

First Session – Forty-Third Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS
Official Report
(Hansard)

*Published under the
authority of
The Honourable Tom Lindsey
Speaker*

Vol. LXXVIII No. 64 - 1:30 p.m., Wednesday, May 29, 2024

ISSN 0542-5492

MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Third Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
AL TOMARE, Nello, Hon.	Transcona	NDP
ASAGWARA, Uzoma, Hon.	Union Station	NDP
BALCAEN, Wayne	Brandon West	PC
BEREZA, Jeff	Portage la Prairie	PC
BLASHKO, Tyler	Lagimodière	NDP
BRAR, Diljeet	Burrows	NDP
BUSHIE, Ian, Hon.	Keewatinook	NDP
BYRAM, Jodie	Agassiz	PC
CABLE, Renée, Hon.	Southdale	NDP
CHEN, Jennifer	Fort Richmond	NDP
COOK, Kathleen	Roblin	PC
CROSS, Billie	Seine River	NDP
DELA CRUZ, Jelynn	Radisson	NDP
DEVGAN, JD	McPhillips	NDP
EWASKO, Wayne	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FONTAINE, Nahanni, Hon.	St. Johns	NDP
GOERTZEN, Kelvin	Steinbach	PC
GUENTER, Josh	Borderland	PC
HIEBERT, Carrie	Morden-Winkler	PC
JACKSON, Grant	Spruce Woods	PC
JOHNSON, Derek	Interlake-Gimli	PC
KENNEDY, Nellie	Assiniboia	NDP
KHAN, Obby	Fort Whyte	PC
KINEW, Wab, Hon.	Fort Rouge	NDP
KING, Trevor	Lakeside	PC
KOSTYSHYN, Ron, Hon.	Dauphin	NDP
LAGASSÉ, Bob	Dawson Trail	PC
LAMOUREUX, Cindy	Tyndall Park	Lib.
LATHLIN, Amanda	The Pas-Kameesak	NDP
LINDSEY, Tom, Hon.	Flin Flon	NDP
LOISELLE, Robert	St. Boniface	NDP
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Malaya, Hon.	Notre Dame	NDP
MOROZ, Mike	River Heights	NDP
MOSES, Jamie, Hon.	St. Vital	NDP
MOYES, Mike	Riel	NDP
NARTH, Konrad	La Vérendrye	PC
NAYLOR, Lisa, Hon.	Wolseley	NDP
NESBITT, Greg	Riding Mountain	PC
OXENHAM, Logan	Kirkfield Park	NDP
PANKRATZ, David	Waverley	NDP
PERCHOTTE, Richard	Selkirk	PC
PIWNIUK, Doyle	Turtle Mountain	PC
REDHEAD, Eric	Thompson	NDP
SALA, Adrien, Hon.	St. James	NDP
SANDHU, Mintu	The Maples	NDP
SCHMIDT, Tracy, Hon.	Rossmere	NDP
SCHOTT, Rachelle	Kildonan-River East	NDP
SCHULER, Ron	Springfield-Ritchot	PC
SIMARD, Glen, Hon.	Brandon East	NDP
SMITH, Bernadette, Hon.	Point Douglas	NDP
STONE, Lauren	Midland	PC
WASYLIW, Mark	Fort Garry	NDP
WHARTON, Jeff	Red River North	PC
WIEBE, Matt, Hon.	Concordia	NDP
WOWCHUK, Rick	Swan River	PC
<i>Vacant</i>	Tuxedo	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Wednesday, May 29, 2024

The House met at 1:30 p.m.

The Speaker: O Eternal and Almighty God, from Whom all power and wisdom come, we are assembled here before Thee to frame such laws as may tend to the welfare and prosperity of our province. Grant, O merciful God, we pray Thee, that we may desire only that which is in accordance with Thy will, that we may seek it with wisdom and know it with certainty and accomplish it perfectly for the glory and honour of Thy name and the welfare of all our people. Amen.

We acknowledge we are gathered on Treaty 1 territory and that Manitoba is located on the treaty territories and ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Anishinewuk, Dakota Oyate, Denesuline and Nehethowuk nations. We acknowledge Manitoba is located on the Homeland of the Red River Métis. We acknowledge northern Manitoba includes lands that were and are the ancestral lands of the Inuit. We respect the spirit and intent of treaties and treaty making and remain committed to working in partnership with First Nations, Inuit and Métis people in the spirit of truth, reconciliation and collaboration.

Please be seated.

The honourable Official Opposition House Leader?

MATTER OF PRIVILEGE

Mr. Derek Johnson (Interlake-Gimli): On a point of—a matter of privilege—for Interlake-Gimli.

The Speaker: On—the honourable member for Interlake-Gimli, on a matter of privilege.

Mr. Johnson: Honourable Speaker, I rise on a matter of privilege, and I will attempt to keep my remarks brief, but thorough.

As we all know, for a matter to be considered, it must pass two tests. It must be the first available opportunity for me to rise on this matter and it must be a prima facie breach of my privileges. On this first test I will show that it is, indeed, the first available opportunity for me to rise.

On May 28, during orders of the day, the member for Riel (MLA Moyes) tabled a complaint that he filed with the Ethics Commissioner. The Conflict of Interest

Act has a remedy for addressing false and baseless complaints, so we will address that in due time.

But all throughout question period, the Premier (Mr. Kinew) and many ministers made reference to this complaint and used strong language. It is important to note that not a member of that caucus would repeat their statements without the protection of parliamentary immunity.

I find myself once again turning to the wisdom we have available in Bosc and Gagnon's House of Commons Procedure and Practice, third edition. In 1987, Speaker Fraser stated: The privileges of a member are violated by any action which might impede him or her in the fulfillment of his or her duties and functions.

It is obvious that the unjust damaging of a reputation could constitute such an impediment. The normal course of a member who felt himself or herself to be defamed would be the same that is available to any other citizen: Recourse to the courts under the laws of defamation, with the possibility of damages to substitute for the harm that might be done. However, should the alleged defamation take place in the floor of the House, this recourse is not available.

Well, Honourable Speaker, I think you will find that throughout question period, the Premier, the Minister of Finance (MLA Sala), the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education all used language to attack my reputation. Yet, not one of these members would stand in front of media and repeat those claims, and when asked about some of this specific allegations by the Winnipeg Free Press, the Premier directed them to his comments on Hansard.

Why, you may ask? It's because if he repeated those claims, I would, as Speaker Fraser outlined, have recourse.

Speaker Sauvé ruled on this matter as well, and I read from her summary: Not only do defamatory allegations about members place the entire institution of Parliament under a cloud, they also prevent members from performing their duties as long as that—as long as the matter remains unresolved.

Since, as one authority states, such allegations bring members into hatred, contempt or ridicule, the member of Riel has every right to make his request of

the commissioner, but there is a reason that the act has a section for addressing false allegations.

The Premier (Mr. Kinew) continued his comments into Committee of Supply, but again, would not repeat his charged or inflammatory language outside of his protected space.

Honourable Speaker, I have shown that this matter could not be raised at an earlier time, and I have shown that there is a precedent of such claims to be considered as matters of privilege. All that is left for you to rule so we can address this injustice.

So I move, seconded by the member for Turtle Mountain (Mr. Piwniuk), that the member for Fort Rouge (Mr. Kinew), the member for St. James (MLA Sala) and the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) and the member for Transcona (MLA Altomare) be held in contempt of this House and the matter referred to an all-party committee for consideration and review.

The Speaker: Before recognizing any other members to speak, I would remind all members to keep their comments relevant to the matter of privilege.

Hon. Wab Kinew (Premier): This is—what I'm about to say is absolutely relevant to this being a matter of privilege, which is that the substantive issue here deals with the former government's attempt to subvert the democratic will of the people by violating the caretaker convention during the transition period.

What the member for Interlake-Gimli (Mr. Johnson) is alleging took place here is clearly a dispute over the facts. He has failed to make the case that this approach is anything near defamation. And the fact that he invokes actions which may or may not take place out of the Chamber should show to you the frivolous and vexatious nature of this attempted matter of privilege.

With all due respect, Honourable Speaker, you do not rule on actions that happen outside of the Chamber. Prima facie, on the face of it, clearly anyone would notice that the case he is making falls apart on those grounds.

Now, the reason why it is relevant that he is standing in the Chamber today and making a frivolous claim to a matter of privilege is because I believe that his true intent is to continue the cover-up by putting this under a matter that you take under advisement, and therefore preventing us, and thereby by extension the people of Manitoba, from further examining this issue.

* (13:40)

What is the substantive matter at hand that he has alleging is at the heart of this issue? Documents that we have tabled, government documents from before our government was sworn in, that show the minister of Finance, the minister of EDIT and the minister of Ag being cautioned by the former clerk of the Executive Council that they needed to respect the caretaker convention.

There is nothing defamatory about tabling documents which illustrate facts. There is nothing defamatory about asking questions about those facts, particularly in question period. It's called question period, not answer period. There is nothing wrong with asking questions.

This is—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

The Speaker: Order, please.

I would remind all members that when we're dealing with a matter of privilege, the speaker that has the floor has to be heard and everyone else needs to sit quietly.

Mr. Kinew: There are many substantive issues here. For instance, on the question of a silica mine in eastern Manitoba, why would the Agriculture minister be involved? But I digress.

The substance of the point that I'm trying to make, Honourable Speaker, with the deepest of respect, is that if you take this request for a matter of privilege under advisement, we will not be able to talk about a very serious issue that has to do with the fundamental principle of our democracy, which is respecting the will of the people of Manitoba when they cast their ballots.

The previous government clearly tried to disrespect that by rushing through this approval during the caretaker period. That's exactly what all the comments that the member opposite has to refer to here today.

So I would beseech you—again, he is within his rights to stand and argue that there is a matter of privilege here at hand, but I would ask that you rule on this matter immediately so that we can continue the discussion of a very important public policy issue and, in the least, that you would provide us with some guidance on how we might govern ourselves in light of what I would say is a very frivolous and vexatious attempt to evade accountability by the member for Interlake-Gimli.

The Speaker: I'm going to take a moment to consult with the clerks.

Order, please.

So I have listened very carefully to both speakers on this matter. It is a new act that we're dealing with that there's very little, if any, precedence on it, so I am forced to take it under advisement to make sure that we rule appropriately and correctly. And I will advise members that what's being taken under advisement pertains to the information that was tabled yesterday.

So that is where it stands, and the Premier (Mr. Kinew) was correct that the matter taken under advisement cannot be discussed while it's—until my ruling comes on that, so.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

The Speaker: Introduction of bills? Committee reports? *[interjection]* Order. Tabling of reports?

