident to those who frequent the coffee shop where, as soon as you walk through the door, you feel most welcome.

I would like to ask that all members of the House of Assembly join me in congratulating Heather and wish her all the best in her future endeavours.

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

CPA BASK. TEAM: CH'SHIP WIN - CONGRATS.

HON. BEN JESSOME: I'd like to congratulate Charles P. Allen boys' basketball team on their third consecutive provincial championship. I love all the kids from Bedford too, but in particular I'd like to give a shout-out to the Hammonds Plains crew: Caleb

Anderson, Jaquan Jackson, Finn Bootland and Daishawn David. HP represented at the CP Allen basketball team, and congratulations to that team on their third consecutive championship. Looking for a fourth again next year.

THE SPEAKER: Just before we go into Question Period, just a reminder that there was a lot of chatter and a lot of tension in this Chamber yesterday. So let's all try to go forward today with keeping in mind that when someone's speaking, there shouldn't be any discussion among other people. We should be listening, whether it's the question, whether it's the answer.

Today I hope that we can all do better. I know that I will be watching very closely, and I think it's time that maybe we start calling people out to make it aware that we need to do better in here. So I kindly ask, going forward today, that everyone just be respectful to one another. A friendly reminder, too, not to be on your phone.

Order. We will now begin Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers. The time is now 2:00 p.m. and we will finish at 2:50 p.m.

[2:00 p.m.]

ORDERS OF THE DAY

ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

PREM.: WINE SECTOR COMMENTS - APOLOGIZE

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, when it was pointed out to the Premier yesterday that all of the wine growers in Nova Scotia, with the exception of two wine producers, would not be eligible for the Premier's new subsidy on importing juice from other jurisdictions, the Premier asked, why can't they just ramp up?

The fact is that industry has ramped up. They have turned a wine-growing industry and a wine sector from nothing to one that's worth \$250 million and employs 1,100 skilled workers. What they don't want to do is turn those beautiful vineyards into bottling factories.

Will the Premier please apologize for his ill-thought-out comments yesterday to the sector?

HON. TIM HOUSTON (The Premier): Speaker, the program is available to anyone who wants to participate. That's the fact. That is the reality. It's an open program. Anyone who wants to participate in that program can participate in that program.

Yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition made statements like “people are going to use foreign grapes and bottle it in Nova Scotia and call it Nova Scotia wine.” That’s simply not true. He tabled a picture of me with an entrepreneur. He knows I have my picture taken with hundreds, probably thousands, of Nova Scotians in the run of a year.

The Leader of the Opposition will say anything to grab a headline. That’s totally fine, but over on this side of the House, we are concerned about developing the economy of this province. We are concerned about growing the industry. We want to work with the industry to grow. That’s where our focus will remain, not on silly cheap headlines like the Leader of the Opposition seeks.

ZACH CHURCHILL: The Premier’s headlines certainly haven’t been cheap. They’ve cost billions of dollars outside of his own budget to accommodate. Let’s talk about headlines.

These concerns are coming from a sector that is worth \$250 million and employs 1,100 skilled employees from one end of this province to the other. This is a critical sector to the rural economy, and the Premier is jeopardizing the valuable part of this sector to subsidize the importation of juice that’s produced in other provinces. He wants to turn our vineyard sector, our wine-growing sector, into a wine-bottling sector, where there is less economic value to the people of the province.

He said this is a trade issue. Speaker, could he please table the wording from the trade agreement that told him he has to subsidize the importation of foreign juice?

THE PREMIER: Speaker, we are very supportive of the industry. We’ve evidenced that with significant announcements. We’ve made more investments in the industry than the prior government did. We are supportive of the industry. We’ll continue to be supportive of the industry. It’s an important industry for our province. There’s absolutely no question about that.

The types of statements that the member makes are just totally unacceptable. They’re the exact reason that just last week the Auditor General said that the core leadership of this party lacks integrity. Man oh man, every Question Period, every time that member opens his mouth, he absolutely proves the Auditor General’s statement about a lack of integrity.

We support the industry, and we will continue to do that.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. Just earlier today, I made a comment that we cannot mention one’s integrity. I would kindly ask the Premier to just retract that one statement with regard to integrity, please.

THE PREMIER: It was a quote of the Auditor General, Speaker. The full quote is: “All of that concerns me with respect to management integrity. I mean, this is the organization that supports our elected officials who can be in charge of . . . billions of dollars. . . So all of that is very concerning.” I’m happy to table the Auditor General’s statement and talk about the report . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. A reminder to everyone that you cannot use a quote to indirectly or directly assume someone’s integrity or misfaults of someone. Again, I would ask that the Premier just retract that, please.

THE PREMIER: Can I retract my use of the word and table the Auditor General’s comments?

THE SPEAKER: Yes.

THE PREMIER: Okay, that’s what I’ll do. Thank you.

ZACH CHURCHILL: I’ve read the trade decision. The Premier said yesterday that this was just a Nova Scotia issue. It’s not. The federal government was implicated in this dispute, and British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia. In all other jurisdictions, none of them decided that they were going to use this decision as an excuse to use taxpayers’ money to subsidize the importation of juice farmed in other jurisdictions across the world. This is not a trade issue.

In every one of those other jurisdictions, what those governments did was invest in their wine and vineyard sectors through the agriculture department. Not by doing markups. They’ve actually responded to this, and they have plans to support the real people who are growing our economy and spending money in the ground.

My question to the Premier is: Why did he not follow the lead of other provinces to ensure that we were investing in the wine sector?

THE PREMIER: This is a trade-sensitive issue. It’s extremely sensitive. It could have broad-ranging impacts across a number of our industries. I appreciate that the Leader of the Official Opposition now believes that he’s a trade expert, but in the case of situations like this, I will rely on the actual trade lawyers, although I appreciate his advice on it.

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

PREM.: SCRAPPING COASTAL PROT. ACT - EXPLAIN

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Five days ago, residents in Lunenburg County noticed site markers appearing perilously close to Little Crescent Beach, indicating that construction on three beachfront cottages by a Halifax developer was moving forward. The timing of

this, mere days after the government announced that it was scrapping the Coastal Protection Act, has raised suspicions and concerns among the local community.

Can the Premier admit that it was a mistake to trust that safe decisions would be made in the absence of provincial policy?

THE PREMIER: As we've previously discussed, all Nova Scotians value our coastline. It's incredibly important to us. We have made a decision as a government that we will work and provide information to Nova Scotians to help them make informed decisions. We believe in Nova Scotians.

I know that the Leader of the New Democratic Party is against working with Nova Scotians on an issue like this. She is also against clean, safe nuclear power, the \$150 for income assistance, and tabling amendments in the Law Amendments Committee.

Speaker, the Leader of the New Democratic Party is against absolutely everything, but I'll tell you what, we are for Nova Scotia and for moving this province forward.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: While the Premier seeks to impugn my reputation, I'll stick to the facts here.

Just last year, this same developer was at the centre of another coastal development controversy when he bought a 130-metre seawall on Little Crescent Beach. In the process, he in-filled a salt marsh, encroached on a public beach, and damaged the surrounding environment.

In response, the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, through their mayor, issued a statement saying "The Municipality of the District of Lunenburg is deeply concerned about the situation at Crescent Beach and echoes the community concerns . . . Council is calling upon Province of Nova Scotia to immediately implement the Coastal Protection Act regulations."

Why is the Premier needlessly putting Nova Scotians and our coastlines at risk?

THE PREMIER: What I would say is that we're working with Nova Scotians. We're working with municipalities. We don't believe that somebody in Halifax dictating to property owners across this province what needs to happen on the coastline is the only way to do it.

It is certainly the way that the Leader of the NDP favours, for sure. We understand that. But we don't. We believe that working with Nova Scotians, providing information and providing maps, is the way to go. That's the approach we're taking.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Last I checked, the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg was quite some distance from HRM.

The developer who built this seawall - who is now building precariously close to the shoreline, and illustrating the failure of this government's coastal action plan - is the very same developer at the heart of the Hogan Court scandal, who flipped the hotel to the Province for an overpriced amount and whose tax bill was footed by this Premier and all of us.

I can't help but draw parallels between the two situations. In both, the Premier was all too eager to help out his friends at the expense of Nova Scotians. Is the Premier listening to all of the Nova Scotians he claims to love, or just his friends and donors?

THE PREMIER: Speaker, I know the Opposition is intent on smearing Nova Scotians at every opportunity they get for a little bit of political gain. I don't support that type of gutter politics.

What I would say is that we believe in supporting Nova Scotians and providing the information. The NDP can be negative on just about anything. We know that, whether it's Nova Scotians as humans, Nova Scotians as businesspeople, whether it's people on income assistance, we know how negative the NDP is. We're positive.

This is a great time to be a Nova Scotian. This province is growing, it's moving forward, and I couldn't be prouder to be in government in this province right now.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

FTB: SUBSIDIZING FOREIGN JUICE - EXPLAIN

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: The Premier has questioned my trade credentials on his decision to subsidize imported juice to compete with locally grown wine. He doesn't need to trust my trade credentials; he can just actually read the trade decision by the World Trade Organization. That's all he has to do. I tabled it.

There's nothing in that report that says the Premier needs to subsidize foreign juice to come into the province. This is not a trade issue, which is why no other jurisdiction that was implicated in this made a similar choice. The question is whether the Premier is making decisions that favour his fundraisers and close friends and allies over the important job of protecting and growing our rural economy.

Can the Premier please answer: Has that company received any funding from this government?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Speaker, this government - including the Minister of Agriculture and I - have met numerous times with people in the wine sector. We will continue to do that. We have until the end of June to come up with a solution that is trade-compliant, and it will have to be trade-compliant. I look forward to coming to that solution that is trade-compliant.

My hope is that people in the wine industry in this province will feel good about what is there, given the need that it has to be trade-compliant.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, we're seeing a pattern of this government making decisions that benefit their close friends and allies. We've seen it when they cut the independent boards that run the health care system and our economic development agencies - and according to the Premier, his friends. We see it in other evidence that has been brought up today, and we are wondering if there is an issue here - if this individual who is potentially going to get millions of dollars out of this deal that nobody else asked for, and that can harm the rest of the sector, is getting favourable treatment.

Can the Premier please answer the question: Has this individual or company received funding from the Province to date?

ALLAN MACMASTER: Speaker, it should be widely known that the changes to the system that was in place, which was a system of markups that were preferential to Nova Scotia wineries - we've already started transitioning away from that, and it actually started last June.

The answer to the member's question is yes.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

DOJ: CRITICAL SHORTAGES IN CORR. FACILITIES - ADDRESS

HON. IAIN RANKIN: Outside today, we are seeing corrections officers protest because of the impacts of the critical shortages in our correctional facilities. The impact is disastrous for both inmates and our correctional officers. Because of the shortages, some inmates are put in lockdown for up to 22 hours, which is what the Nova Scotia Supreme Court has ruled as illegal. The government is picking winners and losers with labour agreements. They need to treat this work as a career and respect the health and safety of officers and inmates.

My question to the minister is simple: What will he do to fix this situation in our correctional facilities?

HON. BRAD JOHNS: I want to be very clear that I have the utmost respect for all our correctional officers, and I recognize the hard, dedicated work that they do on a daily

basis. As I've said before, we have hired 33 just recently, and we currently have a class going through of 45 more. We have open-ended competitions trying for recruitment. We'll continue to work to fill positions and to work with the unions.

IAIN RANKIN: I thank the minister for his answer. Instead of taking this seriously, the Minister of Justice has made light of a serious situation that has led to the suicide of one inmate. For days on end, Richard Murray barely left his jail cell, trapped by staffing shortages that forced officials to lock down inmates. He wrote a letter to his wife saying "This is total cruelty and I only exist in these four walls of hell . . . Why do I even fight to see another day?" I'll table that. The day before the letter arrived, Richard had taken his own life.

[2:15 p.m.]

My question to the Minister of Justice is: When will he take seriously the health and safety of inmates and support the careers of correctional officers?

BRAD JOHNS: What I will say is that I take that very seriously. For you to suggest that I don't, I take very seriously as well.

We are continuing to work. I just went upstairs prior to this and spoke with the president of the union. I am willing to sit down and work, the same way I sat down and worked with PPS, and gave the single largest investment of staffing to PPS when they struck and walked around this building when the Liberals were in charge.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

FTB: WINE SECTOR FUNDING CHANGES - CLARIFY

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, I appreciate the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board's candour in telling the House that money has previously been distributed based on this new model, potentially last Summer. But these changes weren't announced to the wine sector until January 2024. How could money be distributed from this new model of funding, potentially months in advance of the industry actually being informed of these changes? Can the minister please clarify that?

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: As I said many times yesterday, and again today, we're having constant discussion with the wine industry in this province. We have until the end of June, and we're going to come up with a plan that is trade-compliant and is something that Australia approves, because that's what we have to come up with - and we'll do it.

ZACH CHURCHILL: As the minister just said, they've been working on this since last Summer. The industry wasn't informed of this until January when they were called to

a meeting and told what was going to happen. The minister is now saying that they've already distributed money based on this new model. How could that have happened before the industry was told these changes were in place?

ALLAN MACMASTER: The issue at hand here was preferential markups at the NSLC for wines produced in this province. We had to change that. It was not considered fair by the trade tribunal. As a result, we have to move away from that system, and that started happening last June.

Yes, they've been receiving payments. Anybody in the Nova Scotia wine industry who has been coming away from this preferential margin treatment has been receiving payments.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

DOJ: CORRECTIONS OFFICERS SHORTAGE - EXPLAIN

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Justice. Corrections officers are facing a severe and ongoing staffing shortage that puts them and everyone else living and working in the Burnside facility at risk. Recent court challenges show the impact of this. In one recent example already mentioned by my colleague, an inmate was kept in his cell 22 hours a day for 38 days. The courts have condemned this, calling for the Province and the minister to address staffing concerns to ensure that basic human rights are being protected.

My question to the minister is: How did it get to this? How did shortages get so bad under his watch that Nova Scotia has become a national embarrassment for its inhumane and illegal treatment of inmates?

HON. BRAD JOHNS: What I would say is that we have been aware that there have been challenges. I have reached out personally to the union, and said that I am willing to work personally with them to try to address some of those challenges. As I've said previously, we recently hired 33 new officers. We currently have 45 correctional officers who are undergoing training now. Across this country, we have open-ended postings trying to recruit. We'll continue to work with the union as well as the correctional officers to try to ensure that we fill and keep people at work.

SUZY HANSEN: As we've heard, Richard Murray took his own life on January 15th while he was an inmate at the Burnside Correctional Facility. His family is clear that his death was directly related to staff shortages that forced officials to lock down inmates. In a letter his family received the day after his tragic death, Richard Murray wrote: "I only exist in these four walls of hell. Why do I even fight to see another day?" He saw his forced lockdown for what it was - a wrongful cruelty. His final request was for others to not be subjected to a similar fate.

In the spirit of working towards a better system, my question for the minister is: Will he commit to having a public report on the death of Richard Murray?

BRAD JOHNS: Under this government and this minister, I actually did establish something that the previous government refused to do, and that is the Deaths in Custody Review Committee. Whenever there is a death for any reason that occurs in any correctional facility in this province, it automatically triggers a review of what the circumstances are around that.

I don't want to get into particulars around any death or any individual case or person, but every death in custody is now reviewed.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

MAH: CAPE BRETON HOUSING PLAN - EXPLAIN

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, Cape Breton is experiencing some of the worst vacancy rates in all the province. In the CBRM, new data from CMHC shows that there is just a 0.8 vacancy rate in the municipality. A healthy vacancy rate is around 3 per cent. That is nowhere near where CBRM needs to be, and it's getting worse. Cape Breton needs more support. From the government's own housing strategy, by the end of 2022, there was a shortfall of 2,550 units. By the end of 2027, Cape Breton will need 2,950 units.

My question to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing is: What is his plan for housing in Cape Breton?

HON. JOHN LOHR: I'd like to thank the member for the question. We recognize the housing crisis all over the province. I think those vacancy rates are true in other jurisdictions as well, and not just in CBRM. We are concerned about that. For CBRM, we recently put \$5 million into Tartan Downs, which still must be built out - I understand that.

We are continuing to build public housing. We just recently announced another 25 units on top of the 222 units that we previously announced - some of them are in CBRM - and we will continue to do more. We certainly recognize the depth of the housing crisis throughout the province, and we are concerned about every community, including CBRM.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I am happy that the minister did reference Tartan Downs, because that is an important project that will help support not only student housing, but some other housing options in the community. I think that is important because Cape Breton University plays a huge part in our community - and the Minister of Advanced Education was highly critical of CBU the other night in his Estimates.

It is important to our community. We want all our newcomers to have all the supports necessary when they come. My question to the minister is: What other projects could he help to support the community, especially our many international students who are coming and calling Cape Breton home?

HON. BRIAN WONG: To the question and to the comment: I have never been critical of CBU. What I am concerned about with international students is that they are treated fairly - before they ever arrive in Canada, in Nova Scotia, and on the shores of Cape Breton - and that they have accurate information with regard to housing.

On CBU's website, they say: Ensure that you have housing before you decide to come to Cape Breton. We will continue to work with international students. We will continue to work with Cape Breton University and all our post-secondary sector. We are concerned that we do need more housing infrastructure. If that was so important to that member when they designed the Nova Scotia Community College in Sydney, they should have put in housing.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

DAE: CBU HOUSING STRATEGY - DELIVER

FRED TILLEY: Speaker, the minister says he wants to treat international students fairly. Does he think it is fair that they must drive from Halifax to Sydney to go to class? That's not fair. He also references that the previous government should have put a residence at the NSCC campus. As the former principal, I can tell you, you guys voted against a new campus in Sydney. Imagine if we had proposed a new residence. I wasn't even here.

CBU students need a place to live. To the Minister of Advanced Education: Where is the strategy for CBU students so that they can have a place to live?

HON. BRIAN WONG: We have been working very closely with CBU. We understand, the federal government understands, the media understand, international students and Cape Breton residents understand that we need housing in the Cape Breton area. That's not just a phenomenon here in Nova Scotia and Cape Breton; it's right across this country.

We continue to support initiatives at Cape Breton University. We continue to fund Cape Breton University on initiatives that are helping us as a province, including a medical school, including deferred maintenance, including all of their health initiatives and teaching programs. We continue to look for ways to find housing in innovative ways, in order to make sure that students have a place to live, and that includes something called shared housing and Happipad.

FRED TILLEY: This couldn't get any easier. There's one vacancy in Cape Breton on Happipad. There's an app for that, and there's one vacancy, and it's not even anywhere near the university. This minister talks about why the previous government didn't put a residence in at NSCC. They've announced three new NSCC residences since. Great, good. Where's the one for Sydney?

My question to the minister is: Do you think that one room on Happipad is enough to make the students not have to drive from Halifax to Sydney to attend their classes?