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Public Safety

Hon. Matt Wiebe (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I rise this afternoon to speak to recent incidents of crime, including retail crime, here in Winnipeg.

For too long, the acute needs of retailers and communities were ignored by the previous government. Seven long years of frozen funding for law enforcement, ignoring the impacts of addictions, homelessness and mental health in our communities, and a flat-out refusal from the previous government to work with others has led to the situation unfolding today.

We are taking a different approach. Our government will not concede any ground on public safety. Shoplifting, threatening workers, putting businesses, jobs and families at risk, will never be okay.

We are addressing the root causes of crime that the previous government ignored. We will end chronic homelessness. We are working with partners to address the toxic drug crisis, and we're investing in mental health supports to build capacity to de-escalate situations.

And we are working with law enforcement to make it clear that we stand shoulder to shoulder to preserve and protect the rule of law and public safety.

Accordingly, our government is working with the Winnipeg Police Service to immediately enhance our funding, putting more units on the street to immediately increase police resources and address specific

areas of need, including retail theft, in the coming months.

The message to those who feel they can steal and threaten without consequence, is simple: while we'll be there to offer support and alternatives if you choose a better path, we will also ensure that there are consequences for your actions.

To retailers, to community clubs, to churches, and to everyone who will attend a festival downtown this summer or go to dinner at your local restaurant: our government will work with you every day to keep you safe.

We will work alongside you to address the impacts and root causes of crime while we get tough on those bringing chaos into our communities.

* (13:50)

And to those who work on the front lines, in law enforcement and as front—as first responders, on behalf of our entire team I extend our sincere appreciation for the work that you do, putting your own safety and well-being on the line to protect our communities.

Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

Mr. Wayne Balcaen (Brandon West): I stand before you today to address a matter of utmost importance to all Manitobans and that is public safety. Our province is renowned for its vast landscapes, rich cultural heritage and warmth of its people. However, like any community, we face challenges that require our collective efforts and unwavering commitment to ensure the safety and well-being of every resident.

Public safety is not merely the absence of crime; it is the presence of justice, fairness and the assurance that all Manitobans can live without fear. It encompasses the protection of our children, the security of our homes, the integrity of our neighbourhoods and the resilience of our communities.

As we are witnessing in real time, we hear the news stories of the increase in violence, the crime and retail crime all across our province and we must address these issues swiftly. I have been disappointed to see the cuts made recently to public safety. We need to see greater commitments made that will support our communities and better promote public safety.

Our law enforcement agencies need our support and resources. The brave women and men who serve as our police officers, our firefighters, our—pardon me—our emergency responders put their lives on the line

every day. As a former chief of the Brandon Police Service, I can attest to this need greatly. I have witnessed first-hand the need for resources that must be appropriately supplied to those who put their life on the line for us.

Also investing in mental health services for our law enforcement and first responders so that we can make sure that they are able to attend to the many challenging things that they see, hear and feel every day.

I implore this government to fund properly law enforcement and retail crime and make sure that we have a path forward.

Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): I ask for leave to respond to the minister's statement.

The Speaker: Does the member from Tyndall Park have leave to respond? [*Agreed*]

Leave has been granted.

MLA Lamoureux: Crime is continuing to grow out of control in Manitoba. We know that brazen theft, vandalism and carjacking, just for example, have all gone up and while we discuss addressing the root causes of crime and the impacts of organized crime, we also need to focus on lifting people out of poverty.

Unfortunately, blame is often quickly placed on those making bad decisions and often they are the victims of organized crime and gangs, pressured into committing these crimes. Alternatively, they may not have any other options.

Over the recent years, we have seen Manitoba Liquor Marts install systems to track and permit customers. This instalment has declined theft significantly. But we do not want all businesses to be forced to take steps such as these.

Over the last few weeks, we have seen Food Fare on Portage Avenue be faced with threats, assaults and vehicles being torched, music stores being robbed of over \$38,000 and weapons being used to rob small local bakeries. And, Honourable Speaker, these recent crimes are just the tip of the iceberg. All over Manitoba, garages and houses continue to be broken into, vandalism continues to be appearing and often at random, people continue to be senselessly attacked.

A lot is not working right now. Police are stretched so thin, and while we are fortunate to have groups such as the Bear Clan, we at a provincial level need to do more. One step this government could take is bringing back youth justice committees.

But in the meantime, Honourable Speaker, I'd like to thank the minister for bringing some awareness to this topic through his ministerial statement today and for the opportunity to speak to it.

Thank you.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

Serene Goodwill

MLA Nellie Kennedy (Assiniboia): Honourable Speaker, a couple of weeks ago I had the honour of attending the Manito Ahbee Festival at the Red River Exhibition park, which is in the constituency of Assiniboia. This festival is a multi-day celebration of Indigenous culture, arts, music and heritage. Each year a Miss Manito Ahbee is named, and in 2023, Serene Goodwill was selected.

As Miss Manito Ahbee, Serene participated in events across North America, bringing attention to and honouring the memory of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. While the role of Miss Manito Ahbee could be challenging, Serene was determined to make the most of her position, using her voice to effect positive change across the country.

At the young age of 16, Serene is inspiring the next generation of leaders, innovators and advocates. As a role model for young girls and women across the province, Serene approached her role with unwavering confidence and grace, speaking up for her community whenever she could.

While she recently passed down the title of Miss Manito Ahbee to 2024's winner, Serene's impact in the community is undeniable. In fully embodying her role, Serene has become a symbol of hope, passion and resilience for all.

As a student of St. James Collegiate, Serene learned under the guidance of Tara Tuchscherer, a humanities teacher who incorporates themes of human rights and Indigenous allyship in her lessons. Mrs. Tuchscherer and Serene connected in the classroom and over the MMIWG projects they pursued together. For Mrs. Tuchscherer, supporting and encouraging Serene in her endeavours came easy. For her dedication to teaching and inspiring her students, Mrs. Tuchscherer received this year's Teaching Excellence award.

I ask my colleagues to join me in celebrating the remarkable achievements of Serene Goodwill. It is young leadership like hers that confirms the future of Manitoba is in very capable hands.

Rotary Youth Exchange Program

MLA Jeff Bereza (Portage la Prairie): I rise today to honour the Portage Rotary Club.

Since the beginning, the Rotary Club has been involved in many community initiatives and projects including upcoming rotary skateboard park, the Rotary Duck Pond project, annual Rotary Santa Claus Parade of Lights, various galas and more.

Today I'd like to highlight the rotary exchange program and the incredible work they do. The Rotary Youth Exchange program inspires young individuals to become leaders.

The program sponsors students between the ages of 15 and 19 that are leaders in their school and communities in more than 100 countries, and provides the opportunity for students to learn a new language, discover and learn new cultures, develop leadership skills and become global citizens. Students have the opportunity to choose between a long-term exchange, where they stay for the school year and attend classes and live with host families, whereas the short-term varies from a couple of weeks to months.

Joining us in the gallery today is the Bures family from Portage la Prairie, that are hosting a young student, Mykola Blyznyuk from Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine. The Bures family enjoy hosting Mykola and seeing him thrive in school and community while also showing him all of the beautiful things that Portage la Prairie has to offer.

Please join me in thanking Chris, Heike, Oliver and Dominic Bures for all their hard work and dedication in hosting Mykola.

Welcome to our beautiful province of Manitoba, Mykola.

Dyakuyu. *[Thank you.]*

* (14:00)

TJ's Gift Foundation—Champion Award Recipients

Hon. Bernadette Smith (Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness): It's an honour to rise today and recognize TJ's Gift Foundation and their 2024 Champion Award recipients.

Established in 2006, the foundation was created in honour of the late TJ Wiebe, a brother, a son whose kindness, love and passion was felt by all who knew him.

TJ's tragic death inspired the Wiebe family to support other youth who are struggling with addictions. Karen and Floyd Wiebe and the many volunteers of

TJ's Gift Foundation have empowered thousands of youth and their families across Manitoba. For the last two decades, the foundation has promoted awareness for living—for folks—for youth to live drug-free through development of resources for youth, hosting workshops, as well as supporting families who are navigating the justice system.

Earlier this month, I had the privilege of attending the 18th annual TJ's gala gift—or gala dinner. The gala includes the important recognition of those in our community who have helped our young people avoid or recover from drug involvement. The 2024 TJ's Champion Award recipients are: Mitch Bourbonniere, Matthew Willan, Richard Walls, Stacey and Kelsey Lafreniere, and Brian and Linda Gray.

This year's recipients included community leaders, health-care professionals, trauma-informed care providers, organization founders and grassroots organizations—organizers.

I also want to recognize Karen, the late Floyd Wiebe and their family for the empathy and vulnerability they have shared with Manitobans through TJ's Gift Foundation.

Please join me in thanking Karen, who is also the executive director of the Manitoba Organization for Victim Assistance, and her family who are here today, as well as congratulating the 2024 TJ Champion Award recipients who have also joined us today.

Thank you for your amazing heart work. We lift you up and send you our love and gratitude for all of the work that you are doing in our community.

Miigwech.

Karen Wiebe and Floyd Wiebe, Brian and Linda Gray, Stacey Wiebe, Emily Novak, Richard Walls, Patricia Walls, Chad Wiebe, Brittnay Wiebe, Elias Wiebe, Lukas Wiebe, Matthew Willan, Rachel Willan, Elijah Willan, Trinity Willan, Serenity Willan, Mitch Bourbonniere, Stacey Lafreniere, Donna Lynn Lafreniere, Kelsey Lafreniere, Bridget Lamirande, Darian McKinney

The Speaker: The honourable member for Selkirk (Mr. Perchotte)—oh, the honourable Minister of Housing, Addictions and Homelessness.

Ms. Smith: I ask for leave for my guests' names to be entered into Hansard immediately after my member's statement.

The Speaker: Is there leave? *[Agreed]*

Dr. Anthony Anozie

Mr. Richard Perchotte (Selkirk): Once again I'm very proud to rise and give tribute to an amazing member of the Selkirk community. Dr. Anthony Anozie, who joins us with his wife Sue in the gallery today, has a profound impact on the health care provided to the citizens of Selkirk and the Interlake region.

Attending medical school along with surgical training in the United Kingdom, followed by additional training in Australia, Dr. Anozie called Manitoba home in 1997. Starting in family medicine, he serviced the areas of Arborg, Vidor, Framnes, Geysler, Okno, to name a few.

In 2002, Dr. Anozie moved his practice to the city of Selkirk where he continued his career, now as a surgeon. First operating in the old Selkirk hospital, and now in the beautiful state-of-the-art Selkirk and district hospital built under the PC government.

Always looking for ways to improve our health care, Dr. Anozie embarked on an incredible journey of recruitment, design, planning and perseverance, overcoming regulatory and physical obstacles to open Easton Place. Easton Place is named after Selkirk's renowned Dr. Easton who served the area for decades. It is a 20,000-square-foot facility. The facility has seven doctors, over 11 direct health-care staff, countless support staff, a dental office, audiology facility, minor operational surgical clinic, family practice, walk-in clinic, lymphedema treatment centre, massage centre, pharmacy and more.

Throughout his career, Dr. Anozie has been active in the recruitment and retention of doctors and specialists in the medical field. His vision has placed Selkirk in a class of its own.

Please join me today to honour this incredible man for what he has done and the lives that he has changed of for so many.

Thank you.

Session Highlights

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): This is my last members' statement before the House rises for the summer, and I always like to use this as an opportunity to summarize the past few months and highlight some of the positive happenings here in these Chambers. And there is a lot to share this session.

Over the last few months, we have debated everything from health care, to children in care, to affordability.

And I've had the honour of hosting many guests here at the Legislature, including Tyndall Park school, Meadows West School, Maples Collegiate, Hoffman's Fine Foods, NEEDS Incorporated, Ma-Buhay!—a new musical—and quite a few different women's shelters and resource centres in support of Bill 209.

Now, Honourable Speaker, a lot can happen over the course of a year, and I want to start by sharing something about our Clerk, Rick Yarish. Over the past year Rick faced a significant health challenge, but thanks to some great care he is very happy to be healthy and cancer-free.

Honourable Speaker, there's a lot going on. The member for Fort Garry's (Mr. Wasyliw) daughter is graduating. The member from Interlake-Gimli's son is about to get married. The member for Seine River (MLA Cross) has a brand new grandson. The member for Dawson Trail (MLA Lagassé) became a first-time grandpa to a little one named Jasper, and the member from Springfield-Ritchot also became a first time opa to little one named Tamira.

And, Honourable Speaker, there truly are babies everywhere, and that is why I, too, am super excited to announce that I am four months pregnant.

And as our spring session wraps up, I just wanted to end on a positive note. I want to thank all the staff here at the Legislative Building, and wish all of my colleagues a wonderful and safe summer.

Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Before we move on to oral questions, there are several guests in the gallery.

First we have, in the public gallery, from Greenland School, 15 grade 7 to 9 students under the direction of Lyle Toews. The honourable—they're guests of the honourable member for Dawson Trail.

We are—we welcome you all here today.

We are also joined today by 48 students from Ebb and Flow School, accompanied by teachers Stacey and Selena Houle; and Ebb and Flow fire chief, Darcy Houle. They're guests of the honourable member for Dauphin (Mr. Kostyshyn).

I would also like to draw the attention of all honourable members to the public gallery where we have with us today Amber Trails School, teacher Sarah Martin, and students Markus and Jai. They're guests of the honourable member for Burrows (Mr. Brar).

On behalf of all honourable members, we welcome you here today.

I would also like to draw the attention of all honourable members to the public gallery where we have with us today Susan Mitchell, who is the guest of the honourable member for Assiniboia (MLA Kennedy).

On behalf of all honourable members, we welcome you here today.

I would also like to draw the attention of all honourable members to the public gallery where we have with us today the executive of Local—of CUPE Local 998: Michelle Bergen, Gord Meneer, Mike Crowley, Mike Kubrakovich, Bryanne Koehn, Natalie Sinclair, Stephen Terichow Parrott, Jonny Maria, Jason Paintin, who are guests of the honourable member for St. James (MLA Sala).

On behalf of all honourable members, we welcome you here today.

* * *

The Speaker: Sadly, we also have to say farewell to some more of our pages.

Today we have two Legislative pages completing their final shift.

* (14:10)

We have Abrar Bouhadi, who will be graduating this June. Abrar has been a French immersion student since preschool and wishes to continue her studies in French. That is why she will be studying at college Saint-Boniface this fall. She will be doing a three-year general science program while also minoring in political science. She hopes to obtain her bachelor's degree to then further her education in the years following that. Abrar knows that starting university will be a big change, but working as a page at the Legislature has prepared her to experience things outside of her comfort zone.

Although the election did postpone her time as a page, Abrar has learned so much in her few months here and will carry these lessons with her into the future.

Abrar would like to give a big thank you to everyone in the Legislature for their patience and kindness. The kindness she experienced here in the Legislature is something she will never forget and will hold on to this memory.

Having to hand in her keys will be a little bitter-sweet moment for Abrar, but she hopes to be back in the future.

Abrar is joined today by her mother, Bouchra Mounstarak [*phonetic*], her father Abdul Bouhadi, brother Ahmed Bouhadi, friend Sarah Hanslip and cousin Sam Elmazi [*phonetic*]. She hopes you—to see you all soon, maybe even as an MLA.

Congratulations, Abrar. We wish you all the best in your endeavours.

Also we have Ivana [*phonetic*] Ivanovska who will be graduating from Collège Bêliveau this June.

Thanks to her hard work and drive to her academics, after-school activities and sports, she will continue by attending McGill University in Montreal studying computer science program.

She would like to give a special thank you to the page program and everybody involved within by helping her grow as a person and mentoring her, as well as for the kindness everybody has shown her as she navigated her way throughout. She is very grateful for the many new things that the program has taught her, from life lessons to how provincial governments run and how it affects our society.

Iva is joined by her parents Monika and Hristijan, younger sister and possibly future page, Mia.

In all, this has been an incredible experience that she will never forget, and she will be sure to carry on everything that she has learned in the future. She is excited to begin the next chapter in her life and wishes everyone the very best.

Congratulations. We wish you all the best in your future endeavours.

ORAL QUESTIONS

Increase in Property Crime and Retail Theft Request for Government Plan to Address

Mr. Wayne Ewasko (Leader of the Official Opposition): Yesterday, I asked the Premier what he was going to do for Manitoba businesses that are fighting for their very existence with property crime and retail theft growing increasingly more brazen. And this Premier could only talk about rumour and innuendo, which is nothing new for you-know-who, the MLA for Fort Rouge.

So I have to ask him again—[*interjection*] This is incredibly important so I ask the member for St. Johns (MLA Fontaine) to listen to the question.

What is he or his government doing now for businesses that are losing thousands and thousands of dollars a month to crime?

Hon. Wab Kinew (Premier): I want to thank the Minister of Justice (Mr. Wiebe) for pre-emptively answering this set of questions from the member opposite.

What our government is doing is investing additional resources into law enforcement to help us combat the scourge of retail theft over the coming summer months as we continue to invest in things like the prenatal benefit and universal child nutrition program, which will prevent more young people from going down a negative path in the future.

I want to take some time today to thank our pages and to say félicitations [*congratulations*] and congratulations on all that's coming next.

And I also want to take this moment to congratulate on the record the MLA for Tyndall Park for her important announcement. You are about to go through a journey that I am sure will be very meaningful as you welcome your first child into this world and potentially, judging by recent history, maybe one day a future MLA too.

The Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Ewasko: Until this Premier shows the courage of his many, many convictions and repeats his claims without parliamentary privilege, we have—all know that he doesn't believe in what he is trying to sell to Manitobans.

But this isn't about political games he's playing, because it's—he is embarrassed to be caught up trying to push through bills through, undemocratically, the BITSA bill because his House leader couldn't get organized and introduce them in the Chamber on time.

This is about Manitobans, and they can't wait. They are over 200 days—the NDP are over 200 days to even pretend to unveil their first 100-day strategy.

What is the Premier doing to address crime and public safety today?

Mr. Kinew: As we've said today, we're investing new resources in law enforcement to respond over the coming summer months to what has been a scourge of retail theft while we continue to invest in prevention measures to make our community safer.

But when you want to talk about dodging questions, the one question that's on the top of all political

observers' minds is why did the former PC government, after they lost power and before our administration was sworn in, try to ram through the approval of a silica sand mine?

Yesterday, the member opposite went into the hallway and held a press conference on the topic. And he said, I quote: The Ethics Commissioner has that document as well. End quote.

How does he know what the Ethics Commissioner has in his possession or not?

The Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary question.

Mr. Ewasko: Once again, Honourable Speaker, very important questions on crime and public safety, and this Premier stands up once again and dodges and deflects on the question. He needs to respect Manitobans.

And yesterday, I asked a series of serious questions about a young Manitoban that the child-welfare system had failed. I asked him why he and his minister were content with letting service that failed to investigate itself with no public scrutiny, and this Premier only want to sling partisan attacks.

It is beneath the office of the Premier. It's beneath him as a person. We are asking important questions on behalf of Manitobans, and he has to take his job seriously.

One business owner reports police told them, quote: We'll have to send someone out there if we're not too busy. End quote.

Now this Premier wants them to wait more because he has no solution.

Easy question for the Premier: Say what he is doing today or admit that he is not up for the job; which is it, Honourable Speaker?

Mr. Kinew: For the third time this afternoon, we are investing additional resources. We're talking about four additional units. The overtime is being funded from our administration to respond to retail theft.

Beyond that, we continue to invest in prevention measures to keep more young people on a positive path here in Manitoba.

Yesterday, the member opposite went into the hallway and called a press conference to respond to the question of why his administration, after they lost power, wanted to ram through a silica sand mine. This is disrespect for the democratic will of the people of Manitoba. But he went on, in his scrum, to say that the

Ethics Commissioner has access to information that was the subject of this conversation yesterday.

I'd like him to explain to the House for all Manitobans: How does he know what information the Ethics Commissioner has access to when it comes to the question of them trying to ram through a project after they'd lost government?

The Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a new question.

River East Transcona School Division Changes to Catchment Areas

Mr. Wayne Ewasko (Leader of the Official Opposition): Honourable Speaker, this Premier has a track record of only consulting with Manitobans after he has made up his mind. This mentality is passing—is being passed along to school divisions.

Parents in the River East Transcona School Division were not consulted about substantial catchment area changes, but instead offered a meeting after the decision had already been made.

Let's start off easy for the Premier: Does he believe school boards have a responsibility to consult with families before making such massive changes to children's lives and education?

* (14:20)

Hon. Wab Kinew (Premier): We elect—we respect the democratically elected trustees who make decisions at school divisions. That's something they never did. In fact, they tried to legislate away, through bill 64, the even existence of school divisions across the province.

But when it comes to disrespecting the democratic will of the people we see that things went a lot more serious than bill 64, which, thankfully, the people of Manitoba were able to defeat.

They tried to ram through the approval of a silica sand mine in eastern Manitoba after they lost power. The member for Interlake-Gimli (Mr. Johnson) stands in his place today to discuss the issue, much as he stood in the hallway yesterday to call a press conference on the subject.