BRIAN WONG: I always enjoy the opportunity to talk about what we're doing, but I also need to talk about student choice. Students do have choices, and the students who were referred to the other night, travelling from Halifax to Cape Breton - there is choice because at one point last year, Cape Breton University did have 70 vacant rooms in their student housing.

Some of those students who were traveling to Halifax were students who only had classes one day a week, and they choose to live in a metropolitan area where there are more people. Imagine that. One of the things that Students Nova Scotia asked us is to look at a home-sharing program, and that is Happipad. You are talking down good recommendations from our students.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

MAH: HAPPIPAD INVESTMENT - EXPLAIN

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm glad to have the opportunity to talk about Happipad today because last week at Budget Estimates with the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the minister told us that over the past two years, this government has invested \$1.13 million in Happipad, and that we have signed 10 leases out of that \$1.13 million. Now, I wasn't a math major at university, but I believe that's \$113,000 per lease. Hopefully they're penthouse suites at least.

Does the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing think \$113,000 per lease is a good return on investment?

HON. BRIAN WONG: I continue to talk about home-sharing. There are 130,000 vacant rooms right across this province. I said at Estimates the other night that my fear, because of the negativity that's given through the Opposition, is that there's a good idea that's going to go by the wayside - a good idea that we do not have to build anything. What we have to do is connect. We have to connect people who have a room in their house to a student - it could be a nurse or a tradesperson - who needs a home in the community.

We look for your support in promoting the idea, instead of pooh-poohing a Students Nova Scotia idea.

BRAEDON CLARK: What the minister calls negativity I call reality. If the minister or anybody else on that side thinks it's our job to carry water for the government, it's not. Our job is to point out where things are falling short.

[2:30 p.m.]

The minister talks about 130,000 vacant bedrooms. I wonder how many of those are occupied. The minister talks about Happipad like it's the Second Coming. We've got 10 leases in two years, and we also talk about backyard suites. We have 12 backyard suites even permitted over the course of a year, and I wonder how many of those are built.

My question to the minister: Can the minister please explain to me why the Happipad story shouldn't make Nova Scotians sad?

HON. JOHN LOHR: Speaker, I am pleased to say a few words about Happipad and backyard suites. These are innovative programs. We're working on them. I wouldn't ask anybody in the public to do anything I hadn't done myself. We've had over 25 students over the years live with us, most of them at no charge through the Rotary International Youth Exchange program. I am quite proud of that.

If Nova Scotians are willing to open their own homes to people, we want to enable that. I am proud of that program. Give it time; it will work.

Likewise, the Secondary and Backyard Suite Incentive Program - give it time, and it will work. The reality is that if you do nothing, nothing will ever take time to work. That's what we saw. We had a do-nothing government for eight years that now claims every good idea we are doing, they were going to do but never did - they just never got around to it, they didn't think of it in the last eight years.

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

DOA: WINE POLICY REPORT - RELEASE

LISA LACHANCE: The Minister of Agriculture continues to say that the commercial wine policy falls outside his mandate. However, it was the Minister of Agriculture who hastily met with sector representatives in January. I have some questions that I think are his mandate. Hanspeter Stutz, the CEO of Grand Pré Wines, wonders if this policy is based on a friendship between the Premier and the owner of Devonian Coast Wineries, one of the two wineries with a commercial licence.

The consultation process with local grape growers, as reported by Stutz, was highly disorganized and pressured, with the Minister of Agriculture making weekend calls to ask growers for their input.

My question to the minister is: Will the Minister of Agriculture release the report on the consultations that resulted in the commercial wine policy?

HON. GREG MORROW: Speaker, I stand here before you quite confused. Yesterday, I heard from one side of the Opposition that we weren't meeting with industry, and then I hear from the other side of the Opposition that we did meet with industry.

We have been talking to industry. As we mentioned, Finance and Treasury Board Department officials met with industry in early January. The Minister of Finance and Treasury Board and I met with them on two separate occasions. I stay in contact with the Chair of the Wine Growers Nova Scotia board.

I've told him we're working. We're listening to you. Please give us time. Be patient. I appreciate your patience. The minister and his department are very busy with preparing a budget dealing with the fiscal year end, and we will get back to you.

LISA LACHANCE: Speaker, perhaps the minister could table a list of dates and who attended meetings that he considers part of this consultation.

With the mixture of agricultural and business skills, local growers have made the local wine sector a worldwide success. Now this government is undermining continued local growth by giving millions of dollars to bottling companies that can import from elsewhere.

Wine Growers Nova Scotia warned this government on January 12th that supporting commercial bottlers over Nova Scotia wineries and grape growers would risk over 1,100 full-time farm winery jobs and minimize future growth. Couldn't the government have found a better way to resolve the years-long trade dispute?

My question to the minister is: Can the minister explain why his government is subsidizing commercial bottlers with dollar amounts much greater than what is available to local growers?

GREG MORROW: I can't speak to the commercial wine policy. What I can speak to is our farm winery program. We've seen \$2.3 million of investment in our local farm wineries over the last number of years.

I want to talk millions of dollars of investment - \$15 million for the polar vortex funding that we announced last February. I understand that some growers are upset that I use that as an example of our support for them. Not all that money is for wine growers, but the majority is.

We've rolled out Phase 1, and we're working on Phase 2. We're doing that in consultation with industry, and that's what we'll continue to do.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clayton Park West.

MAH: RENT SUPPLEMENT CHANGES - EXPLAIN

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Speaker, a constituent of mine, Patricia, is a 68-year-old retired senior who worked hard all her life for the City. Patricia has lived in the same rental unit in Clayton Park West for nine years. Her landlord is now selling, and she is terrified that she can't find somewhere to live that she can afford. Her yearly income is \$43,000. The previous government used to pre-approve rental supplements, and folks had 90 days to find a place. This has now been cancelled, and we have no idea why.

My question is for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing: Can he tell Patricia and others like her how they can afford to sign a lease when they don't know if they will receive a rental supplement or not?

HON. JOHN LOHR: I think this is referring to a policy change that we made that in order to receive a rent supplement, there had to be a lease present. We realize that in a very few number of cases, that might be difficult. We did make a workaround on that, but someone has to already have a lease or a rental agreement signed to apply for a rent supplement.

I've mentioned that we've seen extraordinary growth in our rent supplement program. One of the reasons why was because of a change we made a year and a half ago: We allowed people to be on the public housing wait-list and also apply for a rent supplement at the same time - something which that government, when they were in power, would not allow people to do. This artificially reduced the number of people who could apply for a rent supplement.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I didn't hear the answer in his reply. How can people sign a lease without knowing how much they qualify for, or if rules are going to change again? Does she apply for an apartment that is \$1,500, \$1,800, or what is the amount?

Can the minister commit to looking at the policy again that the previous government had in place, and could he tell us why it was cancelled?

JOHN LOHR: I think I outlined how we've broadened the program and made it more flexible for people than the previous government. In terms of the actual details of an individual, it's very hard for me to comment on what the member is saying or follow that track of information. But if she wants to provide me that later, I can provide that back into the system for her.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

MAH: RENT SUPPLEMENT CHANGE - REVERSE

RONNIE LEBLANC: Renting in rural Nova Scotia can present unique challenges. In rural communities such as mine, many individuals rent as boarders. However, they don't fit Housing Nova Scotia's definition of a boarder, as they most often don't reside in a registered boarding home and lack formal lease agreements. Recently, one of my constituents who previously received the rent supplement was informed that he no longer qualified because he did not meet the provincial definition of a boarder.

My question to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing: Why was this change made, disqualifying some individuals who board from receiving rent supplements?

HON. JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that I'm not aware that we changed the definition of "boarder," but I'm happy to look into that and get back to the member on that. But I'm not aware that there was any change in that definition.

RONNIE LEBLANC: My constituent relies on a monthly CPP payment of \$735, paying well above 50 per cent of his income. With \$400 going towards rent, he's left with just over \$300 to cover essentials. My question to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing: Will the minister reverse this policy, or at least look into it, that has disqualified many boarders, so that individuals like my constituent can once again access the rent supplement?

JOHN LOHR: What I will say is that we have one of the most successful rent supplement programs in the country. When I go to other provinces, they're asking the federal minister if they can reposition that money elsewhere because it isn't all being used. I don't understand how that happens. Our program is one of the most accessible and open.

As far as what the member is asking about in that personal circumstance, I'd have to have that information and get back to him on a personal level. We realize that it's not easy for Nova Scotians, and that's why we've made such an accessible program that allows people to be on the public housing wait-list at the same time as applying for rent supplements. We realize the demand out there is great, and we want to do all that we can for Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

DOJ: SAFETY CONCERNS - ADDRESS

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: My question is for the Minister of Justice. Recently, on February 7th, local county councillor Kathy Redmond called a public meeting to help residents give an opportunity to discuss their concerns around theft, crimes, and break-ins around Cumberland County, but primarily in the Wentworth area.

The room was packed with about 360 people in attendance, people sharing their concerns about safety. One thing that was abundantly clear is that the people in the community knew exactly who are committing the crimes but felt nothing was being done. I'm hearing similar stories throughout all of Cumberland North. I'm hearing from frustrated citizens who don't feel safe in their communities.

Can the Minister of Justice please tell the House what his department is doing to ensure people in rural Nova Scotia, specifically Cumberland County, can do to feel safe and protected?

HON. BRAD JOHNS: As I suggested to the member when, I believe, we talked about this previously, she needs to talk to the local RCMP, which the municipality would do. They actually contract directly and so I encouraged her at that time, and I would do so now, as well, that her residents should go through their municipality and the local RCMP detachment.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I will share that there were actually several RCMP members at the public meeting and what I heard - not only from frustrated citizens that they don't feel safe - but I also heard from frustrated law enforcement officials that they are frustrated with the court delays. They are also frustrated, as well as the citizens, with the catch-and-release culture that frustrates everyone except for the criminals who are committing the crimes. I will table the CBC article that cites our Crown attorneys talking about how our justice system is failing.

There are massive delays before the courts. This is something the government can fix. We do have control over it. They can hire more Crown prosecutors, more judges, and invest more in policing in rural areas. There is immense crime. Can the minister please look at this growing problem of crime and illegal drug activity and make changes right away?

BRAD JOHNS: What I will say is that we are making huge progress in regard to backlogs and in regard to Jordan and courts, as the member was speaking. As I said previously, we just hired 17 brand new Crown employees up at the Public Prosecution Service. We are making huge investments.

I'd also suggest that in order to really look at what this is, whether or not it's provincial RCMP, which, once again, is contracted through the local municipality, or whether it's a federal issue with some of these crimes as well - some drug enforcement, I think the member just talked about - whether or not that's federal, if the member would like to speak to me later, I can certainly look into it and get some clarification.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

DCS: INCOME ASSISTANCE RATE FREEZE - EXPLAIN

GARY BURRILL: My question is for the Minister of Community Services, who yesterday was asked here for his reasons, his rationale, his justification for freezing non-disabled income assistance rates for the third year in a row, and who spoke about a number of things in his reply but did not answer the question.

Speaker, this does not meet the standard of respect. Thousands of people will be forced to do without as a result of this decision and the minister owes them an explanation. Why is the minister freezing income assistance rates for people without disabilities in our province?

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: What we did say is that we're doing more for individuals. We're putting money in their hands fast and that includes \$150. We're also investing in a dental program. We're also investing in childhood. There are lots of things that are happening. There's more to come, and I will remind that member that he is the NDP member who was part of a government that raised income assistance rates one cent a day and I didn't hear a single thing from him when that was happening under his watch.

GARY BURRILL: Speaker, I want to acknowledge that the minister has a procedural right not to answer my question if he chooses not to, but he does not have a moral right to evade, dodge, or deflect the question before those his actions are causing harm to. Why does the minister support a rate freeze for nearly half the income assistance recipients in our province?

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm pretty sure I did answer the question. What I said was: Instead of putting \$20 a month in their hands, we're putting \$150 in their hands right now. It's a considerable amount of money, which they downplayed and insulted. There is more to do, we know that. We're going to continue to do more, and we're going to make sure that every decision that comes out of the Department of Community Services puts people first.

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

MAH: AFFORDABLE HOUSING - BUILD

LORELEI NICOLL: As we all know, finding affordable housing is not just a problem in HRM but also in our rural communities. The Town of Bridgewater is one of many across the province dealing with the housing crisis. The mayor of Bridgewater said that there is virtually a zero per cent vacancy rate. I'll table that.

However, many of the towns across the province are not just building more housing. The problem in Bridgewater is not zoning red tape but rather lack of infrastructure. The town has 2,500 approved housing units, many of those affordable, however, they can't

build without upgrades to their sewer system, a costly but needed infrastructure upgrade to build more housing.

[2:45 p.m.]

My question to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing: To get more housing built, will the Province help municipalities with the much-needed infrastructure upgrades for the towns like Bridgewater?

HON. JOHN LOHR: I'm happy to inform the member that we enabled something called the Municipal Capital Growth Program this past fiscal year, so just in this fiscal year we're in right now, we had a \$32 million program that municipalities could apply for that would be 50-50 funded. This is a provincial-only program, unlike the federal programs that we've had in the past which are non-existent this year. There's no application portal for the federal programs.

We had such a good response that we have added another \$70 million ourselves as a government for a \$200 million buildout of municipal infrastructure, which is including exactly what the member is talking about, water and sewer, that will enable 7,000 new homes. That's this year. Next year, this coming fiscal, we're hoping that our federal partners will come back . . .

LORELEI NICOLL: To clarify, I'll just ask specifically: Is Bridgewater getting some infrastructure support from these programs he announced?

JOHN LOHR: I'm really confused because what I just described to you was an additional appropriation, which we did at the year-end, which I hear the member advocating for when I hear her leader advocating against. I'm confused. Which does the Opposition want? Do they want us to fund water and sewer and infrastructure, or do they want us to not do any of that stuff? It's a very confusing situation.

Here's the reality: We're not going to listen to them, we're going to do the right thing and fund those projects.

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

MAH: ONE WORLD HOUSING PROJECT - UPDATE

HON. BEN JESSOME: Will the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing please provide an update for my constituents on the One World Building Association project involving 32 townhouses just off the Hammonds Plains Road?

JOHN LOHR: I actually could have the member maybe describe that question in a different way or more specifically. I'm not exactly sure what he's talking about.

BEN JESSOME: There's some concern about a placement of a development involving 32 townhouses off the Hammonds Plains Road, more specifically because if you were forced to evacuate like my community was this Summer, placing a 32-townhouse development in an already-saturated community is raising a lot of concerns. It's a space, a provincial parcel between two subdivisions that connects back to the Hammonds Plains Road. I'm simply looking for an update on that particular development, where that is, and if the minister can verify where they are with that.

JOHN LOHR: I believe what the member is referring to is the aspect of having two ways out. This is an area of municipal jurisdiction and municipal approval . . .

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

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, I rise on a point of personal privilege. The Premier's language and tactics directed at the Leader of the NDP in Question Period were unacceptable. They directly questioned the integrity of the Leader of the NDP. Earlier today, you told us - you reminded us twice - that this was not allowed.

The Premier's comments that the Leader of the NDP is negative and whiny and hates Nova Scotians comes directly from the misogynist playbook, which could also be titled . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The member for Dartmouth North has the floor.

Please go ahead.

SUSAN LEBLANC: They come from the misogynist playbook, which could also be titled *Powerful White Men Who are Threatened by Intelligent Women*, Speaker.

This kind of defamation makes it very hard to do one's job in this House. I ask you to rule the Premier's comments out of order and ask him to retract them and apologize.

THE SPEAKER: Order. I would like to indicate that this is not a point of privilege. Is the member looking to stand on a point of order?

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I understand a point of privilege to be when something happens in the House that prevents us from doing our work as MLAs. Is that not correct?

THE SPEAKER: It can be. Are you willing to state what type of privilege has been breached by what is in law - well, what we know to be incorrect?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Can you explain to me what a point of order would do?

THE SPEAKER: Well, there's lots to it, as you can imagine. Unless we want to take the rest of the afternoon to go over everything - we certainly could.

Again, if you prefer to stand on a point of order, I could take your comments under advisement.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Sure. Thank you, Speaker, for the explanation.

I guess I will say that I would like to make it a point of order then, and ask you to ask the Premier to apologize for his comments and retract his statement. So that's a point of order.

I will also take your comments under advisement and perhaps bring this as a point of privilege when I have some time to think it through.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Premier.

THE PREMIER: I'm not quite sure what the member - the member used some language that I definitely did not use. I did not use the word "hate." That's the member. That's a word the member said.

I do believe, as a matter of course of action, and Hansard will show, that the member has been very negative and complained about the Coastal Protection Act specifically. The member has been very negative about the nuclear - these are the examples I used. I just want to say that those are statements of fact on the member's positioning. If the member wants to clarify her positioning on it, she can, and I would be happy to clarify.

If I've said anything unparliamentary or anything untoward, that was not my intent. We're talking about policy issues, not personal issues - policy issues around coastal protection. We're talking about policy issues around electricity. We're talking about process issues on where an amendment can be tabled, which I believe is the Law Amendments Committee.

I'm talking about policy issues. I'm talking about process issues. I am not talking about personal issues. But if I've said something of a personal nature, then I certainly will apologize and retract those comments.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: He continues to use the misogynist playbook. To say that someone . . . (interruptions).

THE SPEAKER: Order. I would like everyone to take their seat for a moment. Everyone take a deep breath. I don't want a word out of anyone's mouth. I want you all to sit for a moment and reflect. No one talking.

Order. With advisement, we're going to move on, take this whole exchange and review it in Hansard. We will make a ruling, and I will deliver that tomorrow.

However, going forward - we did know better today, didn't we? There are people in and out of the Chamber, sitting up in the gallery, on their phones, talking, laughing, during Question Period. In my 11 years here, I can tell you this: I was scared to speak during Question Period unless it was my turn to get up and ask a question. I was scared to speak - probably not a good thing to be - but I'll tell you, it made me respect this Chamber. It made me respect all colleagues from all sides, but more importantly, it made me respect the person who was sitting in this chair - Speaker, Deputy Speaker, whoever.

Tomorrow when we come in here, I'm going to tell you right now, I'm going to stop during Question Period when people are talking, and I'm going to ask you to please stop talking. That will eat up Question Period, which I'm sure of you will like, but I will. This is what we're going to do tomorrow.

Again, to the member for Dartmouth North, I will have a ruling for you tomorrow.

The honourable Opposition House Leader.

OPPOSITION MEMBERS' BUSINESS

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, now we're going to move into Opposition business for the day. The first bill that we're going to call is Bill No. 421, the Nova Scotia Housing Corporation Act.

Bill No. 421 - Nova Scotia Housing Corporation Act.

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

LORELEI NICOLL: Speaker, I guess in the vein of what you just said, if at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

Here I am with Bill No. 421. I brought this forward before asking because the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing has been mandated to follow the Affordable Housing Commission report. The No. 1 item in that report was to create an arms-length committee where they would create a strategic plan to address the housing crisis that we are in. I wholeheartedly believe - and I always believe - that having a plan that we need to follow will address a lot of what was laid out in that report, as we know.

[3:00 p.m.]

I've heard the announcements, and I've been asking a lot of questions, but the announcements are all toward public housing. We continually hear from young people in our communities that they can't afford a house and they don't know, with their salaries, if they're ever going to be able to find a house. Increasing the housing stock and providing public housing is not looking at it in a holistic manner to provide housing for everyone across Nova Scotia.

The actual report that was done and the group that was formed - I think that it was supported by the previous government to enact and take the next steps. The first step was to create this arms-length committee. It was put in a news release that the government said, "The Act will modernize the structure and oversight of the provincial housing programs and increase accountability and create a new Crown corporation responsible for public housing in Nova Scotia," but the Crown corporation that was created is just looking at public housing.

Unless they can tell me otherwise, that they are looking at it more holistically - I spoke here in Estimates, asking the minister exactly what was being done. Again, it was announcements and a lot of money, but the Premier just said, We're looking at policy issues and process issues. This is exactly what this bill is about: policy issues and creating a process to address the housing needs of everyone in Nova Scotia.

I know there will be others who will speak to this, but I really impress upon the minister, with Bill No. 421, to create this arms-length committee and get public housing - not just public housing, but housing in general - and follow all the recommendations from the commission to have it done as is outlined in his mandate letter.

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

LORELEI NICOLL: If at first you don't succeed - I move second reading of Bill No. 421.

THE SPEAKER: Thank you.

The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: May I cede my time to the member for Halifax Needham?

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad to stand up here and speak to Bill No. 421.

As many folks in this room know, I really feel like we absolutely need to have proper oversight and process when it comes to making sure decisions are made in a democratic and just way. Being able to read through the bill, it speaks to being able to have a governing board to be able to make those decisions that are necessary and that are not directly handed down by the ministers themselves. I think we've lost sight of what that means. We've seen on many previous bills how we're dissolving boards and we're dissolving governing bodies. We lose community voice. We lose voices of expertise. We lose those folks who help drive the work we do when we dissolve those boards.

I was glad to see this bill come forward. I do feel like there are a lot of good pieces to it, because it was brought forward as a recommendation that we need to make sure there's proper oversight when it comes down to making sure we have process and democracy set. With that, I'll take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants West.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak to Bill No. 421, the Nova Scotia Housing Corporation Act. I just want to say a few words. I think the principle behind this piece of legislation is maybe something that the Opposition felt was important.

The first call to action on the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission in the Spring of 2021 - in that report it actually stated: "Charting a new course for affordable housing in Nova Scotia." It recommended to government to establish an arm's-length, independent provincial housing identity, which we have continued to stand up. The new housing authority has been going around, I believe, visiting all of our constituency offices, and explaining some of the changes and innovative ways. We found that all of the different housing corporations that were running in the province all had different rules, so we felt that that was an important first step to do.

In addition to that, the Office of the Auditor General, in the June 2022 report, found that the current public housing model had significant issues, which we took very seriously. There was utter underutilization of public housing assets, and the wait-lists were long. I think I recall that when we were first elected in December of that first year, the minister himself - I mean, we had 140-some units that were vacant due to needing to be cleaned or small repairs. I know for a fact that the minister himself went in and helped to try to get these units up. I believe in that month alone we housed a significant number of individuals just from that effort.

It happened in my constituency of Hants West as well. We had a family that was displaced right before Christmas by a terrible trailer fire. The SchoolsPlus group, the members of the community, actually went and cleaned the unit so that we could move that family in promptly. I believe that we acted very well on that.

The lack of oversight and effective government structure altogether was another key issue that the Auditor General had in her June 2022 report. Various inconsistencies with how the housing was managed, and how the tenant applications were processed - they varied quite significantly across the province. That's why it was such a necessity to take these recommendations seriously, so we could have an easier flow as constituents changed due to children attending different schools, or a family dynamic that causes them to leave one community to join another community. Then they get to that community and the rules weren't all the same. There was no real consistency in how these individuals were getting placed.

In the Fall 2022 House session, government passed the Housing Supply and Services Act, which was actually the legislation that enabled us to dissolve the former way that things were and dissolve Housing Nova Scotia.

What happened then was that we did an amalgamation of the five former regional housing authorities in Nova Scotia into the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency (NSPHA) - that acronym is around quite a bit - which is a Crown corporation that has an advisory board. We enabled the NSPHA to focus solely on properties managed by public housing, and worked very closely in collaboration with social programming, as well as providers to better serve the most vulnerable.

I know in my community, for example, we have a lot of individuals who are maybe not right-sized to the units they are in - for example, a family of five where the partner is deceased, and the kids have all moved on. We found we had individuals living in full-sized homes, therefore occupying a space that could be better suited to a family.

What we found is that through working closely with community partners, we were able to right-size those individuals, and in a lot of cases, they got into seniors public housing, and individuals who were homeless were able to - families were able to take advantage of the move-around. That was one of the action items that our government did, and also provided the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing with the legislative authority to carry out non-public housing programs. These non-public housing programs are key to addressing the challenges that we face in our province broadly.

We are working closely with community, non-profits, private developers, housing sectors, and I feel that they all have a role to play. What might be affordable to me is not necessarily affordable to my colleagues, and certainly not affordable to young families with children who are trying to make ends meet. We need to really look at how the Provincial

Housing Agency can work tightly with this, but we can't close any doors. We have to make sure that we're working with all people across the housing spectrum.

Since the creation of the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency, the government has announced 222 multi-unit public housing units with a further 25 modular units, totalling 247 units of public housing since the creation of the new Public Housing Agency. I don't recall having seen an investment in any public housing in decades. It's not ever enough. We will continue to invest in Nova Scotians and in our province and work with all levels. It could be the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency or private developers who are looking to not only supply market rents, but also affordable rents where the rent supplements can be so key to those other units as well.

We decreased the unit turnaround times by 22 per cent by creating that agency, from 178 days back in December 2022 to 130 days...

THE SPEAKER: Order. Just a friendly reminder to the member to incorporate what the bill is about. The honourable member for Hants West.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: For Bill No. 421, the Nova Scotia Housing Corporation Act, that legislation is not necessary because of the implications that we have undergone within this. Through the legislation that was passed that's already addressing things within this bill, we have also reduced average wait times for applicants by four months just in the last year, completed 40 per cent of the 20 recommendations in the AG's report just since 2022.

Bill No. 421 talks about enabling the creation of a housing Crown corporation to develop affordable housing for various households, including low-income families. So I feel like all the points that I was making are directly towards this piece of legislation that, in my opinion, feels to be a bit of a redundancy of a corporation that doesn't necessarily need to exist, simply because we've already got an agency that's addressing this. A key objective it mentions is partnering with municipalities, non-profit organizations, and private sector entities. That is exactly what I was speaking to - clarifying that those things, should the Opposition wish to see, are all of the things that the minister is already doing under the prior legislation that was passed in the House.

Back to my thoughts here. Forty per cent of the 20 recommendations from the Auditor General have been completed. I also want to let everyone know just how pleased I am with the minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing for his work on this file to date.

Last Summer, during the tragic flooding in my area, the minister spent the entire day with me as we visited the community and witnessed firsthand the devastation of the floods and how very important it is for us to work at being able to pivot and be agile in getting individuals housed when they need to.

[3:15 p.m.]

This year the government will spend \$14.8 million investing in the province through contributions to the National Housing Strategy Action Plan incentives. This money is going to be spent for more of the repair work that I spoke about in our current public housing units that already exist, making them more accessible, and preservation, so that we can continue to have these public housing units maintained. Imagine maintaining them. Instead of leaving them vacant and not maintaining them, we are actually investing money so that we can make sure there aren't any blips in the system transitioning individuals out of public housing or back into public housing. It's work that's essential to continuing to support the affordable housing initiatives that have already been started, which I referenced earlier.

I would be remiss if I did not talk about the partnerships that we have with our municipalities. Mine in particular is completely on track to meet our housing needs assessment. They took the recommendations of that report very seriously and are working on ways for the secondary suites to exist, and to encourage and incentivize individuals who are developers to work with the municipality and to support and look at ways that they can work with the provincial programs the minister has for developers that are willing to put down roots in my community.

I welcome any developer that comes. I'm very proud of the interest and the growth that West Hants has seen. That's really going to help with the affordability piece and getting individuals housed. This work is necessary work to continue on the path forward to developing more housing in the area. With water and wastewater, it's very difficult sometimes to continue to develop at a pace that is required to meet demand.

I just want to highlight that that is another investment the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing is making to make sure the infrastructure is in place so that as we grow these units - whether they be more public housing units - that we're continuing to look at other locations for modular homes, for more public housing units, or whether it's to expand market rental units. The continuum is a broad continuum that is necessary so that we can embrace the growth that our province is seeing and welcome everybody to Nova Scotia and have a place that they can call home.

Our action plan that I've discussed is going to create conditions that will welcome over 41,000 new homes. We know that the community housing sector needs to create approximately 17,204 more affordable units, and it is the responsibility of our government to create conditions that will make sure that this can happen.

Another point of the bill - Bill No. 421, Speaker, is promoting and providing financial assistance to persons with core housing needs. Again, that financial assistance is in place through the Rent Supplement Program that we were able to expand so that more Nova Scotians are able to access rent supplements that can help in the housing options that they choose. They can live where they choose. Not attached to a unit but attached to the

person. So if the person needs to move in and out of a community, they can take their rent supplement with them.

Again, at this time, I will not be in support of Bill No. 421, the Nova Scotia Housing Corporation Act. With those comments and notes across my desk, I will take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham on an introduction.

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction. I want to draw people's attention to the gallery across. I have my constituency assistant Aisha as well, who is up there sitting. I just want to give them the warm welcome of the House.

THE SPEAKER: Welcome. Thank you for joining us.

The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: It's great to speak today on this bill that I introduced the other day, Bill No. 421, an Act to Establish a Nova Scotia Housing Corporation.

I appreciate the comments from other members who have spoken prior to me this afternoon. The first thing I want to say is that the object of this bill is to establish an independent arm's-length housing authority for Nova Scotia. I think it's a good idea. It's not an original idea to me. It was actually the first and, I would argue, most important recommendation that came from the Affordable Housing Commission, which the member for Timberlea-Prospect, when he was Premier, commissioned, and I think did a very good job of laying out where we were in 2021 with housing.

That commission included academics, for-profit developers, non-profit housing providers, government experts in the field. It was a good cross-section of the housing spectrum, and as I said, the very first recommendation - there were maybe 12 or 15 recommendations - the very first one was to establish an independent arm's-length Crown corporation for housing. That hasn't been done.

The reason why I think this is so important is because housing, unlike many other problems in government, is such a long-term issue. If you look back, the trends, the problems that we now see today in housing really had their seeds 20 or 30 years ago, at least, when all governments, of all stripes, at all levels, cut back or eliminated entirely their investments in housing. The federal government did that in the early 1990s. We know that the Province last built public housing in, I think, 1995. All governments really dropped the ball on housing many years ago. Unfortunately, we are seeing the negative impacts of those decisions today, and hopefully not too long into the future, but certainly for some time to come.

When you're dealing with housing, which is so complex, so expensive, so big, so lengthy to get anything done, you really have to have a long-term lens. All of us as MLAs - all governments, of course - are pulled at by politics and by the four-year election cycle. It can be very tempting to make quick, easy decisions with a view to re-election or political gain. That's just the nature of the beast, regardless of who's in power.

To blunt some of that temptation, governments decide to put important long-term issues, at times, into the hands of more independent agencies, i.e. Crown corporations, and I think housing is the quintessential area where that should be done in Nova Scotia. That, above all else, is what this bill seeks to do. The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing - I've asked him about this at Estimates. He's been very clear to say: Look, we don't have an independent arm's-length housing authority. At the end of the day, the responsibility rests with me, as the minister, and the Premier, and the government.

That's fine. I don't think that's the right decision, but that is the decision that the government has made on this file. When you take that responsibility, you have to own the failures, and right now, I think there are many things that are not getting better on the housing front. We know that rent in Nova Scotia is increasing far beyond historical trends - 11 per cent in Halifax last year, the highest in the country year-over-year. We know the impact that has on our most vulnerable, on low-income Nova Scotians, on Nova Scotians who are homeless or who are at risk of being homeless. Of course, that anxiety and that worry creep up the income ladder as rents go to \$1,800 or \$2,000 a month, as home prices go up, and as the wait-list for public housing continues to grow. I believe it is in the range of 6,000 to 7,000 people right now.

To free us, I guess, from the temptations of short-term political thinking, our caucus thinks it is very important to have a measure of accountability, transparency and independence when it comes to Nova Scotia's public housing, which as we know, is 11,000 units, and of course, tens of thousands of Nova Scotians live there.

Bill No. 421 lays out how this corporation would be set up, and particularly in the latter clauses, Clause No. 25 and on more or less, it lays out some of the most important elements in terms of the independence of this corporation. Keep in mind, these corporation members are ultimately appointed by Cabinet, so government would not be ceding all control. They don't need to panic about that.

The fact is there would be a review. There would be a five-year strategic plan that would be presented to the minister and to the House. There would also be a review of that plan against how the government is doing. This would be done by an independent person, an independent expert in the field, so that there would be some distance between the short-term political interests of any government, regardless of what political party they are from, and the longer-term interests of the people of Nova Scotia who live in public housing and those who are waiting for public housing as well. We know between those two groups we are probably looking at 30,000 to 35,000 people at least.

All those clauses - as I said, Clause No. 27 requires an independent person to conduct a review, and that review will determine whether what the corporation is doing is working or not. That is a really important thing. In politics, we love to announce new things and create new things, but we don't do a really good job maintaining what we already have or reporting on what we are already doing, figuring out if what we are doing is working. It's more fun to cut a ribbon than say, Hey, we repaired that pothole. That's just the way it is. We overlook the ongoing need for review, maintenance, and support of all of our programs and all the dollars that we spend.

Nowhere is that more relevant or important than housing, because housing is incredibly complex. It touches all three levels of government. It touches on health as well - physical and mental health. It touches on economic security. It touches on all these things. To have a layer of removal between the minister - whoever the minister might be - of the day and the Nova Scotia Housing Corporation, I think, is a really important thing.

The minister and other members - I know the member for Hants West just talked about this as well - have talked about the fact that this government is investing in public housing - 247 units in total. Of course, that's a good thing. No one would argue that's a bad thing. Unfortunately, it's a drop in the bucket based on our need, and the timeline of this that we're looking at is 2027-28 before these units are constructed and occupied. That shows us how long it takes to get these new units up and running. We are in 2024 now, so we're looking at three to four years just to get 222 units of new public housing plus 25 modular off the ground. That shows us - that is actually evidence - that we should be pursuing an independent model because if it takes four years to build anything in public housing, we need to have a broader, more systematic view. Otherwise, we're going to continue to see that wait-list grow. We're going to continue to see more Nova Scotians living in apartments and public housing units that are too big for them, that they don't need anymore. Unfortunately, no matter who's in power, we're going to see a tendency to make shorter-term political decisions, rather than longer-term decisions that would benefit the public housing tenants and, overall, the housing situation in Nova Scotia which, certainly, as I've said already, has not gotten better over the last couple of years. With those comments, I will take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

FRED TILLEY: I'm pleased to get up to speak to Bill No. 421, An Act to Establish a Nova Scotia Housing Corporation. I listened to the comments from my colleagues, and I listened to the comments of the member from Hants West, and one of the things that struck me in those comments was that the member said the Opposition feels that it's important to establish an arm's-length housing authority. That's true, but the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission thought it was so important that they made it Recommendation No. 1 in their housing report.

[3:30 p.m.]

Not only did they make it Recommendation No. 1, but they also referred to the recommendation in several other recommendations in their report. I would like to just kind of take a minute to go about reading from the Commission's report on Recommendation No. 1, where they identify the issue and they talk about the Housing Authority delivering affordable housing programs, administering mortgages and loans, and operating the public housing stock through its five regional authorities while facing a number of structural challenges.

When you look at the responsibilities of the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency, they vary from providing houses - affordable housing - to administering mortgages and loans and operating the public housing stock. All of these things together is a very large responsibility, and what better way - of course, the Affordable Housing Commission recognized it, we recognized it, the NDP recognize it - than to create an arm's-length, stand-alone authority. But the current government can't see fit to do that.

Again, we're almost three years into the mandate. I will give the government one thing: They're consistent, because we've seen this over and over and over. It started with the Nova Scotia Health Authority. Let's get rid of the independence of the Nova Scotia Health Authority. Let's get rid of the arm's-length economic development agencies, let's pull them in. Let's control that. Let's control the spending of the Province by having \$1.6 billion in appropriations outside the budget.

We heard a comment the other day about ruling the province, and this subliminally would indicate that Bill No. 421 is another example of that. Putting Bill No. 421 forward on behalf of the people of Nova Scotia simply brings to the forefront what the Affordable Housing Commission strongly recommended.

Speaker, I want to bring to attention a report from the *Halifax Examiner*. The title of this report is kind of telling, "Nova Scotia government's housing governance bill ignores commission recommendation." We heard again, through the comments of the member for Hants West, that 40 per cent of the 20 recommendations put forward by the Affordable Housing Commission are in some form of completion or are being worked on.

My math on that is eight, not even half of the recommendations put forward by the Affordable Housing Commission, have been implemented, let alone the No. 1 recommendation that they put forward. Going back to the recommendation of the Affordable Housing Commission, they talk about the opportunity - across the world government housing organizations have transformed, finding new ways to operate with more flexibility. We discovered many inspiring operating and governance structures across the country, such as British Columbia which, like other jurisdictions, has moved housing to an independent, business-focused operation that collaborates with both private and non-profit developers.

Speaker, there's no need to re-create the wheel. We see across the country that the trend is to create these arm's-length organizations to deal - it takes the mystique and the potential or the perception that there could be anything political happening. It improves the transparency, and Bill No. 421 would do just that. It would. By creating an arm's-length organization to look after housing in the province, we would meet the recommendation of the Affordable Housing Commission, we would add transparency, there would be oversight, and it would take some of the pressure and stress off the government because it would allow them to be arm's length from the decision-making day to day.

Government would still have the opportunity, as my colleague said, to set board members, to set direction. What Bill No. 421 does is it not only sets an independent organization, but it provides a provision for a review of the independence of the organization. How more transparent can you get than that?

In a time when people are looking to have confidence in their government, confidence in decisions that are made, accepting a piece of legislation like Bill No. 421 would go a long way in improving that confidence level of the public in the government. They could look at that and say, you know something? This government actually wants to do the right thing. They want to have the independence away from these difficult decisions. I will table both these documents at the end of my talk.

I want to now bump back over to the article in the *Halifax Examiner* in October and read a little bit of the facts from this article: "The PC government's proposed reorganization of provincial housing organizations flies in the face of the primary recommendation from the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission."