But when we're talking about a silica sand mine that would be approved by the department of the environment, I think the question he ought to be contemplating an answer to today is why was the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. Kostyshyn) involved in this conversation at all?

The Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Ewasko: Honourable Speaker, next answer, I want the Premier to stand up, look in the camera, and say to Manitobans that he just wasn't ready for the job. We were ready on this side to be back in government. We are the government-in-waiting.

Parents have child-care arrangements that are based off their children's school schedule. Changing that will have massive repercussions and is putting undue stress and hardships on families.

The school division had an information session with parents after the decision had already been made, and was only accepting pre-screened questions. Many parents have important questions that weren't answered and join us today in the gallery.

So I ask this Premier, on their behalf: Don't the most important decisions call for the greatest degree of consultation and engagement with stakeholders?

Mr. Kinew: Absolutely. When it comes to parents, when it comes to children, when it comes to education, your voice matters. And on this side of the House, we have a firm belief of trust. It's an attitude that when you bring an educator, a child, a parent together, that they can form a consensus about the best interests of the child.

And our Minister of Education, our government will be happy to meet with parents to advance that shared interest. That is directly at odds with their divisive rhetoric around parental rights.

But when it comes to that election topic and others, which led to their defeat, how is it that they found the temerity to attempt to ram through the approval of a silica sand mine on the following Friday after they had been handed a message by the people of Manitoba?

The member opposite, in a scrum yesterday, said that the Ethics Commissioner had certain information. In the same scrum, the member for Interlake-Gimli also made claims about this information being available to everybody over however many months he said—

The Speaker: Member's time is expired.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary question.

Mr. Ewasko: Once again, as I've said multiple times, we are working with the Ethics Commissioner and we're following process, something that this Premier refuses to do, that's following either court processes or

any other process that he's had challenges with for his entire life.

The fact of the matter is the Premier (Mr. Kinew) and his minister have a responsibility to step in and ensure that parents in River East Transcona are appropriately represented by their board and that decisions are being made in a transparent manner.

Many parents understand the underlying premise of the need. We all know the NDP refused to build new schools, and then shortly after they got elected, they cancelled nine more. Parents understand, but ask for consideration for grandfathering to allow their kids to continue on in the school communities and classrooms their kids know and appreciate.

Does the Premier think this is an unreasonable request? And because it isn't, will he direct his minister to ensure they can stay?

Mr. Kinew: You know, I'm not going to prejudge any conversation with parents and direct my minister to do anything at this point. You see, the thing is, I have committed that our government will take a meeting, will hear the concerns, will work with parents, educators, children, school division officials, to come up with a positive path forward.

But I really want to emphasize a point that I will not direct a minister. There's an open question about whether Heather Stefanson directed ministers to approve the silica sand mine. We know that there were people here, such as the minister for—former minister for Economic Development, Investment and Trade, the former Finance minister, who were caught up in these sorts of conversations. Former members of the PC Cabinet, Rochelle Squires, Kevin Klein, they all said that this, a project approval, being rammed through was inappropriate.

The question for the members opposite is, why? Which interests were they furthering in rushing the approval? Was it a public interest or a private interest?

The Speaker: Order, please.

I would just caution members that we're getting dangerously close to talking about matters that are taken under advisement. So I just caution all members to be very careful in that.

River East Transcona School Division School Board Meeting re: Catchment Areas

Mr. Grant Jackson (Spruce Woods): Many parents of children currently attending École Sun Valley School and Robert Andrews Middle School found out

their children are no longer able to attend their current school due to catchment changes, separating students from lifelong friends and moving them out of their home communities.

The Minister of Education has shown that he has no problem summoning a school board into his office when he disagrees with their decisions.

So I have to ask this minister: When did he summon the River East Transcona school board to his office, or does he agree with their approach of keeping parents in the dark until this decision was made?

Hon. Nello Altomare (Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning): I do want to thank the member for that question because it will allow us to look at the process that needs to be undertaken in order for this to be taken care of properly as this member probably doesn't know that the best place to do this and to understand this is at the school-board level.

We trust school boards to, of course, consult with parents. We expect that they will go out of their way to not only consult, but also inform parents of very important decisions before they even get to that point.

Here's the other important piece: we work with school boards just like parents work with school boards every day for the betterment of a student's experience at school. That's the No. 1 piece; that's always been the foundational piece, and I'm sure it will—

The Speaker: Member's time is expired.

The honourable member for Spruce Woods, on a supplementary question.

Child-Care Space Availability

Mr. Jackson: We've heard in this Chamber before that grandfathering is the most appropriate solution, and if it's not an option, the division has a responsibility to explain that to parents in a respectful manner.

Considering one of the biggest concerns that parents have is the availability of child care, especially with hundreds of families now competing for limited spaces, what is this minister going to do to ensure that additional spaces are available for these families in the new areas that their children are being moved to?

MLA Altomare: Again, I do want to thank the member for that question because it does allow us to reiterate our plan regarding child care and, of course, in working with school divisions. Those two work hand in hand.

But here's the—also the very important piece. We have very important investments, Honourable Speaker, in this budget that looks at child care and invests in child care: a 5 per cent increase in the daily operating costs; an increase to wages in order to keep child-care workers in their places.

The other part that's also really, really important is we've added professional development days, so that not only can they continue their training, but also provide the best possible care for our youngest learners in those centres.

We will continue to invest in this sector, something they never did.

The Speaker: The honourable member for Spruce Woods, on a final supplementary question.

Change to Catchment Area—Public Consultation

Mr. Jackson: It's not just those two schools that are impacted with this recent announcement. The division's plan will have a dramatic change on Bird's Hill School where catchment area changes to accommodate the change to dual track will rip apart classrooms and have a large impact on children. All of this was decided without community consultation or input, and when the community raised well-researched and articulated concerns, they were ignored.

This minister can do the right thing and give these families a chance to have a say in their children's education. Will he, or does he agree with the process as it's unfolded?

* (14:30)

MLA Altomare: Again, I do want to thank the member for that question, because, as always, we were always willing, and continue to be willing, to meet with parents.

We have yet to receive any kind of information regarding the meeting that they've requested with myself and my department. Once we do receive that request, and right—even right after question period today, Honourable Speaker, I'd be willing to meet with those parents right here in the Rotunda and have a real fulsome discussion, and set up a meeting later on so that we can not only dialogue about these concerns, but help them with their concerns.

That's something that we will always do. That's something they never did.

Breast Cancer Screening Request to Lower Age to 40

Mrs. Kathleen Cook (Roblin): One in eight women in Canada will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime, and the incidence of breast cancer in women under the age of 50 has increased significantly in recent years.

Earlier this month, the Canadian Cancer Society urged all provinces to lower the age for breast cancer screening to 40. Every other province in Canada has either already lowered the screening age or announced a plan to do so. Early screening means more cases get caught sooner and more lives can be saved.

This is not political. This is the right thing to do for Manitoba women. Every other province has moved on lowering the breast cancer screening age.

Will the Minister of Health make a plan to lower the screening age for breast cancer to age 40 immediately?

Hon. Uzoma Asagwara (Minister of Health, Seniors and Long-Term Care): I thank the member for that question. On this side of the House, we believe in investing and strengthening women's health care; we believe in supporting women and those who need this health care across the province.

For seven and a half years, the previous government cut women's health care across this province in a myriad of different ways. We have been working very closely with CancerCare Manitoba. We've met with the national cancer society across the country; we've met with many folks on this particular issue to not only look at the age standards that are set, but to also look at ways that we can continue to enhance these services.

The Speaker: The honourable member for Roblin, on a supplementary question.

Mrs. Cook: In letters sent to breast cancer advocates in Manitoba, which I will table, officials from the Minister of Health's office said they will consider lowering the screening age if guidelines change or new evidence becomes available.

I'll also table data gathered by Dr. Jean Seely, a professor of radiology at the University of Ottawa: women in their 40s who get a mammogram have a 44 per cent lower mortality rate from breast cancer. Screening women from the ages of 40 to 74 is estimated to save the Canadian health-care system hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of lives.

How much more evidence does the Minister of Health need?

MLA Asagwara: I think by the member's own statements she recognizes that I do in fact take this issue very seriously. She's well aware that we're working with partners not just in Manitoba but across the country to develop an approach that will serve Manitoba women and those who need this care as well as possible.

We've already invested resources in expanding access to this care in the Prairie Mountain Health region; we're actively working with Shared Health to onboard more technologists to provide this service; and we're going to continue to listen to the voices of women in this province, something that didn't happen for over seven years under the previous government, where all they cared about was attacking women's health care across our province, and we're still paying the price for it.

We're going to continue to clean up their mess and take an approach Manitobans deserve.

The Speaker: The honourable member for Roblin, on a final supplementary question.

Mrs. Cook: The minister didn't answer this question, so I'll put it on the record: Manitoba is waiting for a recommendation from the Canadian Task Force on Preventative Health Care to take any action on screening age.

But both the Canadian Cancer Society and the Nurse Practitioner Association of Canada have withdrawn their support of this task force. The data shows that outcomes are better for women with lower screening ages. Breast cancer rates continue to rise and the average age at diagnosis continues to fall.

Manitoba women cannot afford for this minister to keep waiting. Every other province has moved on this issue without waiting for the task force.

Why is the minister waiting to do the right thing for Manitoba women?

MLA Asagwara: I would encourage that member to do a bit more research on this very important aspect of health care.

It's important to note that where areas have been lowered, and in Manitoba we're actively exploring this in the path forward, that when you increase access in some cases we actually see folks who need this care at older stages, who are very sick, not being able to access that care because of capacity challenges.

In Manitoba, we are going to take a responsible, thought-out and informed approach to make sure that women not only get access to this care, but we have a comprehensive strategy that meets the needs across various demographics of all backgrounds and all communities.

That member opposite is part of a team that cut women's health care for over seven and a half years. She has no credibility on this issue and I encourage her to get better informed.

Tax Statutes Amendment Act Authority to Raise Fuel Tax

Mr. Obby Khan (Fort Whyte): Honourable Speaker, the NDP have broken yet another promise when they ran on freezing hydro rates, yet they are actually increasing them to 4 per cent, all hidden within this budget bill.

The NDP fired the Hydro CEO and hired a new special energy adviser that loves the carbon tax. He wants to raise fuel taxes to even higher levels, all the while banning natural gas for home heating in Manitoba.

Let's be clear, the NDP voted against letting Manitobans have their say, and now they have buried powers within this budget bill to raise fuel taxes at the Cabinet table.

Is the minister planning on using these new powers to raise fuel taxes on Manitobans at the Cabinet table and, if not, why even have it in there?