Why would we bring these commissions - well, I guess it was the previous government that asked the Affordable Housing Commission to take an outside look, a transparent look, at the way the organization was operating and come up with these recommendations. We heard in this Legislature the government approve the recommendation of the Affordable Housing Commission, but not implement it.

The *Halifax Examiner* says that the recommendation to create a new arm's-length provincial housing entity is the commission's first recommendation, and it's referenced in others. The Commission wrote, according to the article, that "There was broad consensus from stakeholders across sectors that a new governance structure with an inclusive independent board of directors is a necessary condition for the provincial housing organization to focus on action and delivery, and set it up for greater success to advance the other recommendations." When I read that, what I take from that is that the implementation of the independent commission is necessary to ensure the rest of the recommendations from their report are able to be implemented efficiently and accurately. They basically say that without doing that, it creates a major problem for the rest of the report.

I want to spend my last couple of minutes talking about some of the issues that I see across the province, in particular in my area. An independent authority would have representation from Cape Breton. It would have representation from the South Shore. It would have representation from HRM. That's what they mean by a diverse board. It would reflect the population of Nova Scotia. Those independent board members would then bring their perspectives to this agency, further adding to the decision-making process. Whenever you can have diversity of thought around any decision-making table, it makes those decisions much more efficient, much more reflective of your population, and, in my opinion, much better.

[3:45 p.m.]

Follow that up with the ability to have the independent review of the operation of the agency so that you can further tweak and improve upon the recommendations that are made from the agency. The efficiency of the system that is working to support our most vulnerable Nova Scotians. Those who are in need of housing. Those who are currently couch-surfing, living rough, and not able to access a clean, affordable, solid, safe place to live. I think the implementation of this agency would go a long way to helping us as a province to get to that level. I don't think I can be convinced otherwise. I think, at this point, the government should really take note, put this bill forward, and pass it in this Legislature. With that, I would adjourn debate of Bill No. 421.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is to adjourn debate on Bill No. 421.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable House Leader for the Official Opposition.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: The next bill we're going to call is Bill No. 420.

Bill No. 420 - Rent Regulation Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm happy to speak here today on this bill that I introduced recently, Bill No. 420, the Interim Residential Rental Increase Cap Act, which is a mouthful.

It's a really important issue. Honestly, in thinking over the last year or two since I became the Housing critic about how to address the ongoing, very serious issues in our rental housing market - it's really complicated. I will say that up front. It is not an easy

thing. It can be easy to hang onto slogans or say one thing over and over again and convince yourself that it's right. But this issue of rent in Nova Scotia is a very complex, difficult issue, where if you tip the scales one way, it moves in a different direction, and if you tip the scales the other way, you can cause problems as well.

This bill - the idea of it is essentially, in my view, to find a commonsense middle-ground solution for the ongoing rental crisis. I know we talk about the housing crisis a lot, and obviously, the rental crisis is part and parcel of that. As I said in my previous comments on the other bill, the rental situation in Nova Scotia is dire, no matter where you are. As I've said before, my riding's majority is renters, so it is something that I hear about very often, on a daily basis. I know many of us in HRM would be in similar situations where we have a significant proportion, if not a majority, of our constituents as renters.

As we know, there was a rent cap in place of 2 per cent. I guess it's been a little over a year now that we've had 5 per cent, and that 5 per cent cap is due to expire at the end of December of next year - December 31, 2025. That is an arbitrary deadline. There is no magic around that date. I'm curious as to where it came from or why it is relevant. We don't know what's going to happen beyond that.

We also really don't know how and why 5 per cent was chosen as a figure. Other provinces that have a rent cap system in place - Ontario, for example, has an open, transparent, independent process to determine on a yearly basis what the rental cap will be for the upcoming year. In that province, people who live in Ontario, whether they agree with the concept of a rent cap or not, can have confidence that the number that's arrived at is informed by expert opinion, and for the most part, an impartial opinion. I think that's the way it should be.

That's why the first section of Bill No. 420, the first few clauses move the power to set the rental cap from Cabinet, from Executive Council where it rests now - which is obviously a political body - into a non-partisan expert body, in particular the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board, NSUARB.

The bill indicates that as of June of this year, and then on July 1st of each year after that, the NSUARB would determine what the rental cap increase would be for the following year. I think that's a much better system than what we have now. Right now, the Cabinet decides on the rent cap, and as we all know, Cabinet deliberations are confidential and it's a bit of a black box.

This government has not been eager, I would say if I'm being kind, to share its decision-making process - why it makes decisions. We have a 5 per cent figure. Where that came from, what informed it - would 4 per cent be better, would 6 per cent be better, would 3 per cent best? - we really have no sense. So that's why this bill calls for the NSUARB to set that rate.

Again, the two major advantages of that system, in my view are: one, it's independent from government. It is experts who have experience in regulating complex systems like electricity, most notably, but many others as well - insurance and so on. The second - and perhaps just as important - factor is that it's public, so we can know. What do tenant advocates think the number should be? What does the Investment Property Owners Association (IPOANS) think the number should be? What do citizens think? What do non-profit housing providers think? What do developers think?

We need to get all those opinions there, and we need those opinions to be made public, so that when the NSUARB at the end of the process says that next year it's going to be 5 per cent, then we can say, "All right, I understand how that number was arrived at." That is the first section of the bill, and I think it's a really important part of it.

Right now, we're in a bit of a grey space where, as is the case with many decisions that I think should be independently arrived at, this one rests with Cabinet. If I had complete confidence that Cabinet would show us their work and tell us how they arrived at the figure, maybe I would be more comfortable with it, but that's not going to happen. I think that's the first step that we wanted to lay out here in this bill.

As it says here, the number is just the number, but there are other factors that need to go into it, which is why Section 3(3) of this bill says: "The process referred to in subsection (2)" - how we get to the rental increase number - "must take into account housing affordability, cost of living and market conditions and include consultation with relevant stakeholders." That should be self-explanatory and obvious, but unless those factors are laid out in legislation, we don't know for sure that's how those decisions are made.

It could be a quick decision at the Cabinet table. I know we've been talking about AG reports a lot today, but there was one report about overspending that indicated some Cabinet decisions are being made with no documentary support whatsoever, e.g., no piece of paper to justify why millions and millions of dollars are being spent. That's in the AG's Report - \$25 million in spending, for example, one project, no paper to justify it.

That gives me great concern, because if the government is going to set the rental increase every year - and we know that they're not always making decisions on the basis of evidence - then we should bring that decision out of the shadows into the light through an independent body. I think that's an absolute no-brainer.

The second part of the bill here - Sections 4 and 5 - deal with the question of the rent cap itself, which, as I started by saying, is a difficult question. I understand the need for a rent cap. I think it has value. I think we all see that. Is it a magic bullet for everything? No. If it were, I don't think we would see 11 per cent rental increases in Halifax. It's part of a system. I don't think that just sitting here and saying this needs to go on forever and ever is necessarily the right move.

CMHC, for example, did a study on this several years ago on jurisdictions with and without rent caps, and the effect was unclear. That was CMHC's conclusion. Our position in this bill is that the rent cap, to give certainty rather than just picking an arbitrary date - which is also an election year - we say the rental cap will remain in place, rates set by an independent and expert body, the NSUARB, until we reach a vacancy rate of 4 per cent as measured by CMHC. I think that's a smart, common-sense approach to this issue.

Prior to the last five or six years in Halifax and other parts of Nova Scotia, we did have vacancy rates well above 4 per cent in many areas. Certainly in Halifax, we were in the 3 per cent to 4 per cent range, which is considered healthy. When you get to 3 per cent to 4 per cent vacancy, what you start to find is that prices level out. That's a basic supply and demand situation. If you have 4 per cent vacancy and you find yourself in an apartment and you think, this is too expensive, or I don't like the location, it's too far from work, it's not close to a bus route, it's too far from school, or I don't like my landlord, my landlord's difficult to deal with, they're not coming here and fixing the sink, they're not here and fixing the leak in the roof. These things happen. We know that. They happen each and every day here in Nova Scotia.

If we have a 4 per cent vacancy rate in Nova Scotia, then it's much easier for that tenant to say, You know what? I don't want to stay here. This is not the right place for me. I'm going to move. There will be apartments available at comparable rates to what they're paying now. That's the way it was in Halifax for many, many years. When I was a student at Dal renting, that was the case. You had an apartment. You liked it. If you wanted to move, you could move down the street or around the corner very quickly, within the next month, and pay basically what we were paying at our old place or even less if we found a good deal.

When we get to 4 per cent, our position here is that the rent cap should be lifted at that point because unfortunately, one of the negative side effects of the rent cap - and this is what happens - is while it certainly benefits people who are in their apartments, the people who are punished unfairly are new people. If you move to Nova Scotia from a different province or if you get a new job and you have to move to a different part of the town or the city or the province, you're not under the rent cap, as we all know. Therefore, in order to cover losses that they might incur from the rent cap, landlords are incentivized to increase prices substantially on new renters. That is a real phenomenon. That is something that happens. That is an unfortunate by-product of the rent cap.

If you get to a 4 per cent vacancy rate, which will take years - there's no doubt it will take time to do that - but at least that is a target and a goal that makes sense. December 31, 2025 makes no sense. It's just a date. It has no significance, no bearing on the housing market whatsoever.

Our position on this from Day 1 when we first tabled this legislation, and when we reintroduced it here, has always been that our response to the ongoing rental crisis in Nova

Scotia should not be political. It should not be reactive. It should not be short-term in its thinking. It should be long-term, clear, simple, and fair.

I think this legislation achieves all those goals. It allows for protection for renters while they need it - and they certainly need it today. I'm sure they will need it at the end of 2025, and unfortunately, I'm sure they're going to need it beyond that point because it takes a long time to build housing. If we're at 1 per cent vacancy right now, to get to 4 per cent will take thousands and thousands of units. Until we get to that point, renters need to be protected. They need to know that their rent is not going to increase by \$500 or \$600 year over year.

They also need to know that the decision as to what the maximum increase on the rent will be is made by an independent non-partisan body that has expertise in regulating complicated markets. There's no market more complicated than the electricity market. The NSUARB has been doing that for a long time. To move these decisions to them on the housing market - the rental market in particular - makes a lot of sense to me and is a fundamental part of this bill.

To sum things up, the rental situation in Nova Scotia is getting worse, not better. There are fewer units available than there were two and a half years ago. The units that are available, whether in Yarmouth, Sydney, Amherst or Halifax, are more expensive than they were two and a half years ago.

We need clarity, we need expertise and non-partisanship in this situation with rental prices, and we also need to know what we will do when we get to a healthy vacancy rate again. This bill does all of those things, and for those reasons I obviously support it. I think it's an excellent piece of legislation. I would urge the government to consider elements of it. With that, Speaker, I move second reading of Bill No. 420.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Speaker, I'm happy to direct a few comments to the Liberals' proposed amendments to the Interim Residential Rental Increase Cap Act.

Maybe a good place for me to begin this discussion would be to remember where we were on this subject in Nova Scotia just three and a half years ago. Rental vacancies were at an all-time low. The market was unprecedentedly tight. At that time of an unregulated rental market, landlords across the province were taking advantage of this situation to abandon their traditional practice of annual incremental rental increases in favour of sudden, dramatic rent increases, which we were seeing across the province and were resulting in large numbers of people being price-forced out of homes that they or their families had been renting, often for decades.

[4:00 p.m.]

In this situation, not so very long ago, demonstrations were being held, petitions were being signed, elected representatives were having their inboxes full of emails, and their lists of people to call back about rental problems was very long. Then, in November 2020, to the surprise of an awful lot of people - including me - the Liberal government, which had long stated its opposition to the principle of rent control, did the thing that plainly needed to be done in that moment: they brought in a rent cap.

I think it's worth remembering how, in that November 2020 moment, there was almost an audible sigh of relief that went up across the whole province. So great was our and others' relief in that November 2020 moment that it's really only lately that it has become clear to us what, in fact, a sad little truncated piece of business that rent cap was and is, like those that have followed it - and how far short that rent cap was, and the current rent cap is, from the form of rent control that we ought to have in Nova Scotia, as it has been set out and as we have talked about now for quite a long time in the NDP's Rental Fairness and Affordability Act.

Some of the shortcomings of the first form of interim rent control, which was introduced in November 2020 and which has been followed in the various iterations of it that we have been living under since, are addressed in the Liberal proposal which my colleague has just spoken to, but a number of these shortcomings of the present rent control system and rent cap system are not addressed there.

In particular, I want to speak about three main shortcomings of the present system. The first such shortcoming is that the 2020 rent cap, like its 2022 and 2023 follow-ups, was not permanent rent control, but rather a temporary measure. We've seen how important this is. Every time one of these interim rent cap measures has come towards its conclusion, there's been an almost palpable sense of anxiety increase in the culture of Nova Scotia, as we've gotten closer and closer to that interim rent cap's expiry date. You can almost feel people registering the fact that they know that conservatives are philosophically opposed to rent caps, that Liberals have spoken about their philosophical opposition to rent control, that the interim rent cap is coming towards and end, so they wonder, What in the world is going to happen here? Are we going to end up in the situation where this interim rent cap isn't going to be renewed?

One place we hear this is with seniors who might be looking to potentially downsize from being overhoused in larger family homes but who say, quite reasonably in the present situation, that with the rent cap being simply a temporary matter, they don't know if a smaller apartment is a good idea or not. Circumstances could change, and they could, without permanent rent control, be quickly back in the bad old days of unaffordable, astronomical rent increases.

I think it is a shortcoming of the present Liberal proposal that it is tied to times of vacancy at levels that are 4 per cent or less. It is not, therefore, the thing that we need, which is rent control as a permanent feature of the rental landscape. That's one.

Second, we can see from our experiences of November 2020 what a serious shortcoming it is of the current rent cap that, unlike the proposal that has come from our party, the current rent cap is not universal. That is, it does not apply to all forms of residential tenancies but only to continuous ones; new tenancies, as my colleague had spoken about previously, are excluded. This is, in my view, the root of all residential tenancies' evil, because it powerfully incentivizes landlords to find creative ways to get their tenants to leave, thereby getting new tenants to whom the rent cap will not apply and to whom they may then, perfectly legally, charge whatever the market will bear. In bringing forward this bill this afternoon, the Liberal Party ought to accept responsibility for being the authors of this very problem.

When the first rent cap was brought in back in November 2020, it was universal. It was set out so it applied to the rental unit and not to the tenancy. However, within days of it being instituted, under cover of a Cabinet Order in Council, the Liberals reversed this and took the universality away by making the cap apply to tenancies rather than to units. This meant that new tenancies were exempted from the cap's provisions. This has led to all manner of misery since November 2020, and for the Liberal Party to bring forward a proposal modifying the interim rent cap is something that, in all honesty, ought to be taken account of and addressed.

The third shortcoming I want to speak about in the present interim rent cap is something that is so obvious to us now in a way that it was not obvious in that first flush of relief when the rent cap was brought in. It is obvious to us now that, in addition to being permanent and universal, a really effective rent cap has to be comprehensive. That is, it must cover the whole rental picture, the whole rental situation, the whole landscape. It can't be subject to being circumvented by various kinds of dodges and loopholes.

There are many such dodges, loopholes, and skirts around the rent cap operative at present in the Nova Scotia rental economy, as landlords have continued to demonstrate great creativity in finding ways around the rent cap, but absolutely chief and central amongst those dodges is the fixed-term lease. The result is that today, in this city, it is virtually impossible to find a rental unit that is available through anything other than a fixed-term lease.

This is why we find ourselves - my colleague had spoken about this situation but hadn't properly identified the cause of it - this is why we find ourselves in the untenable and ridiculous situation that, although the legislated rent cap is 5 per cent, average rental increases in the province last year were 11 per cent. This is why *Nova Scotia's Provincial Housing Needs Assessment Report*, which I will table, found that the price of rental units that changed tenants - that got new tenants - in a time when the rent cap was 2 per cent

went up by 28 per cent in 2021 and 2022. This is not because rent control doesn't work. This is because we have a capless rent cap in Nova Scotia.

There are solutions to these problems. The solutions to these problems are found in lots of other jurisdictions that have rent control systems that have these three features: They are universal, they are comprehensive, and they are permanent. This is what is exactly provided for in our province in our party's long-standing rent control legislative proposal, the Rental Fairness and Affordability Act, some of the features of which are included in the Liberal bill that is before us. As in most things, however, the original is generally your better bet.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Chester-St. Margaret's.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: What can I say? The tight rental market has definitely created hardship and worry for Nova Scotian tenants. I think that's something we can all agree with here. We know that rising costs of living are impacting Nova Scotians and that some are struggling more than others. Years of neglecting to build more housing has led to a highly competitive rental market that has impacted renters. It's why our government has supported the Interim Residential Rental Increase Cap as a way to give tenants some form of stability and predictability in their rent costs whenever possible.

At the same time, there are also cost issues for landlords. This is more the case for smaller landlords who are renting to long-term tenants and struggling with the cost of maintenance and upkeep. Our government is listening to both tenants and landlords, as well as the organizations that advocate for these groups. As MLAs, we represent both in our constituents, and it is important that we understand how policies - I'm sorry, Speaker. I was nice and quiet while everybody else spoke. Thank you to the Leader of the Opposition. I appreciate that. Sorry. I'll get back on my notes here - would affect both parties and strive for balance. While our government works hard to achieve balance in regulations to support both tenants and landlords, we know that the solution to the tight rental market is to build more housing.

I am proud of the work the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing is doing by building up Nova Scotia faster. That action - our actions, the government's actions - includes the details laid out in the housing plan. It also includes the steps we've taken to restrict short-term rentals, support backyard and basement suites, and build more student housing. We eliminated the provincial portion of the HST on new residential rental buildings, and we're building 222 new public housing units, the first our province has seen in 30 years.

In this year's budget, our government has also invested another \$2.4 million to create more rent supplements for a total of \$69.2 million to help 8,500 households. That is very good. We're also working hard to attract, train, and retain more skilled tradespeople to build the housing that this province needs, and it's working. Nova Scotia led the

Maritimes in 2022 in new housing starts with 676 new starts per 100,000 population. That is a fantastic start. We see more new rental construction buildings being built every day, both in HRM and across the province in rural areas as well.

[4:15 p.m.]

Speaker, as you can see, we're doing more to increase the options for Nova Scotians looking for a place to call home. We believe that once the number of new units increases, Nova Scotians will see more affordability. I don't think it's a good idea to tie the end of the rent cap to a vacancy rate set by a third-party organization. Over the past two years, we have responded to the needs of Nova Scotians, both by extending the temporary rent cap and by increasing it to 5 per cent in January.

Another thing this bill would have us do is leave maximum rent increases up to the Utility and Review Board. That's not what the UARB is set up to do. It would be overrun with requests and complaints, which the Department of Service Nova Scotia is better equipped to handle - and does handle - through the dedicated staff at our Residential Tenancies Program. The program helps landlords and tenants resolve disputes that they can't resolve themselves. Our government has worked hard to reduce wait times for hearings, and they're now about four weeks.

I have to say that in my community - I remember four or five years ago, it used to take months and now it is down to a short period of time. I couldn't be happier. Nobody wants to wait three months. This is from someone who used to help people with their rental homes.

The program works, and I encourage all Nova Scotians to use it if they feel that their landlord or tenant isn't following the Residential Tenancies Act. We are working to both protect tenants and to ensure that we aren't driving small landlords out of business. Many small landlords are our neighbours or family members or friends. They aren't making huge profits. They're providing a place for their fellow Nova Scotians to live and like many tenants, they're facing significant challenges, given the rising costs of living.

Our government is working to help keep those smaller landlords in the market. If they stop being landlords, their tenants also have to find a new place to live.

It's essential that our government continues to take action on the best solutions for our province's future. This means we have to be mindful of the needs of both the tenants and the landlords. We wish there was a quick solution that would allow us to flip a switch and solve the housing crisis overnight, but unfortunately there isn't, or we - and every government - wouldn't have this issue now. The housing crisis that we are in is a result of governments that neglected to invest in housing, whether that be public housing, student housing, or creating an environment for market housing to flourish.

Our government is making these investments and taking action so that we can build up Nova Scotia faster, to deliver more homes for Nova Scotia. That's what we're focused on.

The Interim Residential Rental Increase Cap Act ends December 31, 2025. It was always intended to be temporary - from the very beginning. We are focused on creating more housing as quickly as possible because we're confident that it will reduce the pressure on the housing market and give Nova Scotians more options. It's only common sense. You build more homes; we have more homes for people to live in. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Unless we do that - which is what we're doing - we're always going to be on this treadmill of having housing issues, whether it's affordable for medium- or lower-income people - it is. It'll be a treadmill if we don't keep doing and going the way this government is going.

We are, in the meantime, trying to balance the rights between both tenants and landlords through the Residential Tenancies Program. The program works and we encourage Nova Scotians to use it. It does work. I know it takes time - I said earlier, about four weeks - and when you are in a situation where you are not happy, four weeks seems like an awfully long time. But it is way better than what it was three years ago when you were waiting two or three months. We are making steps forward to fix that.

The proof is in the numbers. I was about to say the proof is in the pudding - I'm a little hungry, sorry. The fact is both landlords and tenant groups have opposing views on the rent cap. As do we all, it seems, in this House. There are opposing views, you know, being against rent caps and tenant groups wanting permanent rent control established.

The current structure of the Interim Residential Rental Increase Cap Act, IRRICA - I'm sure there's a fancy way of saying that - the rent cap is designed to strike a balance. The rent cap was established as a temporary solution to help keep housing affordable while housing supply is increased, while ensuring existing landlords stay in business. I know I've said the same thing twice in different ways, but I think it is very important to make sure that that point is clear because it's the reality.

My colleagues are asking me to say it again, but I won't put you or my voice through that. They do say, actually, you have to say something three times for people to lock it in their heads.

Creating the structure outlined in Bill No. 420, how much the rent cap amount should be, established through the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board and including consultations among stakeholders, may create additional fiscal and staffing pressures that may not exist within Service Nova Scotia and the Residential Tenancies Program or the UARB.

I think the important thing here is - the key to my message is the third time's the charm. The current structure of the IRRICA and the rent cap is designed to strike a balance. The rent cap was established as a temporary solution. I'm hoping everybody picked up on that across the way. The key message here is that it was always intended to be temporary.

We are focusing on creating more housing as quickly as possible. We're confident, very confident this will reduce the pressure, and we are trying to balance the rights between landlords and tenants. Most people here have been politicians for more than one term, or MLAs for more than one term, excluding myself and a few others, but we all know it is difficult to find that balance between tenants and landlords, or whatever situation you're in. There is no perfect solution to anything.

The reality is the best solution - the number one solution - is building public housing, is building housing, is helping not-for-profits. It's helping developers find ways to make sure that they can build these things. We've got to keep doing those things. We're going to keep doing these things.

I appreciate the member of Bedford South introducing the bill yesterday, March 5th. I understand, sitting on the Opposition side, how it would be advantageous to try to push things, but we're going about this the right way. We are. We feel it is going the right way. There are 222 new housing units for the first time in 30 years.

These things are the path forward to making sure that everybody has a house to live in and that we have an affordable stock for people of a lower income. Again, I appreciate what the member across the floor is saying, but we're on a path. We're on the right path. I'm very proud of what this government and the minister are doing. With that being said and my time running out - and my voice as well - I will just say thank you, Speaker; thank you to the Opposition on both sides - I can't really tell with the unofficial Opposition wants, but I can read the bill clearly.

I appreciate what the Official Opposition has put on the floor, and I appreciated reading it last night, and I appreciate speaking on it...

THE SPEAKER: Order. That concludes your time.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: I first want to thank the member for Bedford South for tabling a thoughtful bill that clearly demonstrates - I think we're the only party that is trying to separate the politics around housing to actually finding solutions to it. I think that's been made very clear in the debate here today.

We've heard from the member opposite on the governing side that this province is on the right path. I want to tell you: We are not on the right path. We have had the highest

rental increases in the country. We have gone from being one of the most affordable places to live in Canada to one of the most expensive. The housing pressure, the cost of the rental market, is key among those living cost increases that people have experienced. This current rent cap is not working, and the evidence is very clear on that. If this rent cap was working, we would not be leading the country in increases in rent. If this rent cap was working, we wouldn't be limiting the amount of new development like we are right now.

We have serious problems here that this piece of legislation actually addresses with the rent cap regulatory framework. Here are the issues: If you lived in an apartment and signed a lease before the rent cap was brought in, you've been very well protected. Your rent is probably below market at this point, and you're safe and you're comfortable. However, if you are a young person who's graduating, who's leaving their family home, if you are a new immigrant coming into Canada from abroad or from other provinces, you are facing inflated rental prices which are subsidizing the rents of those who are currently benefiting from the rent cap.

We have a discriminatory regime right now, where any new entries - again, whether it's a young person coming out into the housing market, or a senior trying to sell their family home and downsizing, or a new person coming to this province, moving here - are facing inflated rental costs as a result of this discriminatory regime that we have in place, a regime that was meant to be temporary.

What we have suggested here is a reasonable way forward that not only will treat all renters fairly under universal regulations, but also ensure we are not damaging the economics around housing so that landlords and developers can actually build new buildings and landlords can upkeep their current properties.

There are two big issues that are happening right now because of the current rent cap: 1) new entries are being discriminated against and paying inflated rental prices. That's very clear because we have the highest rental increases in the country despite this cap. The secondary problem we're creating is damaging the economics of a free housing market that is impacting landlords' ability to invest in their properties, that is impacting smaller developers' ability to develop new properties, and the reason for that is because they're losing or can't make money off these properties. The system is built around private investment and making sure that we have a housing market that is healthy.

This regulation would take into consideration the new renters who are coming into the market and being discriminated against, the need to protect them from inflated rents while treating those currently under the rent cap fairly under the same regulation, and also it would involve assessing the increased cost that building owners have, whether it's their insurance that has gone up I think over 100 per cent in the last couple of years, or maintenance costs going up, labour costs. All these cost pressures are mounting, and we can't hide from that. We have to speak honestly about it. It is impacting our ability in this

province to build new stock, to build affordable stock, and to upkeep the housing stock that we have.

[4:30 p.m.]

This deals with all these things. It also sunsets this regulation when we know we are going to get into a healthy housing market that will self-regulate. When we have a vacancy rate of 3 to 4 per cent, all the economic evidence and all the historical evidence shows that the housing market, the rental market, remains stable. We saw that over eight years of our government - we had a healthy vacancy rate. If someone wasn't happy with the level of service they were getting from their building owner or their rents, they had options. It is a supply and demand issue.

Now the government opposite is quick to point fingers and blame past governments for the situation that we're in, despite the fact that during the last decade we had affordable rents in this city, in this province. We didn't have a housing crisis. The government is right that there is a supply and demand issue, so let me ask you, Speaker: Who's trying to double the population when we've run out of houses? Is it past governments, or is it the current government?

There is a supply and demand issue here. We have a government, because they think it makes good headlines, that has promised Nova Scotians that they're going to double the population of this province when we have literally run out of houses, when we've run out of civic infrastructure capacity for sewage and wastewater, when our schools are at capacity, when government services are at capacity.

So yes, there is a supply and demand issue. It's been created by this government in an overzealous immigration plan that is not taking into consideration the housing stock we have and the fact that we've run out of it. It is not just creating issues in the rental market for people - the costs of rent, which is what we're discussing in this bill, because this is a supply part of the question. It is creating a situation when new people come here - whether they're coming from other provinces or other countries - where they can't find a place to live. They are living a sub-quality life as a result of this.

If the government wants to get high and mighty and say, Well, it should have been past governments planning for our plan to double the population, they're wrong, and they need to take responsibility for that.

This is the government that said they're going to double the population. This is the Premier who says in every single speech he gives that he's committed to this - when we've literally run out of housing. So yes, this is a supply and demand issue, and the government is creating a greater supply of people while we don't keep up with the supply of housing. That is a big part of this problem.

Again, we see the government saying they've got a plan and a path forward. There's no plan. There's no path forward. Young people coming up in this province are looking at the most expensive housing market that we've seen since the 1980s. Young people are looking at the most expensive rental market that we've seen, and we've got a government that won't allow those people growing up in Nova Scotia to have a chance, because they want to double the population when we've run out of housing. Until the government recognizes that - that they've got to slow the tap down a little bit because the water bucket is overflowing in housing - we're not going to get anywhere with this, and we're going to be chasing our tail and more people are going to struggle as a result of this.

This is not a path forward. The arbitrary rent cap that has been put in place is nothing more than kicking this issue, this can, down the road until the election cycle is over. That's all it is. That's not a plan. It's reactionary, performative politics - again, from a Premier who promised building owners that he would scrap the rent cap regime. Another promise broken. Again, it's not based on strategic thinking. It's not based on a plan. It's not based on building a good process to actually take a hard look at the rental market and how to regulate it smartly so that we don't damage the housing market, and that we don't hurt new people trying to come into the market. It's based on just getting this issue off their desk until the next election is over. That is consistent with everything we've seen from this government.

Now on the other hand, the NDP pretend that we can't pay attention to the economics of housing - that the ability for landlords and developers to build shouldn't even be considered, or the economics of housing doesn't matter. That is also wrong. That is pandering to people who are struggling to make ends meet, who are struggling with higher rents. It's telling them that the NDP has an answer to this when they don't.

They don't have an answer to this. Their answer is to tax vacant lots more and to continuously intervene in the rental market, which is - here's what's going to happen, because again, the economics matter. It's supply and demand. It's also the economics of buildings that we're building. Nobody's going to invest in new buildings. Nobody's going to invest in their properties if those properties are losing money. They're going to go bankrupt. They're going to go to the bank. The bank is going to sell them in tax sales, or municipalities are going to sell them. It is a failed thought experiment, and it's not going to work here.

We have to be reasonable about this. We do have to consider the economics of housing - the cost to building owners. That has to factor into what we're looking at. The cost of power going up 14 per cent; the cost of maintenance going up; the cost of goods and services going up: All these things do matter in the housing market, and the NDP pretend we can just ignore all these things - freeze all the revenue streams for people who are investing their own capital and taking risks to build our neighbourhoods, to keep our buildings alive to rent to people. They think we can just ignore that.

What's going to happen when we've got taxes going up on vacant lots? That increased cost to that landowner - who do you think is going to pay for that? It's going to be passed on to the homebuyer of that property, or it's going to be passed on to the tenant. Increasing the costs for people on their land to do business is not going to be borne by the individuals who have to pay for this. It's going to be borne by the individuals who need the housing. That's something that the NDP seems to think isn't going to happen, but it is. It's not going to work.

If we're going to be smart about this, we can't ignore the housing market. We can't say that we can't have a free housing market anymore. Right now, it does need to be regulated, because we do not have a healthy housing market. The vacancy rate is close to zero. People don't have choices right now, which is why we do support regulating the cost of rent in a way that is universal, that ensures there's not a discriminatory rent regime in the province where people who've been renting for a long time benefit and new people who have to rent don't. That is discrimination.

But we also recognize that, if we can actually have a housing environment in Nova Scotia where the cost of the land of the building owners and developers is factored in and is considered in the equation, we can have a regulatory framework that is not going to create ghettos in Nova Scotia, and that is not going to price people - newcomers and young people, and seniors who want to downsize out of their homes - out of the housing market.

We do know, based on historical economic data, that a healthy vacancy rate will self-regulate those markets. We're seeing that in Austin, Texas right now. That city's been very progressive on the housing front. They have built more supply - not by how the government has tried to build more supply, by creating a regime where developers can get side deals with the Province. They've actually based it on rules - and what's happened? They've seen their rent go down 7 per cent because they have vacancies.

The housing market, when it's healthy, actually works. The NDP doesn't like a free market. Okay, we can ignore it all we want, but we are not going to build enough public housing to get us out of this mess. I'll tell you that right now. We can't tax ourselves out of this mess, either. We've got to be smart about it.

This piece of legislation can create a reasonable regulatory framework for rent control that is fair to all tenants, that will also not disincentivize new development or investment in properties, that won't incentivize ghettos developing over the next number of years because building owners can't invest in their properties, and that gives us an off-ramp to get back to a free market when we get to a healthy vacancy rate.

If we're going to get to a healthy vacancy rate, we've got to be honest about it. This government needs to pump the gas on trying to double the population when we've run out of houses. Because if we don't do that - if we don't deal with that part of the issue in our supply of people and the demand that's creating - we are not going to build enough houses

to get us out of this, we will never have a healthy vacancy rate in the near future, and we will be trapped in this situation for the foreseeable future.

I won't be told by the government opposite that it's somebody else's problem, that it's somebody else's fault. This government has the policy to double the population. We had a healthy housing market with healthy vacancy for a number of years in this province. This government has failed to deliver a real plan that's going to deliver more housing that's more affordable and to have a reasonable rent regulation regime that's fair to all people. They can change that by passing this bill.

THE SPEAKER: Order. The honourable Minister for Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: I am pleased to speak for a few minutes. I'm not sure exactly how much time I have left - five minutes or so - on this bill. Obviously, the topic of the bill is one that we spoke about many times on the floor of the Legislature, and I am sure it won't be the last time.

I do want to address some of the characterization from the members opposite - particularly the Leader of the Official Opposition - pertaining to our government's responsibility, and pointing fingers, and not dealing with issues that are on our desks. The fact of the matter is that we know there are a number of challenges that Nova Scotians are facing every day - whether it be the affordability crisis, whether it be the housing crisis - and we are not shying away, turning a blind eye or pointing fingers at previous governments.

We're accepting that we have a responsibility to act, and we are doing so. I think Budget 2024-25 speaks volumes to that, and speaks to our investments in Nova Scotians. It speaks to investments that we're making to build this province up, to build the housing that we need, to build the health care infrastructure that we need, to build the road infrastructure that we need. I could go on.

I believe my honourable colleague, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the member for Kings North, has referenced many times deferred maintenance. Perhaps that is a little bit of finger-pointing to the previous governments, but that is the fact. There was a lot of deferred maintenance, and as the member opposite likes to say, issues that are on our desks, but I think some of them are perhaps issues that were left on their desks when they were ministers in previous governments. Again, we are not shying away from the fact that we have a lot of work ahead of ourselves.

The assertions that as a government - whether it's Progressive Conservative, NDP, Liberal, or any other stripe for that fact - we can control global, external factors, whether it be mortgage rates or inflation or supply chain issues or labour shortages, all realities that the construction industry is facing - that is completely ridiculous. I don't care what party

is on this side of the aisle, no government is going to be able to control that. To insinuate that we can, I think we could debate that until we're blue in the face and perhaps the Opposition would ring some bells by doing so during that debate.

We are very happy to be here and that's one thing I will say . . . (interruption).

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order. You know, I think about my young fella's teacher. He says: Are you being your best selves today? (Laughter) I just ask in context if we could keep that in mind.

The honourable Minister for Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services.

COLTON LEBLANC: Speaker, I'm not shying away from being here and doing the good work on behalf of the people of Nova Scotia with my colleagues on this side of the House. We were elected to govern. We were elected to serve our constituents and whether that's 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. or 12:00 noon to 12:00 midnight, so be it. We're here to do that work. There are a lot of hard-working Nova Scotians who go to work every single day who do shift work, and when their shift work is done, they go beyond that. Guess what? I'm not shying away from that. Been there, actually.

I think some of that deferred maintenance that my colleague spoke about, and the challenges that we're faced with today in the housing marketplace, were a failure to predict that Nova Scotia is a province of opportunity, a province of growth - growth that we're accepting. We are very fortunate to welcome newcomers to our province.

We are very fortunate that we have targeted supports to welcome these newcomers to our province and can be strategic in welcoming these people we need in Nova Scotia, whether it be skilled tradespeople or health care professionals. I could go on. We know that Nova Scotia needs people to build houses, schools, hospitals, and roadways. That's why we're getting it done.

We're not shying away from the responsibility ahead of us and that's in front of us right now. We'll continue to take the right steps forward to support Nova Scotians and to make investments in the people of this province. I have confidence in everyone on this side of the aisle, in my cabinet and caucus colleagues who support the work of our government. We're moving in the right direction.

THE SPEAKER: Order. The time allotted for debate on this bill has elapsed. Pursuant to Rule No. 20(2), the debate is deemed to be adjourned.

The honourable Official Opposition House Leader.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 405 - HST Reduction Act.

[4:45 p.m.]

Bill No. 405 - HST Reduction Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings South.

HON. KEITH IRVING: I'm pleased to stand and speak on Bill No. 405, the HST Reduction Act.

My comments will first outline why we need tax relief in this province. Then I will speak a bit about debunking the government's position and claim that this budget provides tax relief. Then I'll speak about whether we can afford this and touch upon the increased revenues and the Auditor General's report that outlines clearly where so much money is going and moving off the books for Nova Scotians.

Why do we need tax relief? The Minister of Finance and Treasury Board has stated that this was the number one request during budget consultations. I think everyone in this House can agree with that. Nova Scotians are hurting. They are struggling. Affordability is top of mind to so many Nova Scotians. We've had large bumps in inflation these past three years at 4 per cent, 7.5 per cent, and 4.5 per cent. That's putting considerable pressure on Nova Scotians, both low- and middle-income.

The cost of housing: We talked about rent control not doing its job with rent increases of 19 per cent in Nova Scotia. Of course, Nova Scotians are finding it extremely difficult with food inflation and the ability to feed their families. That is exhibited through the very high use of our food banks and the growing lines. These are serious issues for Nova Scotians. They are looking to us as legislators - to this government - to provide some tax relief.

The other reason tax relief is necessary is for the competitiveness of our province. With the highest taxes in the country, it's very difficult for us to attract businesses and the employees who are going to work in those businesses to Nova Scotia. We have the highest provincial tax rates in the country.