Hon. Adrien Sala (Minister of Finance): There's only one party in this Legislature that has voted in support of a carbon tax in Manitoba and that's the members opposite. That's their record and Manitobans know that.

For seven and a half years, they did the work of making life more expensive, whether it was finding new ways of legislating hydro rate increases or otherwise. And when it comes to energy development, they did absolutely nothing for seven and in a half years. Not a single megawatt was created under the previous government. They sat on their hands. No plan, no vision.

What did we do as soon as we got in? We brought \$500 million of investment to expand generation in Manitoba. We're going to keep doing that work to make sure we have the energy we need for generations to come.

The Speaker: The honourable member for Fort Whyte, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Khan: Honourable Speaker, not only did this minister not answer now question No. 85 in the row for me, he's putting misleading information on the record.

When he says the previous government, how many megawatts did they create? The previous PC government generated 700 megawatts compared to this NDP. They have no plan for the future, no plan on how to help Manitobans and they have no plan on how to govern accordingly. This minister has gone on the record and said that they have no plan.

Will the minister just come clean today and say that hidden within this budget bill is the authority for him to raise the fuel tax at the Cabinet table, yes or no?

MLA Sala: Again, as I've said in this House before, we're doing that important work of bringing together folks to develop an energy policy that will make sure we can provide affordable energy for years to come and do that while we keep Manitoba Hydro public, something the members opposite never would have protected.

But speaking about unanswered questions, the member opposite had some things to say yesterday in relation to the work that the previous government did in trying to ram through a silica sand mine. He said, quote: Nothing new was presented today. The media's had the documents. The Ethics Commissioner has the document. Nothing new was said. Nothing new was presented.

Well that doesn't jive, Honourable Speaker, with what we presented. We know that what we brought forward were new names that showed the involvement of the member of Interlake-Gimli, showed the involvement of the member for Red River North (Mr. Wharton)—

The Speaker: Order, please. I previously—*[interjection]* Order, please.

I previously asked members to be very cautious about talking about matters I've taken under advisement. I believe the Minister of Finance has stepped over that line.

MLA Sala: The question all Manitobans want to know the answer to is, does the member opposite support the actions of his colleagues?

Mr. Khan: Honourable Speaker, two questions in a row to the Minister of Finance, if he will simply

increase the fuel tax at the Cabinet table, and he refuses to answer them. He's not answering them because he knows he's going to. That's why he's hidden these authorities within this new BITSA bill.

This Premier (Mr. Kinew), this Finance Minister and the member for Fort Garry (Mr. Wasyliv) have all gone on the record and said, previous BITSA bills that do this are undemocratic. But I will table another quote from the member of the opposite side of the House and that quote says: So what they've done, what your boss, what your colleagues have done is to ensure the dismantling of democracy here in Manitoba. End quote.

Who said that, Honourable Speaker? The failed Government House Leader (MLA Fontaine) said that.

* (14:40)

Members on the opposite side of the House have always said it's undemocratic.

Why is this minister forcing this through in BITSA? Will the minister say today if he's going to increase the fuel tax—

The Speaker: Member's time is expired.

MLA Sala: First of all, I want to start by saying how incredible of a job our House leader does each and every single day. We are unbelievably proud to work with that member. In regards to his comments, he's coming today, asking about what we're going to do on a fuel tax. What did we do on the fuel tax? We offered Manitobans a holiday. That's right.

For seven and half years, Honourable Speaker, what did they do? They charged that to Manitobans every single day they were in government, for seven and half years.

What did we do right after we got in government? We brought in a holiday that's created the lowest inflation in Canada, the lowest fuel prices in Canada and some of the lowest food prices in Canada.

That's the work we're doing in support of Manitobans.

Infrastructure Capital Investments Request for Projects Under Review

Mr. Konrad Narth (La Vérendrye): With construction season well under way and very few projects seeing action, and a budget that has outlined cuts to capital investment, Manitobans are left wondering which projects will see investment and which will be facing the chopping block.

The Minister of Infrastructure has said publicly that her blue ribbon panel would be reviewing the five-year plan and making changes and suggestions.

My question for the minister is: What projects in the five-year plan are under review, and when will she share with the public if they have been cut by this NDP government?

Hon. Lisa Naylor (Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure): I am thrilled to get an infrastructure question. It—by the actions in the Chamber over the last month or two, it seems very unimportant to the other side.

So let me just remind folks on the other side of the House that we have invested \$500 million into transportation infrastructure this year. We've invested in—we increased the funds for maintenance to address infrastructure deficit by almost \$8 million this year. And so we're pretty proud, actually, of what we're doing on this, and can't wait to answer the next question.

The Speaker: The honourable member for La Vérendrye, on a supplementary question.

Highway 201 and 311 RTAC Expansion Update

Mr. Konrad Narth (La Vérendrye): My question was around capital investment, and that's the concern around those cuts. There are many infrastructure projects across my constituency and our province that are essential to the growth and prosperity of both.

These are projects that have support of Manitobans, but have seen nothing but silence from this government. Let's start with my constituency.

Can the minister tell the people of Manitoba whether the RTAC expansion to Highway 201 and 311 will be completed in this term of government?

Hon. Lisa Naylor (Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure): Again, I thank the member opposite for the question, and again it's another opportunity to talk about the important transportation infrastructure upgrades that are happening in the province.

In his previous question, the member asked about the previous government's five-year capital plan. I'm very excited that we'll—we—our multi-year plan will be released sometime in the next couple of months. I—and so I'm looking forward to show—and I thank him for the opportunity to get to talk about that and announce it today.

And so that's something he can look forward to, to see what projects are coming online over this construction period.

The Speaker: The honourable member for La Vérendrye, on a final supplementary question.

City of Winnipeg Road Upgrades

Mr. Konrad Narth (La Vérendrye): It's concerning that Manitobans are going to know after we've wasted a complete construction season what the plan is moving forward.

This minister refused to commit to much-needed upgrades in the city of Winnipeg like the Chief Peguis Trail and the Kenaston expansion. Winnipeggers are concerned with the lack of commitment. Our government planned a full 10-year strategy to achieve free-way status on the Perimeter.

With long-term projects at the St. Anne's interchange and the Waverley intersections now in limbo under the NDP government, will this NDP minister help grow the city of Winnipeg and make these necessary road upgrades?

Hon. Lisa Naylor (Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure): To address the questions about the Perimeter, all projects are proceeding as scheduled. There is no question; you could actually take a drive around the Perimeter and see some of that for yourself. I know I have had that opportunity.

But let's be clear, Honourable Speaker. If there are any problems with highways in this province, it's due to seven and a half years of cuts from the previous government. Many of our highway projects will have to be moved up in the schedule because of how badly they've broken down because they have been ignored and not taken care of under the previous government.

That means that we have to rearrange plans—

The Speaker: Member's time is expired.

Lake Winnipeg—Nutrient Target Regulations Timeline to Implement

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): Lake Winnipeg sustains over 23,000 residents who live in 30 communities along its shores. About 800 commercial fishers operate on Lake Winnipeg every year, and the pollution crisis is harming communities.

Nutrient-target regulations have been proposed for years to establish phosphorus and other nutrient-reduction targets. Despite continued contamination,

we are still left questioning whether government is even willing to establish targets to reduce the amount of toxicity in our lake.

Does the government plan to enact nutrient-reduction targets on Lake Winnipeg, and if so, when?

Hon. Tracy Schmidt (Minister of Environment and Climate Change): I thank my colleague for the question on the environment.

Unfortunately in this House, I don't get the opportunity enough to talk about the environment, because we don't get any questions from the opposition.

The health, as I've said before, the health of our waterways and the health of Lake Winnipeg are of top priority for me and for our government, and our record on water is clear already, Honourable Speaker. In seven and a half months, we have signed an MOU to protect the Seal River Watershed in northern Manitoba. And our record is also that we have refused a silica sand mining licence to a company that was going to drill through the aquifers here in Manitoba, putting the drinking water of Manitobans at risk.

We will always prioritize the health and safety of our water and of Manitobans first and foremost.

The Speaker: Member's time is expired.

The honourable member for Tyndall Park, on a supplementary question.

Mercury and Heavy Metals in Fish Population Timeline for New Guidelines

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): Honourable Speaker, since February, nearly 100 Olympic-sized swimming pools of diluted sewage has leaked into the Red River, and we have two more Manitoba First Nations who have filed lawsuits over the sewage spills.

We have yet to know the full extent of the damage to wildlife, but we know that it has been 17 years since the acceptable guidelines on mercury and heavy metals were provided to Manitobans.

What is this minister's timeline on when a new report on mercury and heavy metals in fish will be produced?

Hon. Tracy Schmidt (Minister of Environment and Climate Change): Again, I thank the member for the important environmental question.

And again, this is an issue that we take very seriously. When it comes to nutrient loads in Lake Winnipeg, we know that the city of Winnipeg is the

single largest source of nutrient loads that are going into Lake Winnipeg.

And we have taken action already. On top of commencing an investigation into the sewage spills that the member talks about, we have also—I directed the department to issue an environmental protection order to the City of Winnipeg to make sure that they get to work right away, and we have also invested an initial \$10 million to help the City of Winnipeg do that work.

There's more work to do, there's more work to come, and we are very excited to work with both the City of Winnipeg and the federal government. Perhaps the member opposite could speak to some of her colleagues in the federal government and—

The Speaker: Member's time is expired.

* (14:50)

The honourable member for Tyndall Park, on a final supplementary question.

North End Sewage Treatment Plant Compliance with Phosphorus Limits

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): Excess nutrients caused by pollution affects fish and wildlife but also toxic blue-green algae blooms on Lake Winnipeg's beaches. The previous NDP government set conditions of the North End water pollution control plant for total phosphorus limits. However, every year since then, the total phosphorus concentration exceeded the limits by over three times.

What is this minister doing to ensure that the North End treatment plant comes into compliance with the terms set out by their own government?

Hon. Tracy Schmidt (Minister of Environment and Climate Change): Again, thank you for the important environmental question.

Our government is going to be working hard with the City of Winnipeg, with the federal government, to make sure that we can put the necessary regulations, enforcements in place to make sure that this important issue is addressed.

But again, you know, this file—Lake Winnipeg file, has been neglected for seven and a half years under the previous government. One third of the department was slashed. That left environmental site inspections cut in half. Their record on the other side of the House is abysmal.

On this side of the House, we're a collaborative government. We are working with First Nations. We are working with fisheries. We are going to find a solution to this problem. We are going to take action on behalf of all Manitobans.

Increase in Retail Crime Initiatives to Address

MLA Jelynn Dela Cruz (Radisson): Honourable Speaker, retail crime has been on the rise, no thanks to the serious negligence of the failed Stefanson government.