We have the highest HST, and that's why we are proposing that we reduce the HST. The need for tax relief is there to support Nova Scotians and for our ability to compete across this country and this world for business. While we remain the highest-taxed jurisdiction in the country, we are losing ground.

I noticed in the budget this year that the budget has revised downward their estimates for GDP for this province. That should be a concern for government, a government that is on a freewheeling spending spree. It's easy to spend money when times are good, but you actually have to keep some money in the bank for when times are bad.

This government is increasing debt and deficit and still punishing Nova Scotians with the highest taxes in the world while the government is receiving massive tax increases.

Let's talk a little bit about this budget and the claims by the Finance and Treasury Board Minister and the Premier of this province on the tax relief provided in this budget. The tax relief, if you talk about ending bracket creep - which we support as long overdue - is a total in this budget of \$13 million. If we put that in the context of the budget showing that the government of Nova Scotia is going to take in \$4.1 billion in personal taxes - \$13.4 million, but it's actually not even providing tax relief. Ending bracket creep is not lowering taxes. It's removing a hidden tax increase. If you don't believe me, there have been several articles from the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and from the Fraser Institute recently published in response to this budget.

Many people don't understand bracket creep, and I certainly wonder whether our Premier understands bracket creep. For the Premier to talk about this as - the Premier's words were "This is an incredible form of tax relief for Nova Scotia, absolutely incredible. I personally believe it is the biggest." The biggest: \$13.4 million of removing a hidden tax increase. It is now the biggest form of tax relief in the province, in history. The Minister of Finance and Treasury Board is quoted as saying "The number one ask by Nova Scotians in this year's budget consultation was for tax relief and they're going to get it." These two statements are completely false.

Let's hear from the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, from February 29th: "Bracket creep happens when governments don't move tax brackets with inflation and inflation can automatically bump taxpayers into a higher tax bracket even though they can't actually afford to buy more. 'A bright spot for taxpayers is that Houston is finally ending the sneaky backdoor income tax hike known as bracket creep,' . . . 'Houston needs to cut spending, stop racking up red ink and provide taxpayers with further relief.'"

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. I'm sorry, it doesn't matter. You're not allowed to use a person's name.

The honourable member for Kings South.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, Speaker. I was referring to the Premier, of course. My apologies.

Alex Whalen, the Associate Director of Atlantic Canada Prosperity at the Fraser Institute provided the following opinion article: "While it's certainly welcome news, it's not a tax cut. And it does not meaningfully change Nova Scotia's overall tax problem."

It goes on to say:

With this budget, the government had an opportunity to restrain spending and improve the province's finances and position itself for serious tax relief going forward. It failed to take advantage of that opportunity, which is the government's prerogative. However, trumpeting the 'largest tax cut in Nova Scotia's history' when it's neither historic nor a true tax cut is quite a stretch, particularly given that the true problem remains unsolved.

Why can we afford this? Personal income taxes in this province have gone up \$1.2 billion in four years, 43 per cent. HST has gone up \$850 million, or 45 per cent in four years. Commercial income tax, \$340 million, or 82 per cent in four years. The government has received \$1.1 billion more in equalization payments, an increase of 53 per cent from the federal government.

Total revenues for the Government of Nova Scotia in the last four years, including this upcoming budget, have increased 39 per cent - total revenues of \$4.4 billion. And the government's on a spending spree. I know we'll hear all about the things that Nova Scotia wants, and we're spending the things on what Nova Scotia wants.

The Auditor General's report released yesterday gives us some very clear indication of where this money is going, and it's actually not going to projects this year. The March spending - the "March Madness" of this government, when they get their windfalls that they didn't anticipate, is to throw it out the door as quickly as they can in any way feasible, and try to run a deficit so that they can tell Nova Scotians that we're really working on all the problems that you care about.

The Auditor General has indicated that she only looked at \$433 million of a billion dollars of additional appropriations last year. That billion dollars is four cents of HST. As much as \$737 million - 86 per cent of that money out the door, taxpayers' money which this government gave to organizations across the province - has not been spent, 86 per cent of it. Some of them are for multi-year projects.

Why aren't we funding those in the year that we actually have to fund them? Instead, we're giving the money out the door in which the Auditor General has shown us that there were no strings - in some cases, no paper. Some universities didn't even know the money was coming and didn't have a project, but suddenly \$25 million appeared. It's absolutely insane. We've lost millions of dollars of interest revenue. And what's interest revenue? We can't put that money on the debt. We have to pay interest.

For 11 out of the 11 projects, there was no immediate spending need for any of them, while Nova Scotians have a need for tax relief - real tax relief. The government has to stop chasing headlines, announcing projects that nobody's even thought of. Throw money out the door. Waste taxpayers' dollars. Continue to mount up massive debt. Because

when times turn bad, then we'll be looking at our debt-to-GDP and saying, Oh, we can't do anything.

We found no evidence that these projects needed upfront funding. Fiscal capacity alone is a poor rationale to distribute public funds in advance of need. The words of the Auditor General - and what Nova Scotians should be really shocked and concerned about is this government's blatant disregard for the opinions of the Auditor General and disagreeing with the Auditor General.

[5:00 p.m.]

Nova Scotians need tax relief. There's an affordability crisis and this government wants to send out hundreds of millions of dollars to sit in somebody else's bank account while they struggle for food. That's why we've brought this bill in. A 2 per cent HST cut would return \$500 million to Nova Scotians. I hope I have shown you Nova Scotians that a 2 per cent HST drop is affordable. Nova Scotians deserve tax relief and Bill No. 405 will provide that. I now move Bill No. 405.

THE SPEAKER: Order. Second reading was moved last week. We will continue debate.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm happy to get up and speak to this bill. I'm happy to speak about the issue of affordability in general. We know that so many Nova Scotians are feeling the pinch, feeling the crunch of the current cost of living crisis.

In Dartmouth North, which is the area I represent, for years we were known - predecessor the honourable Joanne Bernard was credited with saying this, and I agreed with her at the time - that Dartmouth North is No. 1 on the list of all the bad things (interruption) was it Jerry Pye? - and last on the list of all the good things. I apologize to Joanne.

That is true, and that is why there has always been a significant look at Dartmouth North as an area of deep need. We have the highest percentage of people living in rental housing in Dartmouth North. We have the highest amount of people on income assistance in Dartmouth North. We have very little in the way of health services, although I think that's changing. It's supposed to be changing this year. What that means is since I've been elected, since 2017, my office is an extremely busy place. We meet people on a daily basis in our office who are struggling to make ends meet.

This is not the odd person who comes in - this is the usual. This is the norm. The unusual person is someone who comes in and asks for pins and flags because their kid is going to a tournament somewhere. That's the exception to the rule of who spends time in

the Dartmouth North constituency office. Of course, my office is there to serve everyone, but I do want to say that I feel like speaking about the affordability crisis. As the person who has the privilege of representing the community of Dartmouth North, I feel like I've got some special insight into this topic.

I would go further, just in my intro here, to say that nowadays, with the current cost of living crisis, the folks who used to come into the office who were living on the edge - they were extremely vulnerable and came from a population that was extremely vulnerable, had often lived in precarious housing or were facing housing precarity, always had lived in poverty, and they had all kinds of reasons for coming in. Now I see people coming in for whom these issues and problems are new. That speaks to me and tells me that things have definitely changed.

I remember speaking - and I have referenced this time and time again - in July or August of 2019 or 2020, before the pandemic, when things started changing on the housing front in Dartmouth North and when people began to come in because they were getting evicted for no reason or they couldn't find a place to live. I said to my caucus colleagues at that time, Something is going on and it's going to get bad. It has continued to get worse. Now we see everyone - middle-class people and families with two parents or two adults working at good, well-paid jobs having trouble making ends meet too. They are worried about their power increases and about their cost of groceries.

This is now a crisis that is affecting so many more people. It has always been a crisis for lots of people, but the cost of essentials has been rapidly rising in this case in the last couple of years, on everything from power and food to fuel and housing. Everybody is now feeling the pinch. We know the cost of groceries has increased 6 per cent over the last year and 13 per cent over the year before. Last year's Food Banks Canada Report 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 proportion than in any other province.

We also know the statistics about child poverty and about food insecurity. Power rates have increased 13.6 per cent in two years. Families all over the province are struggling to make ends meet. We agree - I've always agreed - that people need a break. That's why we're putting ideas forward, and that's why we have been putting these ideas forward for years - to help average Nova Scotians who are facing rising housing costs, food costs, and energy costs, with wages that just aren't keeping up.

Ideas like the one we recently announced, like removing unnecessary vehicle fees - the sticker on your license plate, for instance. My colleague, the Leader of the New Democratic Party, likes to say it's the most expensive sticker you'll ever buy and largely unnecessary.

Then we have older policies and older ideas that we've talked about. That reminds me. Before I go into this exhaustive list of suggestions, may I just reference for a moment

our feisty and lively Question Period we had today, where the NDP was accused of being negative about everything and told we needed to be positive. I always thought that we do a pretty darn good job of being positive. In fact, I have made the joke over and over again that we are not just the Opposition but the proposition, because we like to make proposals and we have ideas - ideas like rent control.

My colleague eloquently spoke about a rent control system in Nova Scotia that would address the needs of renters while at the same time address the needs of landlords. Our piece of legislation on rent control allows for landlords to make application to raise a rent higher than whatever the CPI is if they can show that they need to because of renovations, floods, fires, or whatever. It does meet the needs of landlords and renters.

We also have called for - wait for it - a living wage. In Halifax, the living wage has now been determined to be \$26 per hour. Workers in Halifax who are making minimum wage are making almost \$11 less than that. That is untenable and makes things impossible. It makes it impossible to make ends meet.

We've also called for free birth control and menstrual products. Ding ding ding. Guess what, folks? The NDP in Ottawa is making that happen for us, which I'm very grateful about. But you know what? That's going to save a lot of people a lot of money every month.

Here's another idea: a low-income power rate. Well, guess what? We are currently debating a massive bill that will restructure the electricity system in Nova Scotia. If we don't take the opportunity to contemplate - at the very least, contemplate - a low-income power rate while we are debating this massive bill - pardon me: shoving it through the legislative process, Speaker - then we are doing all Nova Scotians a disservice. As I quoted the great Tracy Chapman last week: If we don't do it now, then when?

We could also ban power disconnections. That is also something that could be contemplated in a debate of that bill, of Bill No. 404, but I don't think it's going to happen.

We could expand the HomeWarming program - heat pumps and whatnot. Heat pumps save a heck of a lot of money, but a lot of people don't have them because it's expensive to put them in in the first place.

We in the Public Accounts Committee - sorry, the whole province - saw the Auditor General's report on over-budget spending yesterday and this morning, and there is a whack of money that Efficiency Nova Scotia has been given by the government to do programs. Listen, I love Efficiency Nova Scotia - let's make sure that people are able to access energy-efficient programs and instruments, whatever they're called - things that will make their power bills go down. If we can't get the rates to go down, we can at least get the bills to go down. Heat pumps for everyone. Insulation - I can't insulate my house because it's insulated with seaweed. It's a big problem. But most people can.

Let's change the building codes so that we make sure we're building warm, well-built, efficient homes in the first place to reduce people's costs. These are all great ideas that could help with the cost of living.

Oh, I know - eliminate Pharmacare co-payments. Universal food program. Speaker, before you call me out of order, I will reiterate that what I am doing here is suggesting some things that will bring down costs for Nova Scotians. This bill is calling for a reduction in HST. I'm suggesting other ways we can bring down costs for Nova Scotians. A universal school food program: check. We're getting that. The NDP has been calling for that for a long time. Increase and index the Affordable Living Tax Credit - that's a good idea.

How about a seniors' income benefit? Most provinces in this country have a seniors' income benefit. If you qualify for the OAS and the GIS - whatever it's called - then you automatically get a seniors' income benefit. Not in Nova Scotia. You get \$750 one time. The other way would help seniors who are struggling to make ends meet in a much more predictable way, and a bit more money.

How about paid sick days? Good one. How about we stop tip theft and wage theft? People who are working in the service industry - the service economy, which is the underpinning of our tourism industry, by the way - sometimes they have to fight to keep their tips. If you are struggling to make ends meet, Speaker, you need to use your tips and keep your tips. Let's bring in legislation to stop tip theft. We could also index and increase the HARP.

While we do think that discussions about affordability need to talk about taxes - we do, and I'm back on the taxes, we need to make sure that the system is fair and works for Nova Scotia. That's why the NDP government eliminated HST on essential items like children's clothing, like groceries and diapers and books. We did that when we were in government, and we think it might be a good idea to axe any tax on items bought in the grocery store. We have proposed that as well.

Home heating: The Liberals were unsupportive of these tax-break measures. It wasn't long ago that Stephen McNeil voted against taking 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 the big promises that the Liberals do make in Opposition. We've heard this before. Our friends in the government often point out the fact that the Liberal Party could have done lots of these things when they were in power for . . . (interruption).

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order. I ask that a little more self-control happen in the House. I understand the passion from the members, but please respect the person who is speaking.

[5:15 p.m.]

I'll ask the person speaking to please respect the bill that we are speaking about today. I understand, but your yo-yo is coming to the end of the string, and you don't haul it back fast enough, so please.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you, but actually I was talking about the bill specifically in this moment. This bill is suggesting that we cut the HST by 2 per cent. I was merely saying that when they were in government, the people who wrote this bill voted against cutting the HST from power bills and home heating costs.

I think, like many Nova Scotians, people are skeptical of these big ideas when they're in opposition. The Liberals have been promising a gas tax cut since 2009. Despite eight years in government, with the current Leader of the Liberal Party in Cabinet, this never happened. So why would Nova Scotians trust them on this idea?

I have so much more to say, Speaker. I will close by saying to take our ideas and make things better for Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: Again, I appreciate the passion, but let's all try to grab some control here and respect the person who is talking at the time.

The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: I rise today to discuss the impact to Nova Scotians should the HST be reduced by 2 per cent.

This decrease in HST revenue would equate to a projected loss of \$500 million, jeopardizing the sustainability of critical government programs. Let's talk a little bit about what would happen to the residents of Colchester North - and Nova Scotia, I should add - if we had that \$500 million less.

As I've sat here, and after I had planned and prepared my remarks, and listened to much of what's been said, there's been a lot of talk about vulnerable Nova Scotians. We all care deeply about vulnerable Nova Scotians. I worry about it. It's a fanciful idea to talk about reducing taxes. We know we would all love to have that, but who is it going to impact? For me, that's the million-dollar question.

There are lots of ways that we could critique each other, but I think we need to really understand that. Just now, there was discussion about the cost of energy, and some discussion about some promise the AG had made with respect to funding that didn't go through this House.

I think it's been a pretty common consensus throughout this Legislature, since I got here, to move towards heat pumps, and the benefits that Nova Scotians receive from heat pumps with respect to both reducing carbon and reducing the cost of heating. I want to note that this government has just recently announced for moderate-income Nova Scotians - I'm not exactly sure what that threshold is - a program to get a free heat pump. That's pretty big stuff.

Rural communities across this province are full of hard-working people. These people work to provide programs and services that enrich the lives of their neighbours. In my community, the West Colchester Recreation Association - in a very small rural community that struggles to keep the rec centre open - were recipients of the revitalization fund. Am I going to go back to them and say, Sorry, guys, get out there and go get some more blocks of cheese and see if we can sell them, because I haven't got the money for you for the revitalization fund? Although we do love to support the farmers by selling cheese - I just had to throw that in there.

What about the Colchester Transportation Co-op? Should we no longer be working to support their efforts to improve transportation across our communities? The government invested \$10 million in every volunteer fire brigade in Nova Scotia - \$3.5 million across 340 organizations. Do you expect me to go to Onslow, Belmont, or North River or wherever and say, Sorry, guys and gals, we just can't work with this anymore, so we're not going to be able to give you the money?

While I'm on the fire brigade, I want to refer back to - I don't remember exactly, I think it was 2018 or 2019 - the presumptive cancer coverage, the funding that we put into that early on in our mandate that they had been asking for for years. Again, that's kind of what you would call discretionary funding. I don't know, but I'm quite certain that right at this moment, TVs in fire stations all over Nova Scotia are huddled around watching this and wondering what's going to happen to their presumptive cancer care. (Interruption) I hope so. I expect they are because they certainly did appreciate it.

Anyway, our government has committed to making progress in major areas of need in this province. Health care, housing, infrastructure, all those challenges caused by nearly a decade of stagnant investment. I think those are critical words there: stagnant investment. You can see the numbers in the budget. Billions of dollars are being spent to make meaningful change and improve the lives of Nova Scotians. In a time when we hear constantly from people struggling most "We need support," to think that this is the time to tighten our belts does not feel right to me.

The message from the Opposition is cutting the HST will provide relief to Nova Scotians. I recall a conversation in this House before the budget was actually tabled, and there was discussion about both the HST reduction and bracket creep and that sort of thing. The Opposition leader said Nova Scotians could sustain the impact of bracket creep. We're

not working to sustain Nova Scotians; we're working to uplift them. That's a challenge, and you can't do that without funding.

To support Nova Scotians, to provide new opportunities and reform systems that have been neglected for far too long, our government is dedicated to delivering initiatives that save Nova Scotians money. The people across the province count on our government for assistance.

Let's just talk for a minute about the Seniors Care Grant. We've discussed that many times here. We've been criticized for it. I can't imagine why, but anyway - the Seniors Care Grant, which assists our most vulnerable citizens by providing funding for things like health care services for their health and wellness, and for things like foot care, physiotherapy, and mental health support; for home heating and repairs and regular heating maintenance, home cleaning, organizing with help, and downsizing or moving.

Is this a program we'll cut? I don't know. Something's going to have to go if we're going to reduce the budget by half a billion dollars. How about the Heating Assistance Rebate - a program that assists low- and moderate-income residents with heating costs, including oil, electricity, natural gas, wood, and wood pellets? Is that something that we're going to . . .? There are a million things here that we can consider.

Some will probably say, Well, that's just talk - or whatever. The Opposition said here earlier this week or last week that money doesn't grow on trees. I guess it's got to come from somewhere.

The Affordable Living Tax Credit assists residents who are the most vulnerable in our society to make ends meet. Is this another one of those programs that will be considered to be reduced or cut? These are all targeted programs that actually ensure the limited funds get to the most in need. That's absolutely critical.

What about More Opportunities for Skilled Trades? I like this one. Nova Scotians under the age of 30 who are working in the trades or the film industry are eligible for a rebate of provincial portions of their income tax. This program has encouraged young people to move home. When was the last time we had young people moving home? This program has encouraged young people to move home, and those who live here to take the jobs in these important industries. Do you want to tell them that we don't value their contribution to our province? Do we want to tell them to go back to Alberta for a while? We're just cutting taxes here for a little while. After we finish this, you can come back again after that.

These programs support hundreds of thousands of people in our province. They have been used to tackle affordability challenges for Nova Scotians. When the Official Opposition cut the health care budget, I think \$7.2 billion, we all know the struggle that there has been in health care and the investment and the - what's the right word - significant

gains. Long ways to go yet, folks, but there are significant gains that have been made in health care since this government took office.