We have heard from small-business owners, from law enforcement and many other community members at our recent public safety summit. It's why our government is responding to these real, immediate concerns with real, immediate action for community safety and protections for small businesses.

Can the Minister of Justice tell Manitobans more about the work of his department and how we are refusing to stand by on retail crime?

Hon. Matt Wiebe (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): Thank you to the member for Radisson for that important question.

I shared with the House earlier and I wanted to reiterate our government's action in response to the incidence of crime, including retail crime, recently here in Winnipeg.

Our government is working with the Winnipeg Police Service to immediately provide new funding to put more units on streets and increase police resources to address specific areas of need, including retail theft, in the coming months; whereas, the previous government ignored the root causes of crime, refused to work with any partners and froze funding for law enforcement year over year.

Our government will not concede any ground when it comes to public safety. Shoplifting, threatening workers, putting businesses, jobs and families at risk will never be okay.

The Speaker: Member's time is expired.

Federal Cap on International Students Government Allocation Concerns

Mr. Richard Perchotte (Selkirk): When the federal government limited international students, they left it up to this minister to decide how Manitoba's share would be allocated. It was her decision to give the University of Winnipeg an increase and her decision

to target faith-based organizations, which fulfill much-needed jobs here in Manitoba.

Many Manitobans want to know why the minister picked winners and losers to such an extent.

Hon. Renée Cable (Minister of Advanced Education and Training): I commend the member for getting the facts straight that it was absolutely a federal government decision that came down.

We worked quickly to implement a policy that would ensure that all institutions felt the loss the least, and I will say once again that our government invests in post-secondary. We continue to invest in education. We will support Manitobans through that. And we will—*[interjection]*

The member opposite from Fort Whyte is heckling me, as he always does. And I just—I want to make it known that the member from Fort Whyte continues to bully me, on the record.

The Speaker: The time for oral questions has expired.

PETITIONS

Medical Assistance in Dying

Mr. Ron Schuler (Springfield-Ritchot): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

These are the reasons for this petition:

(1) Beginning March 17, 2024, persons struggling with mental health as their sole condition may access medical assistance in dying unless Parliament intervenes.

(2) Suicidality is often a symptom of mental illness, and suicide is the second leading cause of death for Canadians between the age of 10 and 19.

(3) There have been reports of the unsolicited introduction of medical assistance in dying to non-seeking persons, including Canadian veterans—*[interjection]*

The Speaker: Order, please. Order, please.

I would remind all honourable members that when the Speaker's standing, they should stop talking. And I would ask all honourable members to quit hollering back and forth across. The member's trying to read a petition. I can't hear him.

Mr. Schuler: (4) Legal and medical experts are deeply concerned that permitting Canadians suffering from depression and other mental illnesses to access euthanasia would undermine suicide prevention efforts and risk

normalizing suicide as a solution for those suffering from mental illness.

(5) The federal government is bound by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to advance and protect the life, liberty and security of its citizens.

(6) Manitobans consider it a priority to ensure that adequate supports are in place for the mental health of all Canadians.

(7) Vulnerable Manitobans must be given suicide prevention counselling instead of suicide assistance.

(8) The federal government should focus on increasing mental health supports to provinces and improve access to those supports, instead of offering medical assistance in dying for those with mental illness.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

(1) To urge the provincial government to lobby the federal government to stop the expansion of medical assistance in dying to those for whom mental illness is the sole condition.

(2) To urge the provincial government to lobby the federal government to protect Canadians struggling with mental illness by facilitating treatment, recovery and medical assistance in living, not death.

This is signed by Marjone [*phonetic*] Sarna, Madeline Dumont, Lorraine Jolicoeur and many, many other Manitobans.

The Speaker: No further petitions? Grievances?

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

Hon. Nahanni Fontaine (Government House Leader): I'm tabling a revised Estimates sequence for today only.

The Speaker: All right.

REPORT STAGE AMENDMENTS

Bill 10—The Advanced Education Administration Amendment Act

The Speaker: So, as agreed to by the House on May 21, 2024, this afternoon, the House will first debate the report stage amendment sponsored by the honourable Minister of Advanced Education and Training to Bill 10, The Advanced Education Administration Amendment Act, under the following debate provisions: (1) the amendment sponsor may speak for up to

10 minutes; (2) a member from the official opposition may speak for up to 10 minutes; (3) the independent member may speak for up to 10 minutes; and I shall put the question.

Hon. Renée Cable (Minister of Advanced Education and Training): I move, seconded by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change (MLA Schmidt),

THAT Bill 10 be amended—to Clause 2(2)

(a) by replacing the proposed section—subsection 2.3(6) with the following:

Ministerial directive re policy

2.3(6) If the minister determines that an institution is not in compliance with this section and the regulations made under clause 12(b.1), the minister may issue a directive to the institution specifying

(a) the action the institution must take; and

(b) the time – determined by the minister to be reasonable in the circumstances – within which the institution must—make the—take the action.

Public—of—Public notice of directive

2.3(6.1) The minister must make the directive publicly available in any manner the minister considers appropriate.

Ministerial action re failure to comply

2.3(6.2) If the minister determines that an institution has not complied with the directive within the time specified, the minister may direct the Minister of Finance to deduct any amount from any grant requisitioned for the institution under section 9.1 or 9.6.

(b) in the proposed subsection 2.3(7), by striking out "subsection (6)" and substituting "subsection (6.2)".

* (15:00)

The Speaker: It has been moved by the honourable Minister of Advanced Education, seconded by the honourable Minister of Environment and Climate Change,

THAT Bill 10 be amended in Clause 2(2)

(a) by replacing the proposed subsection 2.3(6) with the following:—

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

The Speaker: Dispense.

The amendment is in order.

The floor is open.

MLA Cable: I'm pleased to rise today for the report stage amendment of Bill 10, The Advanced Education Administration Amendment Act. This bill amends The Advanced Education Administration Act. The foundation for Bill 10 is the safety of students. These amendments are about ensuring our institutions have the stool—the tools to keep our institutions safe—our students safe.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thank you to the participants of the Social and Economic Development Committee for their review and input on this bill and to all the stakeholders who took the time to share their perspectives. We have listened to these perspectives and can assure our academic communities that our government is committed to respecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy. These are not up for debate with our government.

The foundation for Bill 10 is the safety of students. These amendments to the act are about ensuring our institutions have the tools to keep students safe. Currently, not all post-secondary institutions are covered by the—covered by the act have the same level of checks and balances. And we know that there are gaps. Families need to know that students are safe wherever they choose to study, and regardless of whether they are in the classroom, on campus, on a work practicum or work placement, any place that a student is learning, they deserve to be safe.

The current act does not have any avenues for recourse. We are proactively ensuring we have the mechanisms to hold institutions to account. We are moving an amendment to The Advanced Education Administration Amendment Act, which will provide further transparency and ensure a progressive approach to compliance. Specifically, we have added in new provisions that outline earlier steps the minister must take to support compliance, including a ministerial directive. The additional amendments clarify that adjusting a grant would be a last resort, and there would be significant work with an institution to promote compliance before any consideration of a financial penalty.

Every minister of the Crown must act in the public good. And in consultation with folks through the—through committee and in conversations, it became clear that there was some question about how and when a minister may use their authority to revoke a grant or claw back a grant. And I just want to be abundantly clear that it is never in the public interest to arbitrarily make cuts. We've seen the damage that

has been done to institutions because of this, and really at the forefront of all of this is student safety.

I want to say to the institutions and to the students that this is an opportunity for us to work together as partners to create positive change against sexual violence for the well-being of all of our students, faculty, staff and communities. I look forward to the passage of this bill.

Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

Mr. Richard Perchotte (Selkirk): I'm proud to stand once again today and put some words on the record.

During the evening that we went over this bill, there was 15 presenters registered, and out of the 15, the 11 that did speak all spoke against this bill, talking about this bill being a tremendous overreach, not required. Several times throughout the evening, this was referred to as a dictatorship, a tyranny. They talked about the fact that this government is reaching for items that they do not need. They're using a heavy-handed approach when, in fact, they have the tools at their disposal to ensure the safety of the students.

Every member who spoke that evening spoke of the utmost care for the students that are in the school system, and we share that. We absolutely want to make sure that every student has the ability to attend university, college or any training institution, to feel safe, to think about their future and not worry about any sexual violence or harassment.

The Conservative government introduced the legislation that is already on the record. It is there. The schools are required to demonstrate and report any activities that happen that have to do with violence, sexual harassment. The policies are to be adhered to and made public. The policies that are there need to be transparent and reviewed on a four-year basis.

What was being brought forward was a heavy-handed stick to make sure that this complies. Compliance is important, but the tools are there. There is the ability right now of—many of the schools have a lot of members on their board who could absolutely vote in favour by the government telling them so.

There's—in the bill briefing and during that evening, we had conversations about if any schools were deemed that required this and the answer again was no. When asked about this, it was assured to the members this was not to be any form of punishment and hopefully it wasn't never required.

And although that may be true, the legislation that's being brought forward is extremely heavy-handed

without any appeal process, without any monetary range. And where that comes from, and I had said at the time—and it was also said by people presenting—that it becomes judge, jury and executioner to determine what is right or wrong.

So we have several points that we have here. First I want to be very, very clear that the safety of every student is paramount for every member in this House. Just the safety of the students from—every presenter and every school and institution I have spoken with has also said their safety is paramount. They want nothing more.

It was brought up at the—at that evening that it says the bill in its current form is simply too vague. Its silence on criteria that would enable the minister to cut an operating grant is also—potentially would entail a reduction of a grant to zero, thereby risking the closure of an institution.

It also went on further and said their concern was the bill risks incentivizing the very problems it seeks to address. It said it was reminded of a quote from one of the students at the Brandon University regarding the complaints against a soccer coach and the university's failure to report it, basically saying that if you have something that you need to bring forward and if you bring it forward not at the right time, you could be punished, then you may not want to bring it forward at all. And although that seems inherently wrong from the values that we have, because again, we want to protect the children, so we want to make sure that legislation is brought forward.

We recently went through a pandemic. There's been a pandemic where people couldn't gather for weeks and months and, even some cases, years. To review a policy on a four-year basis without any consideration of leniency for external events that may happen seems a little arbitrary.

* (15:10)

To have a policy that somebody would—could not get together but meaningfully have the information prepared and they're doing their due diligence to get this done, but they just didn't have it done, that means on day one after the deadline came, the minister could go out and cut 100 per cent of their funding without any recourse.

And the schools are very clear. We had people from the University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, University of Brandon, St. Boniface university. We had people from the colleges attend. We had a lot of private citizens that were bringing forward

their concerns based on their institutional information that they know inherently that the government needs to respect the autonomy of every single school.

And I understand the minister rightfully and dutifully feels the importance of protecting students, and we all feel that importance. And for that I give her great credit for that. But we need to make sure that we take a look and address these concerns on a measurable basis; that we don't overstep our authority with a big stick and do it with threats. We need to work with the institutions to make sure that the sexual violence and sexual harassment policies are done effectively on time, and working with them, perhaps setting up a schedule that six months prior, you start inquiring with the institutions of where they're at on that. Do they need some help? Where do they need to go?

We heard several times throughout that evening where the minister simply asked the presenters how to do—how should I do my job? What would you do if you were me? What would you put in the policy if you were me? I was absolutely shocked. Why would we be asking other people how to do their job, especially since every one of these presenters said there was zero consultation.

And consultation isn't sending a letter after the fact, saying we're bringing a—forward this bill, okay? Consultation is done before the bill is presented to get the people in the room, get them on the phone, get them to engage in effective dialogue to say, this is what we're proposing; how does this affect the school; how does it affect the student body. Have all the people come together, all the stakeholders that are affected by this bill, and to say, what do we need to do to move forward and make this happen?

They would have discovered very quickly that every one of the schools they would have talked to would have cried wolf very, very quick. They would have said this is absolutely ridiculous, it is not needed, we haven't heard of one single incident from this government that says this is a requirement.

Well, the intent may be good. We need to make sure that we work with the universities, the colleges and all levels of our schools to ensure the safety, but to do that in a collaborative way, to make sure that we have all members and all stakeholders at the table to discuss what's going on.

I've got several pages here where they talked about all the different issues that they face, and every single one of the presenters said this is not the way to

go. There are several different ways that this government and this minister can present their argument and have everybody achieve the same goal, by doing it in a manner that brings forward proper dialogue, not by threats or coercion of taking away funds, not by removing an appeal process, not by having any say from any other institutions.

This bill is against what they deserve—

The Speaker: Member's time is expired.

The question before the House is the report stage amendment to Bill 10, The Advanced Education Administration Amendment Act.

Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some Honourable Members: Agreed

Some Honourable Members: No.

The Speaker: I heard a no.

Voice Vote

The Speaker: All those in favour of the motion, please say aye.

Some Honourable Members: Aye.

The Speaker: All those opposed, please say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

The Speaker: In my opinion, the Ayes have it.

Mr. Grant Jackson (Deputy Official Opposition House Leader): On division please, Honourable Speaker.

The Speaker: On division. So the motion was passed, on division.

* * *

The Speaker: As agreed by the House on May 21, 2024, the House will now resolve into Committee of Supply.

Will the Deputy Speaker please take the Chair.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY (Concurrent Sections)

ROOM 254

JUSTICE

* (15:30)

The Chairperson (Rachelle Schott): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Justice.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Matt Wiebe (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I do.

Appreciate the opportunity to join you this afternoon and members of the committee for this year's Estimates. It's truly an honour and a privilege to be joining you here for my first time in Estimates on this side of the table as the Minister of Justice and the Attorney General to introduce our 2024-2025 Budgetary Estimates for Manitoba Justice.

Budget '24 lays the groundwork for the department's work on a number of strategies and initiatives that support our government's goal of ensuring our province and our communities across Manitoba are protected, safe and healthy.

Initiatives will address public safety, youth crime, and provide better outcomes for youth, women and LGBTQIS2S+ with investments supporting tough-on-crime and tough-on-the-causes-of-crime approaches.

With the prevalence of serious, violent crime rising over the last several years, a department-wide integrated approach to public safety is critical. The government works through a public safety strategy that will be informed by the public safety summit that will bring together community leaders and partners who will guide an informed and meaningful response to ensure that we are addressing the root causes of crime. And all of government work is working towards a common priority of community well-being.

This includes recognizing the importance of addressing the root causes of violence in families and communities through prevention, reintegration and healing. Co-ordinated efforts will include policing and supporting resources to disrupt sophisticated criminal activity, maximize efficiency and increase public safety. Budget '24 includes investments to support a public safety summit—strategy, pardon me.

The recently announced bail reform plan, a multi-faceted strategy, reflects our commitment to protect public safety by being tougher on repeat violent offenders, promoting confidence in the administration of justice and ensuring consistency and fairness in the approach to bail across the province.

Budget '24 includes an investment of \$3 million in police resources to help track down offenders who violate their bail conditions. Law enforcement enhancements will strengthen efforts to arrest repeat violent offenders who knowingly breach their court-imposed

release conditions, including those charged with intimate partner violence offences.

These investments will make our communities safer by addressing individuals who pose a serious risk to the safety and well-being of our community.

Budget '24 also invests \$514,000 to expand capabilities to provide the robust reporting capacity to inform decision-making at provincial and federal levels, and \$500,000 to enhance community monitoring and supervision of those released on bail.

In addition, budget '24 invests \$1.5 million to support an electronic monitoring program, which will provide an additional layer of accountability for individuals under community supervision.

Budget '24 includes investments in our First Nations and Inuit policing program, which is a federal contribution program administered through Public Safety Canada. It provides funding alongside provinces to support policing and public safety for First Nations communities across Canada.

An additional \$8.7 million in provincial funding has been allocated to support the First Nations and Inuit Policing Program, while we continue to establish a First Nations safety officer program in 44 First Nations across Manitoba. We will be expanding the role of safety officers in '24-25 to grant officers the ability to provide administrative and logistical support in both criminal and non-criminal matters.

Protecting Manitobans and their personal property is critical to support Manitoba families. Budget '24 includes a commitment to provide a \$300 security rebate to families and businesses for the purpose of purchasing, installing or upgrading their security systems.

Manitoba Justice's vision is to ensure that all citizens, including our youth, feel safe in their communities and have the confidence in the justice system. To address youth crime and to protect our vulnerable people, budget '24 is investing in expanding mobilization programs to include additional neighbourhoods and areas in Manitoba as well as more intensive supports for youth.

This expansion includes the advancement of culturally relevant education and learning supports for Indigenous youth involved or at risk of involvement in the criminal justice system. Investments include \$1.2 million to support 15 community mobilization programs which provide co-ordinated client-centred interventions that bring together law enforcement, health

and social services as well as community organizations to provide integrated intensive supports to at-risk and vulnerable individuals and families.

Budget '24 also invests an additional \$660,000 in intensive rehabilitative custody and supervision programs for youth. Intensive rehabilitative custody supervision sentences are imposed under the Youth Criminal Justice Act and are utilized for youth who have been convicted of a serious violent offence with complex mental health needs deemed to require specialized additional interventions.

These sentences provide designated youth access to therapy, mental health supports, psychiatric or psychological interventions that may otherwise be unavailable, additional staffing and assessments and other individually identified supports, as well.

In '24-25, Manitoba Justice will focus on cross-departmental efforts to improve health and social outcomes for women, girls and LGBTQIA-S-2S+ folks who are involved in the justice system. Strategies will target mental-improving mental, spiritual and physical health while supporting safe housing and increasing economic opportunities.

Manitoba Justice recognizes that the root causes of crimes are multi-faceted and require cross-departmental and multidisciplinary approaches to address the various contributors to crime such as substance abuse and mental health challenges.

The department is committed to working with our Housing, Addictions and Homelessness department and law enforcement agencies to hire new mental health practitioners to strengthen mental health resources for those citizens who require alternative safety and wellness responses. Budget '24 invests \$4 million in new funding to support 25 new mental health positions with a plan to hire a total of 100 new mental health workers over the next several years.

Budget '24 also invests an additional \$500,000 to support two sobering centres in Brandon and in Thompson. The Brandon sobering centre, with a transitional housing project in the city of Brandon, and the sobering centre in the city of Thompson, with direct involvement and support from MKO, are intended to improve and-improve public and community safety utilizing restorative justice options to build safer communities and reduce crime. The overall goal of both initiatives is to reduce recidivism rates and to increase the housing supply for people at risk of homelessness.

In addition, Manitoba Justice will be expanding restorative justice and community justice programming with the aim of diverting more cases, where appropriate, outside of the formal justice system. Restorative justice is an approach to crime that decreases 'recidivism' rates and advances Indigenous justice reconciliation by emphasizing the wrongs done to individuals and communities, addressing the harms and responding to the underlying causes of offending. Expanding these programs will help in further decreasing recidivism rates in both victims and offenders in the criminal justice system.

The department remains committed to collaborating with Indigenous communities to support reconciliation and address the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system.

Budget '24 invests an additional \$320,000 to support the Indigenous Court Workers Program. The program facilitates and enhances access to justice by assisting Indigenous persons—those are both adults and youth—who've been charged with an offence under any federal or provincial statute, municipal bylaw, or otherwise involved in the criminal justice system, to obtain fair and equitable, as well as culturally relevant, treatment.

* (15:40)

Organized crime in Manitoba benefits from the secrecy of beneficial ownership or the ability to benefit from having an interest in property while the legal ownership of the property is under another name, such as a corporation. This can be used as a tool for money laundering.

We have introduced Bill 30, The Unexplained Wealth Act. With this, Manitoba will adopt a registry of beneficial owners who have significant control of provincially incorporated companies that is accessible to law enforcement, government tax entities and regulators. In addition, we have introduced Bill 29, the body armour and fortified vehicle control act, to prohibit hidden compartments being added to the vehicle after it was manufactured.

Finally, Honourable Chair, I'd like to take the opportunity to extend my sincerest gratitude and commend the tireless efforts of all Manitoba Justice employees throughout this period of transition. The unwavering dedication and steadfast commitment to our staff—of our staff in their duties to serve Manitobans and create a safer province for all is truly inspiring. On behalf of everyone in our great province, thank you so much for your service.

And with that, I'll conclude my remarks.

The Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments.

Does the critic for the official opposition have an opening statement?

Mr. Wayne Balcaen (Brandon West): Thank you, honorary Chairperson, for the opportunity to bring forward some words on my first time here at Estimates, and I look forward to having a robust discussion on finance and funding for the entire Justice portfolio.

As I've mentioned before, my career path was 33 years in law enforcement and the last probably 15 years of that was in the senior administration of our police service, so I'm acutely aware of both the needs on the street level but also at the administration level and the government level because government is a primary supplier of funding for police services—whether it be federal government through transfer payments, whether it be provincial government through payments to municipalities, or municipal governments themselves supporting their police services through the police boards and through The Police Services Act.

So I look forward to having this discussion and, hopefully, some better insight into where budget '24-25 is heading.

I would put the last few words on the record, is I would also like to thank my former colleagues at Manitoba Justice and all of the law enforcement, first responders, emergency services, for the tireless effort that they put forth to protect the citizens of our province, of our cities, of our jurisdictions.