So what are we going to do now? We're going to take that half a billion dollars out, and where are we going to cut that? Are we going to go back to sitting on our hands for a while and waiting for things to get better? That kind of thing?

Maybe they think we shouldn't have given a raise to our hard-working CCAs, and that we could have left those 500 beds empty. Or we could have not given the nurses who kept our hospitals running smoothly during COVID - how critical was that? I guess we shouldn't have given them a bonus. It's just all these different things. I'm sure I'd be at a lot more than half a billion by now, but anyway. Maybe the community pharmacy or clinics should be on the chopping block.

In the last year alone, we have had 2,600 more surgeries. The surgical wait-list has been reduced by 27 per cent. Over 25,000 more CAT scans. Ultrasounds have been completed, and 60,000 more primary care appointments have been made available. This year, our investment in the battle against cancer continued with \$61 million additional dollars - just this year. It will provide patients with new precision medicine and digital imaging technologies that will deliver better outcomes.

In the budget released last week, we announced that our government is investing in mental health through an investment of \$36 million more in funding that will make progress on our commitment to offer universal mental health care to Nova Scotians. We also delivered a \$7.2 million investment to help cover the costs of sensor-based glucose monitoring. I could go on and on and on.

Where are we going to do this trimming? Because you're going to have to trim. It's crucial to acknowledge that the revenue raised through the HST is the second-largest provincial revenue source which our government uses to support our programs and services. These are important programs and services that residents in Nova Scotia rely on for assistance.

The budget was released last week, and it contains even more measures to assist hard-working Nova Scotians. These are the people our government is continuing to invest in. The school lunch program will assist families who are having trouble making ends meet. That sounds kind of good to me.

If the money doesn't come in, money doesn't go out. It can't go to those important programs and services that so many people rely on for assistance. What are you going to cut? I think we need to seriously have that discussion. Money the government receives . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order. We have now reached the moment of interruption.

[5:30 p.m.]

The notice of the topic for the adjournment debate was submitted by the honorable member for Halifax Needham and reads as follows:

Be it resolved that this government urgently work with educators and school committees to develop and sufficiently resource a provincial school violence prevention strategy.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION UNDER RULE 5(5)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

GOV'T. (N.S.): SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREV. STRATEGY - DEVELOP

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, our kids and schools are not all right. School violence is a daily and worsening occurrence. This figure is worth repeating: in the 2022-2023 school year there were 17,234 incidents of physical violence - 17,000. That represents an enormous year-over-year increase of 25 per cent. While enrolments have increased, incidents of violence have increased at a rate far exceeding that.

No amount of violence in schools is an acceptable amount, but these numbers are staggering. Just this past week alone, I have read in the newspaper about two separate incidents in schools, in Truro and in Cape Breton, involving weapons and school-wide lockdowns. Teachers have been raising the alarm about this growing issue for some time, for years.

A survey conducted by the Nova Scotia Teachers Union last year found that 87 per cent of teachers believe school violence has increased since 2018; 92 per cent said they have witnessed first-hand violence in schools; 55 per cent say they have been the victim of a violent act or threat in schools. How can we expect children to learn and teachers to work in this environment?

This situation is so worrisome that even the Auditor General has taken notice and is planning to release a report on violence in schools later this Spring. This report will shine the light on this important issue, but government should not wait on the potential report by the Auditor General and not wait for the recommendations to take action to ensure that schools are safe spaces. Ask any one of our teachers what this report is likely going to find. It's going to be the same thing that teachers have been warning us about for years.

While I understand that the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development has instructed a review of the Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy, we

share the NSTU's concerns that this just doesn't go far enough. School violence is a complicated and systemic issue that can't be addressed adequately with a piecemeal approach. What I would like to see from the minister and from the government is action on taking a wholesome, system-wide approach to how we can make our classrooms and schools as safe as we can.

The rise in violence cannot be attributed to any one single thing. The factors include: mental health problems stemming from the pandemic; a lack of services to deal with them; increased poverty and the need to balance appropriate consequences with supporting students' needs. All of these things are creating this situation where we see an increase in violent incidents and serious violent incidents.

Teachers have been clear about what they are looking for. They've called on this government to first, and importantly, increase school staffing. In the face of the current teacher shortage, many students just aren't able to be adequately supported. A lack of supervision resulting from staffing shortages also poses problems.

We know that it has been a difficult year with the rise in local examples of homophobia, transphobia, hatred, threats and acts of violence in our schools. As such, it doesn't come as a surprise that students are feeling that stress. According to the Student Success Survey, more than half of 2SLGBTQIA+ students feel like they don't belong in their school. This is not the kind of Nova Scotia we want to build for our children and all young Nova Scotians. In this year's report, 42 per cent of 2SLGBTQIA+ reported feeling unsafe or threatened in the past month. That's up 8 per cent since 2019 and while overall 23 per cent of students felt unsafe at school, among 2SLGBTQIA+ students that number was nearly doubled - 42 per cent.

The rise of hate and violence in schools is unacceptable and this government cannot stand by and not do anything. We need to make Nova Scotia schools safe places of support for 2SLGBTQIA+ students so our Province can address and find solutions for the overrepresentation of 2SLGBTQIA+ young people in care who are homeless and struggling with finding support, health care and employment opportunities.

My colleague from Halifax Citadel-Sable Island and I have spoken with the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development about these issues, and we push to get a firm commitment on how we could use this survey information to improve schools for students. We also wrote to each and every MLA here sitting and we encouraged them to stand firmly in support of 2SLGBTQIA+ people in their districts and across the province because we know that as elected leaders, we need to stand up directly to hate in our communities by making public commitments to a Nova Scotia that does not include hate. Government must move forward on concrete action to ensure the safety and well-being of all students in this province, but especially those from vulnerable groups.

We know that recent announcements, like the entry requirement for education programs, don't get to the root of the issue which, according to the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, is retention. A recent survey of teachers found that 84 per cent have considered quitting in the past five years. That is a lot of teachers. Addressing teacher retention, addressing the need to fairly treat and compensate substitutes, increasing staffing across the board are all things that this government needs to do to ensure schools are safe. Yet, despite this, the recent budget falls short of meeting these pressing needs.

There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in this budget to address violence in schools or teacher shortages. This is a status quo budget at a time when there is nothing status quo about the challenges students and their teachers are facing in our schools, says the NSTU President Ryan Lutes. Our most vulnerable students aren't getting the support they need because of lack of teachers. There has been an alarming rise in violent incidents that are becoming increasingly severe, and 84 per cent of teachers are considering leaving the profession due to burnout and lack of recourse to support their students.

The NSTU was hoping this budget would signal a genuine desire on the part of the government to create healthier, safer, and more sustainable learning environments for students and their teachers. Instead, what government delivered was the same old enrolment-based funding formula that existed for the last decade. This government isn't doing anything faster or sooner when it comes to supporting children at school.

What are we urging this government to do? We are urging this government to take these concerns of teachers and school communities seriously. Take our children's and teachers' well-being seriously and take actions to make sure our schools are safe. For we know that every child can learn, but we also need a learning environment where every child can be safe.

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

HON. BEN JESSOME: Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak to this. I don't know whether I am uniquely placed in the sense that I represent four different families of schools, but I can say that the issue of school violence is certainly one that comes across my desk far too often. I represent three Halifax Regional Centres for Education, HRCEs, school communities, namely: Millwood High school, Charles P. Allen High School - I shouldn't say three. Now it is four because we now have West Bedford School and Bay View High School. In addition, the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial, CSAP, schools.

In the past year, as was noted by my colleague from the NDP, incidents of school violence were in excess of 17.2 thousand, which is record-setting and not in a good way. I don't think for a second that this is an acceptable statistic for the minister or anybody in her caucus, or anyone on this side of the House. It certainly is a worthy topic for us all to debate, and I thank the NDP for raising it and bringing it forward.

In 2016 at Millwood High, there were two students involved - they had stashed a bag of guns in the woods. These are 15- and 17-year-old students. This is a major, major incident. At Bay View High School last year, we had students burning a Pride flag. A hate crime.

We had, as recently as just before Christmas at Bay View, students involved in spraying an irritant in the school that resulted in a number of students and staff being injured and suffering the effects of that irritant. Most notably, the incident at C.P. Allen last year where a student and two administrators were involved in a stabbing that hospitalized two administrators and traumatized far more.

It goes without question, at this time, that something needs to be done. Frankly, an assertion that the Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy needs to be reviewed is really not a complete or worthy answer to respond to these types of incidents. Quite frankly, it just makes staff members feel like they are the ones who are at fault for these types of incidents. It points a finger at people who are struggling to keep up with the demands and the needs of students who are at risk of committing these types of behaviours.

Really, our focus needs to be much broader than that of just school codes of conduct. Even within that review of the Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy, I would encourage the minister to ensure that what is produced in terms of addressing offenders, and recurring offenders, involves consequences that meet the expectations of deterring students from reoffending and from actually committing these violent, abusive acts in the first place.

Students are just not scared of the consequences. The support system that they require to be educated about why they shouldn't do this type of behaviour is not effective as well. They don't have arms wrapped around them to the extent that they could so that they understand that what they're doing is harmful. They're more likely to repeat their same actions.

We're hearing directly from parents in our community, particularly with respect to these incidents. I know that my colleague from Timberlea-Prospect is certainly hearing the same things related to the incidents at Bay View High School. We reached out to the minister in writing, both the MLA for Timberlea-Prospect and I, in late December. We have not received responses to that correspondence.

I would encourage the minister to seek out that correspondence where we, in fact, call on her to meet with parents at these schools and to create some sort of public interaction to let parents know that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is willing to listen and respond to what can only be considered abusive, dangerous, hateful incidents that are probably a result of the lack of supports for the mental health of the students who are involved.

I've spoken to teachers as well about what's going on and how we can help improve the situation. Of course, we touch on the things that the member from the NDP stated around retention, incentivizing, and the complement of human resources that are required to fill the system.

I've got a brother who is starting as a teacher in the Fall. You want to be confident that these people are looking forward to doing that work, that they feel supported by their government, that they feel capable and safe within their schools, and right now we're not at that point. The ask for more "uninstructional" time, particularly for our teachers in the HRCE high schools, I think is something that's top of mind and has been an expression to me as a way to help mitigate these types of situations.

[5:45 p.m.]

We know how strongly our educators feel about ensuring that the relationships they have with their students are a complete priority, and because of the limitations around the expectations and requirements on instructional time, they have little time in communal spaces, in the hallways, to be a presence and to be a place for these students to go when they're potentially going to commit this type of behaviour, or on the other side, if they're a victim of this type of behaviour. They feel like they just don't have that time anymore.

It's something on a go-forward basis we do need to take a strong look at to say, How do we create more opportunities for educators to maximize those relationships in the interest of being able to talk to and get through to their students when these types of situations are possible?

We also need to be sure that when violent incidents do occur in our schools that the supporting resources that are made available are adequate. They need to meet the needs of the situation, the severity of the situation, and the students and faculty who are there, and the parent community as well. There's lots of constructive feedback, I think, here in this debate today. I started off by saying that I don't believe anybody in the House would assert that we don't want to see safe schools. I know the minister has indicated her intention to address school violence, because I know she believes that our schools need to be a safe space.

Frankly, I believe it's our job as the Opposition to try to point out some of these incidents that are real in our communities in the hopes that it will encourage some expedited results that meet the needs of our students and staff.

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

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I do thank the members opposite for the opportunity to talk in more length than Question Period generally offers us about the issue of safe schools.

It really is a complex issue that merits in-depth thought and attention. I do really appreciate the opportunity to talk about this. Speaker, I would also say that I think I'm in agreement with a number of the things that the members opposite have said. I also appreciate this opportunity to share with them the work that's under way, because the work that they're calling for, I'm really pleased to say is in fact under way.

It's important, to start off, to reiterate my colleagues across the way's sentiment around this, that violence in schools isn't acceptable. Our students deserve to feel safe and be safe in their learning spaces. Our educational staff also deserve to be and feel safe in the places where they work, and families and communities deserve to know that we within the education system are all working to do everything we can to ensure that our schools are as safe as they possibly can be.

Speaker, that being said, it's also important to understand the context of violence and safety, and the many elements of it. The reality is, we don't live in a bubble. Our schools don't exist in a bubble. Schools are parts of community, and as such, issues that exist in community do make their way into schools. So the answers to these issues don't lie solely within the province of education. That's really important as we craft solutions, that we understand that.

I think it's also important to understand that students are learning. They're not just in schools learning about math and learning about literacy; they're in schools learning about social and emotional issues. They're learning and developing the skills and the tools to handle interpersonal relationships, to handle conflict in constructive and helpful ways. And that's part of their learning experience.

Those things having been said, regardless of what the reasons are for incidents when they happen in schools, we know that when incidents happen in schools and events happen in schools, they're scary and they can be troubling. Not just to the people involved, but to families and community members broader than that.

How do we tackle this? I want to describe - and again at the risk of oversimplifying, but three of the major pillars where we address safety in schools and we support safety in schools: The first of those pillars is prevention. And really, fundamentally, that is about having supports and resources in infrastructure in place, and social, emotional learning.

We know that social, emotional learning skills are foundational, and they're protective for our students. Educators know as well that the development of those skills is fundamental to ensuring that our students and children know how to handle conflict constructively. A great deal of the supports and a great deal of the programs and the resources within our schools are designed and focused on developing those social and emotional learning skills.

And those things, they do two things: Not only do they teach students, but they also help students build and develop strong relationships between one another, with staff, with community members, and those relationships are also protective. That's Element No. 1. Element No. 2 in our schools is guidelines, expectations, and tools that address inappropriate behaviour when it occurs. When we talk about that element, No. 2, it's really about the code of conduct. I'll come back to that as well. And then, finally, the third pillar that we do have around safety in schools is about ensuring our schools are prepared for addressing serious incidents.

Those are the pillars, and I want to say there is a lot at play already in schools. When I took this office, I came to learn about many incredible programs and practices that were already in place in schools addressing all of these things. They include things like the Summer Learning Academy, which supports our administration and supports our educators with topics like restorative approaches in schools.

They include things like the Three Braid Training, which also supports school administration around anti-racism and anti-discrimination issues. We have the Youth Project in schools, which provides support and services to youth 25 and under around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity and supporting safety and relationships around those issues.

There is lots in place already in schools. But what I want to say, relating back to the reality that this a collaborative effort - this work is collaborative work. This work is community work. And that means we need to do it together. It's not top-down, it's not one group independently.

That is why I have personally joined staff from over 60 schools in their staff meetings, talking to thousands of educators, visits in dozens of schools to hear directly from them about what they need to support their work, including around safety in schools. We've also encouraged educators to reach out and share their solutions and approaches through ideas of education.

Because of what I've heard directly from teachers and educators, because of what they've shared through ideas for education, we have done many things around supporting safe and inclusive schools. For example, we have expanded the GuysWork program, which is a social-emotional-educational tool around healthy masculinity.

Speaker, we're piloting new approaches to addressing behaviour through the use of child and youth care practitioners because we heard directly from teachers and educators that that would support them in their work.

That is also why we are reviewing the Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy, because we heard directly from teachers and educators that that required a review and an intention. We are engaged with and talking to our school communities on a regular basis

and working shoulder to shoulder with them to ensure that we continue to support safety within our schools. That's just one of the elements that we're doing.

We understand that this is collaborative work, and that is why we have also formed a leadership team with the NSTU and with the Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia, PSAANS, to work together on safety. It's not enough to just institute a code of conduct review. We need to do that in collaboration. We need to see a shift in leadership mindset. That's why I'm so pleased to be collaborating with those two organizations. We look forward to engaging with the other unions and others, as well, as that work continues.

We understand that this is collaborative work. That's why, as well, we've worked to strengthen the role of school advisory councils, SACs. Schools are part of communities, and our educators - our strong team of 20,000 educational staff across the province - can't do this alone. We need to do it in collaboration with families, in collaboration with parents. Strengthening the SACs and supporting them to be strong, to enable them to help support our work on student well-being and student achievement, is also another element that's going to help us support the safety of our students and staff within schools.

Speaker, members opposite said a few things that I said at the outset I completely agree with. They said government should not wait for others to indicate what we should do on this front. I'm happy to say that we absolutely aren't waiting. I've addressed a number of things that we're doing, and we're going to keep working.

Members opposite have said that the review of the Provincial School Code of Conduct Policy doesn't go far enough. I completely agree, and that's why we're not just reviewing the code of conduct. That's why we are implementing all of the pilots that I've talked about, and more, in response directly to things that teachers, educators, and school staff have requested because they know that will support them in the work that they do.

The members opposite have indicated that we need to resource mental health. Well, we're taking great action in supporting mental health.

They indicated that we need to work on poverty reduction. We're implementing a school food program, which is going to do exactly that.

They've indicated that we need to add resources and staff to support this work. I can say that we are doing this work. We have in Education and Early Childhood Development a budget of \$1.99 billion, and I can assure the members opposite that we are deploying every last dollar of that amount to support the safety of our students and our youth across the province. We're a staff team of 20,000 strong in education. I will work shoulder to shoulder - we will work shoulder to shoulder - with that staff team to continue to support the safety of our schools and our students.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. Thanks to everyone who participated in this evening's debate.

Before we continue, I wanted to let members know that, as you saw, I stepped out of the Chamber for quite a while to prepare a ruling on the matter that was raised in the House today that I had taken under advisement.

[6:00 p.m.]

Following Question Period, the honourable member for Dartmouth North rose on a question of privilege over remarks made by the honourable Premier during an exchange with the honourable Leader of the NDP during Question Period. I indicated that I did not think the honourable member for Dartmouth North had articulated a particular privilege that had been breached. The honourable member for Dartmouth North then reframed the matter as a point of order.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North framed her complaint as follows:

The Premier's language and tactics directed at the Leader of the NDP in Question Period were unacceptable. They directly questioned the integrity of the Leader of the NDP. Earlier today, Speaker, you told us - you reminded us twice - that this was not allowed.

I continue the quote:

The Premier's comments that the Leader of the NDP is negative and whiny and hates Nova Scotians comes directly from the misogynistic playbook which could also be titled *Powerful White Men Who are Threatened by Intelligent Women*. This kind of defamation makes it very hard to do one's job in this House. I ask you to rule the Premier's comments out of order and ask him to retract them and apologize.

During an exchange regarding the Coastal Protection Act, according to the unedited Hansard, the Premier stated:

I know that the Leader of the New Democratic Party is against working with Nova Scotians on an issue like this. She is also against clean, safe, nuclear power, the \$150 for income assistance, and tabling amendments in the Law Amendments Committee.

Speaker, the Leader of the New Democratic Party is against absolutely everything...

Then subsequently: “Speaker, I know the Opposition is intent on smearing Nova Scotians at every opportunity they get for a little bit of political gain. I don’t support that type of gutter politics.”

Finally: “The NDP can be negative on just about anything, we know that, whether it’s Nova Scotians as humans, Nova Scotians as businesspeople, whether it’s people on income assistance, we know how negative the NDP is.”

Before making my ruling on the point of order I should note that the Premier stated the following in response to the point of order, and I quote the Premier:

If I said anything unparliamentary or untoward, I certainly - that was not my intent. We’re talking about policy issues, not personal issues - policy issues around coastal protection. We’re talking about policy issues around electricity. We’re talking about process issues on where an amendment can be tabled, which I believe is the Law Amendments Committee. I’m talking about policy issues, I’m talking about process issues. I am not talking about personal issues, but if I have said something of a personal nature then I certainly will apologize and retract those remarks.

As we have said many times in this Chamber, including today, our different positions on issues and passion for our work often result in a healthy level of tension during debate, but when this tension reaches a point where it causes disorder or disruption in the Chamber, it certainly has gone too far.

We have also often said that rulings of unparliamentary language are context-dependent. I also stated earlier that the same language in a less charged atmosphere or used in a different way may not be considered unparliamentary. The honourable member for Dartmouth North stated that the honourable Premier stated that the honourable Leader of the NDP was negative and whiny and hated Nova Scotians. This characterization was not accurate. The Premier’s remarks were directed to the New Democratic Party, not the caucus or any particular member, and he did not use the words “hate” or “whiny”.

However, given the exchange that occurred today, it is clear that when the Premier used the words “gutter politics” and “smearing Nova Scotians,” it caused disruption in the House. If not inherently unparliamentary, the words are certainly unparliamentary in this context. For this reason, I find that the member for Dartmouth North did have a legitimate point of order and I will ask the Premier to retract the unparliamentary remarks when he returns.

I also note that saying that the Premier’s words “come directly from the misogynistic playbook, which could also be titled *Powerful White Men Who are Threatened by Intelligent Women*” is a personal insult. Members should not be using

insults. Even though it could be argued that the comment was not directed at the Premier and not inherently unparliamentary, it had the same disorderly effect on the Chamber as the Premier's unparliamentary comments.

I accordingly ask the honourable member for Dartmouth North to withdraw and apologize for the unparliamentary remarks when she next returns to the House.

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

KENDRA COOMBES: No, I'm waiting to speak in Supply.

THE SPEAKER: We haven't moved on yet.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Speaker, would you please call the order of business, Government Motions.

GOVERNMENT MOTIONS

HON. KIM MASLAND: Not the one that I want. Speaker, I move that you now leave the Chair and the House resolve itself into Committee of the Whole House on Supply.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is to resolve into Committee of the Whole House on Supply.

The motion is carried.

The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: I guess it's time to do my annual speech on youth. When this government appointed a Minister Responsible for Youth, I waited for that mandate outlining its responsibilities. Three years later and it is becoming apparent that the ministerial role of youth is becoming like the Department of Seniors under the Liberals: an assortment of links to other departments. Except for a quick check on the Nova Scotia website, I couldn't find a single link to the Ministry of Youth.

I used to say to the minister I do not want to see that ministerial role of youth become like the Department of Seniors under the Liberals. However, I am now seeing that the Liberals' links in the Department of Seniors was more than what I am seeing with the ministerial role for youth.

I've said it before, and I'll continue to say it again in this House: Cape Breton has some of the country's highest child and family poverty rates. I've said it before, I'll say it again: The last government neglected children's and youth's needs for eight years and it remains the same under this government. Food bank usage is still at an all-time high and getting higher. The cost of living prices have diminished completely the purchasing power for many families and is creating more financial instability for those families.

Organizations and preventive measures for youth to keep them - what we're seeing is an issue with our youth and the fact that their needs are not being met. Since becoming the MLA, and in my previous life, I frequently met with youth organizations. I continue to do that, and they're eager for leadership and advocacy.

I was disappointed that the minister's mandate letter a few years ago did not mention the specific and complex vulnerabilities that Nova Scotia youth face and I am still perplexed as to what that ministerial role is for. Considering in this budget, looking through it, the only highlights for youth seem to be the EDGE Program to help prepare youth at risk for the next steps of education and employment, and the JRTA was the only other part, and that was regarding a transit system for Halifax.

Yet there was nothing in there with regard to youth programs. There was nothing in there with regard to core funding, and that leads us all to be very concerned. No mentions of youth organizations that are preventive measures for youth to keep them out of things such as the criminal justice system. They are also tools for breaking the cycle of poverty. Hope always springs eternal. I'd hoped to see a more fleshing out of that office in last year's budget and the budget before that, and in this year's budget, but that has not been the case. I'm waiting for next year's. I'm going to hope that it's in next year's budget. We're going to see a line item for the Office of Youth, and we're going to see some core funding in there. Hope springs eternal.

I expect to see, like I said, money for youth organizations. And again, going through this budget was such a disappointment, because one of the items - the only mention of youth in the budget was in relation to youth in the criminal justice system and youth in the workforce. Those were the really underlying things for youth in this budget. Don't get me wrong: Youth in our criminal justice system is a critical topic. So is preventing youth from entering the criminal justice system.

It's also vital to support youth entering the workforce. However, the programs and the organizations that nurture and foster youth should have been mentioned. After-school programs and organizations play a crucial role in youth development. If we want to support youth in the workforce, we must first help the programs and organizations that foster the skills that youth need to succeed.

With regard to youth in the criminal justice system, the goal should be prevention. We must utilize every tool to prevent as many youth as possible from entering the criminal

justice system. The government spends more money on the criminal justice system than funding youth programs, youth centres, and after-school programs. Imagine if we invested more proactive cycle-breakers, such as youth after-school programs and centres. The cost of our criminal justice system would decrease, and when I say, “investing in programs” and “investing in money for youth centres,” I’m not talking about one-offs. I’m not talking about, “Hey, here’s a program on food”, or “Here’s a program on sexual health.” I’m talking about the actual core funding that youth centres need.

Studies have shown that when government invests consistently in youth programs and the using of core funding, it has potential to transform the lives of youth, reduce crimes committed by youth, improve well-being, and significantly reduce the cost to the taxpayer. Supporting young people improves their confidence, their physical and mental health.

Young people are struggling with many issues: poverty isolation; disengagement from school and community; unemployment; family violence; and family and youth substance abuse and addiction. From many studies over the years, it’s become well known that youth are more likely to get in trouble and become more isolated and disengaged in the after-school hours.

Youth centres run during the after-school hours play a vital role in combating many youth issues and creating experiences. These centres provide a safe place for youth and allow youth to learn things, make friends, improve their academics and have fun. Youth centres help youth develop essential life skills, such as teamwork, communication and critical thinking.

But one big problem that we have with our youth centres - besides the core funding issue, really - is also a lack of proper youth workers. We don’t have enough youth workers being trained to fully staff these facilities. In order to have successful youth centres, we must have properly trained youth workers. That means the youth centres must be able to pay them a living wage and benefits. But many of these centres are on shoestring budgets. They cannot continue to retain the youth workers they do have because they cannot pay them enough to be competitive with areas such as the education system.

Yet we know that better grades and test scores have been shown in children who participate in youth centres versus those who do not. They provide a safe and nurturing environment for children to learn and grow. They also give children the opportunity to socialize and make new friends. Participation in these programs has improved academics, reduced behavioural problems, and increased graduation rates.

They’ve also proven that they keep children safe. A study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that kids who participate in after-school programs were less likely to be involved in crime or risky behaviours. Kids get a chance to be part of a community and develop those positive relationships with adults and children.

[6:15 p.m.]

It allows them to explore diverse interests from STEM or STEAM. It allows them to explore different sports and fitness, and arts and crafts. It allows them to build social and life skills via structured or unstructured programs, which can also help students develop social and emotional life skills. The research has shown that after-school programs can help kids experience positive teamwork, communication and problem-solving. They can help kids learn how to manage their emotions and time, set goals and stay on track, which are essential skills.

Working parents get peace of mind that their children are safe in a supervised environment while they wait for their adult to return from work. They provide nutritious snacks and meals for these children's development. With all these benefits connected to the programs run by youth centres, this government is continuously failing to provide substantive core funding to youth centres.

Instead, it will be another year of youth centres fundraising, writing grants and looking at many other places, under rocks, so they can pay staff and keep the lights on. I've said this before in this Legislature and I'm going to continue to say it, the BGC Cape Breton - The Club, as it's known, under Chester Borden - has a mantra: "Kids don't care what you know, until they know you care." How are the youth of Nova Scotia supposed to know the government cares if the government doesn't invest in them by investing in core funding for the youth centres?

I will say this again - and I hope that the Minister of Advanced Education hears me - and that is the need for an NSCC program for youth workers. If we want successful youth centres for our youth, then we need youth workers. We need to be able to retain them. We need to be able to pay them, but first we need to start training them because we are very limited in the real, true youth workers who are trained in, well, being youth workers. It's a different set of skills than an ECE. An ECE can deal with the young kids, but you need a real, trained youth worker to deal with our older youth. That has become apparent to me by talking to many youth workers. They are begging for core funding, continuously, and they are asking for more youth workers to be trained.

If we want to invest in our kids and our youth, I look to the Minister responsible for Youth, and I look to the Minister of Advanced Education. I ask them to start looking at core funding for youth centres, and I ask them to start looking at training for youth workers.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, I am just going to rise on my feet for a few minutes in Supply. I appreciate the comments from my colleague in the NDP, who always has had a passion for supporting youth in the community, as we all do - represents one of the best stories when it comes to supporting youth in the Whitney Pier

Youth Club. I had the privilege of representing the Whitney Pier community for over seven years here in government.

I just feel a little compelled to get up and talk a bit about the budget again, but also the conversation that we've had today, getting to this point. You're really kind of starting to see now some of the commentary that's coming out of the various stakeholders across the province. You're starting to see some advocates come out and talk about what they see in the budget. Some of the banks have actually come out now and are starting some messages around some of their concerns around the fiscal health of the province.

It's always a balance when you have a government that is trying to create new programs and support Nova Scotians. There's that balance between implementing new spending, but at the same time, ensuring that you're not burdening future generations with a massive amount of debt.

That was kind of always our argument from the beginning. Again, you get into these conversations here, and the back and forth for Opposition. I've been doing this for so long that I've seen all three parties in power. It's funny, a lot of the narrative doesn't really change, regardless of who's there. The government will blame the Opposition that was in before them, and the other political party, whoever it is, will get into the fray and blame the previous government because they didn't do it, who's blaming the current government who is making decisions.

I do want to talk about this situation. We heard a lot today about what would happen if we cut the HST - something that I've received a lot of positive feedback on, and something that I believe the government could have done. To take it a step further, you're actually starting to see stakeholders in the community reference that bracket creep is not a tax cut, because it's not. You're realigning Nova Scotia with the other jurisdictions across the country. It will save Nova Scotians some money, but it's not a tax break. It's something that has been a hidden tax. I'm glad it's gone. We've all advocated for it. Advocates in communities across the province have advocated for it and it's gone, but it's not a tax break. That's why we've advocated for a reduction in the HST.

The government members put their debate forward of why they don't think they can do that. They use examples from their own communities, and they say, Well, if you do that, we can't support project A or we can't support the growth construction in Annapolis. I'm throwing examples out. I don't want to get into a back and forth, personally pointing at anyone. It's about the debate and the budget itself.

I can tell you, when we were in government, we never came close to the revenue that this government had. We came into government with a massive debt left by the New Democratic Party of the day, and yes there has been lots of bashing back and forth, so I'll take a few shots. That was the government that said they wouldn't raise the HST, and they did. They also said they wouldn't cancel the ferry, and they did. They also said that they

would support education and then cut \$65 million at the time. See, when you are around long enough, you see it all, right?

I have a few more minutes for the minister in the corner. (Laughs) But the point I am trying to make is that the HST - one of the real rationales is that government has the most money in history of any government. When we were in government, I would have loved to have this money - and I use Cape Breton as an example - but we were able to invest in a complete hospital redevelopment, and we never had the revenue that this government has. We made those decisions because they were the right decisions that were brought forward by the doctors in our community and the medical professionals saying that the Northside General and the New Waterford Hospital have reached their life. We couldn't renovate them anymore and we couldn't expand them anymore. The infrastructure was just impossible.

We had a cancer centre that was built for 16,000 patients and was taking well over 30,000, which is unfortunate. You're from the community too, Speaker. We always knew that cancer has been a big problem. It's a big problem in every community, but in Cape Breton we've seen a lot of cancer, unfortunately.

The point I'm trying to make is that the government has received billions of dollars more, and they make this argument that, well, we've got to keep the HST. What we are saying is that you have so much more money than any government you had before you. You can legitimately give Nova Scotians a break on their HST. That is what we've been saying.

We made all those investments and balanced books. We moved a community college. We built a breakfast program. We implemented pre-Primary. We built new schools. We built new roads. We divided a highway between Antigonish and New Glasgow. We made all of these decisions. We brought in collaborative care. We negotiated contracts. We built major infrastructure projects outside of what I've talked about when it comes to - and again, I use Cape Breton as an example - the Glace Bay Hospital, and the many recreational infrastructure projects, whether they were on the North side and in Dominion, which some of the government members would be very familiar with. Again, there are examples right across the board.

I was involved with solar projects in some of the government members' ridings. We were involved with many of the wind projects in my time in the Department of Energy. These were significant projects. These were in the hundreds of millions of dollars, some of them. We supported a lot of great active transportation. We supported a lot of climate change initiatives. We did all that with less money and balanced the books.

Through two majority governments, I can tell you that the advocates and the banks and anybody who was involved in the day said that there was strong fiscal management. Some people argued that we were probably the best PC government in the history of Nova

Scotia because we balanced budgets, and we built programs - and it's true. It's funny, and I laugh when I hear it, too, because it is kind of true in a sense. We had six consecutive balanced budgets, brought in pre-Primary, brought in a breakfast program, committed to four new hospitals that are under construction in Cape Breton, moved the community college, built recreational projects, divided a highway between New Glasgow and Antigonish, brought in collaborative care, and committed to long-term seniors' programs.

[6:30 p.m.]

They can laugh all they want. I'm just telling them the truth. They voted against all of them, and now they're cutting ribbons on them. I love it. It's hilarious to see them at the regional hospital. I can bring those in and table that all day, looking at this budget about what they said about the redevelopment at the regional hospital. Everybody had something to say then, but they'll be there, and it's in the budget.

I'm glad they're still committed to it because that was the work of doctors and medical professionals - the same people who are in the Department of Health and Wellness now. Maybe there are some new faces, but for the most part those doctors on the ground designed all of that.

This government never had to make the tough decision of going into a community and closing four hospitals. That was fun. It was fun going to the grocery store for a year. They were very tough conversations. This government hasn't had that yet, but it's going to come. Those days are coming when they'll have to make some tough decisions, because they're spending and they can't keep this pace of spending up, when what I'm seeing are some trends in the economy that could change on a dime. Then the conversation becomes very different.

Some of the articles are coming out about it. As I said, we had six balanced budgets and lots of social programs. We brought in food for our kids in schools. We brought in pre-Primary for all our four-year-olds. We brought in infrastructure projects, whether they were highways, hospitals, or community recreation, and we balanced the books.

There's a joke saying some people considered us one of the best PC governments in the history of the province, because it was built on the fundamentals of making sure that we were fiscally responsible for our future generations while also having the ability to build those programs and prioritize them.

I'll table this because it is kind of funny. Today in *SaltWire*, Adrian White asks - and I can't use his name, so I'll just reference that it is the Premier - "Is the Premier really a conservative?" He talks about the spending. Some people will say deficit spending is good and that it's happened, and I've been part of that scenario, too.

I think this is an important article because I feel like the lines of political parties are really kind of shifting. Well, here's a premier who said he was just like Justin Trudeau when he first started out, and now he gets billions of dollars from the federal government. Then first thing he'll do is attack the carbon tax - I'll table the article - but he said he was like Justin Trudeau. He's on the record saying that, more than once, I believe.

In this article, Adrian White talks about whether the Premier is really a conservative. What he talks about is - and to get away from the political party recognition - he talks about credit cards needing repayment, and he says: "It's not fiscally sustainable to have spending consistently outstrip revenues, so this government uses the taxpayer credit card to borrow the difference. But credit cards need repayment at some point and Nova Scotia taxpayers are on the hook."

I think that's always important to remember. That was something that we talked about when, under Premier McNeil, before COVID, when you had those consecutive years of balanced budgets - the government will make the argument, Well, they didn't do this, and this suffered and that suffered.

I had a great relationship with the long-term care facilities in Sydney. They were great. The minister can laugh all she wants, but she's going to go down and take credit for it. That's okay. They're good people. You know what? I've been a politician for 13 years. I must have been doing something right to be here as long as I am and have those relationships with people.

The point I'm trying to make is that we made those decisions, and we made those projections based on balanced budgets. They were all based on balanced budgets. Now you have the Auditor General saying this government has spent up to \$25 million without any paperwork on projects. I'm sitting there - I was a minister, I was fortunate to be a minister for a number of years - I'm sitting there going, How does that happen? How does the Premier of the province say, Oh, okay, MLA for Sydney-Membertou, you've got 25, you just don't worry about the paperwork. Just spend money.

Where's the outcome for it? That's my concern. I have about a minute left, and I'll end with what I ended with last night. I said the budget is here, there are good things in it, we're going to continue to debate it, I look forward to the conversations.

Obviously, the stakeholders are starting to come forward. Banks are starting to come forward, saying the fiscal health is at stake. You have the Auditor General coming out saying that Nova Scotia is an outlier, and there are tens and tens of millions of dollars that the government is spending without even paperwork, in some cases.

It is a dangerous practice, and I heard a word last night that was used in here, and maybe it was a slip, but the word "rule" was used in here last night. Not unparliamentary, Speaker, but very dangerous, because if you don't serve, and you think of it as being a

ruler, I guarantee you that you will lose every time. That was the first time I've heard that word in here in nine years - from somebody on the government side who talked about "ruling" Nova Scotia.

I almost wanted to ask my question in Question Period today to "the ruler of Municipal Affairs and Housing," but I knew that I would be called out of order, and rightfully so. Eight seconds left. There will be lots more to talk about.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is that we do now resolve ourselves into the Committee of the Whole House on Supply.

The motion is carried.

We'll take a short recess while we get set up.

[6:37 p.m. The House resolved itself into a CWH on Supply with Deputy Speaker Nolan Young in the Chair.]

[10:51 p.m. CWH on Supply rose and the House reconvened with Deputy Speaker Nolan Young in the Chair.]

THE SPEAKER: Order. The House will come to order. The Chair of the Committee of the Whole House on Supply reports:

THE CLERK: That the Committee of the Whole House on Supply has met and made progress and begs leave to sit again.

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, March 7th between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. Following daily routine and question period, business will include Committee of the Whole House on Supply and if time permits Committee of the Whole House on Bill No. 404.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is that we do now rise and meet again tomorrow between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

We stand adjourned.

[The House rose at 10:51 p.m.]