And I know the immense amount of work that is undertaken by the Department of Justice and all of the employees in there, so I would like to thank them for their efforts and their commitment to making Manitoba a safer place for all.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: We thank the member.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 4.1(a) contained in resolution 4.1.

At this time we invite the minister's staff to join us at the table. We ask that the minister introduce the staff in attendance.

Mr. Wiebe: Very, very pleased to be joined today by Maria Campos, who is our assistant deputy minister of Corporate and Strategic Services, who is incredibly knowledgeable and—especially for this process and will be a great resource for the committee.

We're also joined by Owen Fergusson, who's our acting assistant deputy minister of Public Safety.

And very pleased that both of them could join us here today and, again, I hope that we can have some fruitful discussion this afternoon.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Minister.

According to our rule 78(16), during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning of each department shall proceed in a global manner, with questions put separately on all resolutions once the official opposition critic indicates that questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Balcaen: I just wonder before we start if the minister could also introduce his staff that's here, his political staff.

Mr. Wiebe: Despite their shy nature and how they do not like to be the focus of attention, I'm happy to introduce our staff that are here. This is Rorie McLeod, who is my DOMA. He is my chief of staff in my office. And we also have joining us here today my executive assistant, Acacia Weselake.

Mr. Balcaen: Thank you, Minister, for that introduction. It's always nice to know who's at the table when we're here. So if I could introduce Larissa Gobert, who is part of our PC team as a researcher.

And so I will lead right into my first question, if I may. Lately, Minister, we've been hearing deal about retail theft and the issues that are facing not only Winnipeg but I can say unequivocally many communities throughout Manitoba. The uptick in violence and prolific offenders is very concerning to not only law enforcement but more importantly the citizens that we serve and the businesses and the owners that run these businesses.

In September of 2020, under the Progressive Conservative government, a Retail Crime Task Force was established to support a safe and thriving retail community. And this task force was one of the recommendations that came out of the Manitoba retail council round table. It included representatives from Manitoba Justice, the Winnipeg Police Service, Brandon Police Service, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, national,

local and independent retailers, private security firms, Manitoba Liquor & Lotteries, Commissionaires Manitoba, the Retail Council of Canada as well as MNP.

Can the minister provide for us an update on whether this task force is active in light of all of these recent crime sprees?

Mr. Wiebe: Well, I wanted to start by, you know, I guess, thanking my critic for starting with this important issue because as he heard very clearly in the House today, it's certainly an area that, you know, we're hearing about in the media now, and it's certainly getting attention.

But just, you know, at the grassroots level, maybe I'll say, we've been working with communities, as he said, across the province over the last number of months. And we've been hearing some of the concerns that businesses have, that communities have, and this is really an important area to focus on and to ensure that we're taking action.

* (15:50)

It's why we were very happy today to talk about additional resources that are going to be provided to the Winnipeg Police Service immediately to increase their capacity in the short term, to ensure that they're able to deal with hot spots that have developed over the last short time. But also over the next period of time, where they can continue to do that important work that they're doing, over and above the work that they—that we're funding and partnering with them to do for public safety across our city.

We—you know, what we wanted to do is we wanted to ensure that we're taking the concerns of all communities and all groups very seriously. And so beyond, sort of, the retail task force, we wanted to ensure that we were listening to everybody. And that's why it was a very unique opportunity to bring everybody together at our public safety summit, which, you know, I can't say enough good things about in terms of the collaboration that I saw happening at that event.

The number of folks that came forward that thanked us for initiating this process, being led by the Premier (Mr. Kinew), it was—across the board it was well received, I would venture to say. And, you know, the critic can correct me if I'm wrong, but I do think that it was a unique opportunity that hadn't been done before, and so I think there was a lot of value in it.

What we're undertaking as a government is to take that information that was shared and was gathered at

that summit and to now use that and utilize that in a way that will be constructive in building those partnerships and also ensuring that communities across Manitoba understand we're listening to them and we're responding to their unique needs.

Again, appreciate that the member opposite mentioned, you know, rural communities and the frustrations they're having. We travelled already outside of the Perimeter to communities like Brandon, we travelled to Swan River, we've been all over the province. And we're going to continue to do that work. That's the next step in terms of the formal process around the public safety summit, is to bring that across the province.

But we've heard from those communities. And not least of which, through the good work that's being done at AMM, where, you know, we heard from them directly about some of the concerns in their communities and had a chance to set up one-on-one meetings to ensure that we were listening to those communities.

So the work is being done, and what I would suggest is that it's being done in a way that's—has never been done before, and it's more robust and more fulsome than has ever been done before, which is an important part of this, is to make sure that we're expanding our focus, to make sure that we're listening to all folks who are in this space, who are working towards making our community safer, and all of those folks who are, you know, having—being frustrated by the rise in crime and public safety in our communities.

So it's important to broaden that out and that's been an important and a good exercise, and certainly been informative to me as minister.

With regards to the Retail Crime Task Force, my understanding is that committee met this week on Monday. They continue to do good work; we continue to collaborate with them. And continue to reach out to them to continue to guide how we can best support retailers in Manitoba and throughout Winnipeg.

Mr. Balcaen: Well thank you, Minister, for that answer, and I'm certainly happy to hear that the Retail Crime Task Force is continuing their great work. I, myself, was a member of that task force in my previous occupation, and I know the importance and the relevance that that task force brought forward to all sectors that were involved.

And appreciate the work and the commentary that was brought forward not only in law enforcement, but as it spans to Crown attorneys, the courts and certainly, restorative justice programs afterwards that can be looked into.

But during your answer, Minister, you did speak about the announcement that you made today in the Chamber and discussions, I believe, you had with media afterwards regarding funding the Winnipeg Police Service for specifically retail crime. And so I'd like to ask a few questions on that as we move forward.

I'm wondering how much the department or the ministry will be giving to Winnipeg Police Service and what the timeline for the use of these funds is going to be.

Mr. Wiebe: So again, I want to be very clear for members of the committee that this an immediate response. So our expectation is that this will be—that the money, the funding, with regards to what's coming from the Province, will be immediate.

But more importantly, in terms of how we see this rolling out is, you know, we don't—there's additional work that is going to be done and is being done in the department to better fund and support police and law enforcement across the province.

But specifically, in this instance, what we're looking at is an immediate response, so the expectation is this is over and above the already increased funding that's been offered in budget '24 to the WPS, but the expectation is that this is rolling out immediately.

And we know that the Winnipeg Police Service has been a great partner for us. And they are, you know, willing to continue to work to support our government's initiatives. They understand the basic concept of getting tough on crime and getting tough on the causes of crime. They understand that, over the long term, that the investments that our government is making in mental health and addictions, in housing, in education, in health care, in the Department of Families, these will all pay dividends over the long term.

And I think their members appreciate that we're taking a serious approach, that we're taking a long term vision when it comes to enhancing safety throughout our communities. So they certainly appreciate that overall and that long-term work.

But what we're seeing here today is over and above that and is over and above the investments that we're already making. It is money that has been budgeted for in budget '24, and it is money that will essentially move quickly to get out to those hotspots where we see some of the most difficult situations playing out right now, to de-escalate some of those situations.

And so, you know, we're very encouraged by the partnerships that we already have, again, with WPS, with the City of Winnipeg—the mayor is—has been a great partner on this. We want to develop those relationships. We're working with the mayor's office in a multi—multiple different ways.

But we want to get this out as quickly as possible. And that's why we were—we wanted to announce it today, give people that sense of, you know—that somebody's doing something about this; that we're not going to sit idly by. And we're not going to sit by and allow people's safety to be compromised.

* (16:00)

So it's—there are—it's been a great partnership. We're going to continue to build on that. But this is in addition to the other initiatives that we've announced when it comes to bail and enhancing bail reform in our province. Again, not just talk, not just, you know, blaming others, blaming other levels of government, throwing up our hands saying there's nothing we can do. Our government is taking real action when it comes to violent offenders, when it comes to repeat offenders, which again, in this case we hear very often that these are people who are coming back and repeat offending. We're taking action on those.

And we're setting the standard. We're setting the standard within prosecutions and we need to make sure that we're paying attention to the safety and security in community, about the impacts to communities and we need them to be responsive to those needs as well.

And so this is really in addition to the multiple different ways that we're already enhancing public safety across our province, and we want to ensure that we're being responsive to retailers, but we're being responsive wherever there's a need. If somebody picks up the phone and, you know, needs to call for help, needs to call the police, they want—we want to ensure that they're getting the response that they need to keep them safe.

That's what this is all about. It's an important initiative, and we're excited that we'll be able to roll this out as soon as possible.

Mr. Balcaen: So again, I ask how much is being provided to Winnipeg Police Service, and where are these funds coming from?

Mr. Wiebe: So the—from budget '24, the amount that's being allocated towards the WPS in terms of their basket funding is \$24 million. In addition to that, we

are funding \$3.9 million for additional foot patrols; \$3.8 million is going directly for missing persons; \$1.7 million towards the violent apprehension unit; \$3 million on the bail initiatives; \$1.4 million in guns and gangs. So in addition to that funding of \$24 million, this would be an additional \$13.8 million for a total of \$37.8 million.

This money is being flowed through a variety of different projects and initiatives that our government has initiated, but that being said, we're always looking for new partnerships. And that's why when it comes to the retail crime and the impacts that we're seeing right now on our streets, this is why we wanted to flow additional funding is because they continue to be good partners. They continue to understand the needs in community. And they understand, again, the larger impact of our government strategy when it comes to public safety.

So what we're undertaking here is over and above, and we look forward to working with the Winnipeg Police Service to understand exactly what those needs will be and looking forward to getting that information back and being able to understand how effective it's being and how we can continue to roll this out. Again, all of this work is being done now with the understanding that with the public safety strategy that our department is developing, we'll continue to build on these partnerships. We'll continue to lean on community, lean on law enforcement, lean on those people who are doing great work in our communities to keep them safe.

We want to partner with them. We want to show that we're a true partner at the table. We're not going to just sit back and blame and, you know, throw political shade at other levels of government, whether that be the mayor's office, which we saw happen rampantly under, you know, under a PC premier who—both in Brian Pallister and then Heather Stefanson—who you would think would, you know, have a lot of common interest with former mayors and the current mayor and the city.

You know, they should've been best of buddies, and they should've been able to work together, but we saw that it was easier for them to instead be, you know, think of the politics first, think of the, you know, think of the blame as being, you know, some cover for them and be able to just sort of, you know, shuffle that blame off to other levels of government.

That's not the kind of politics that I signed up for; I don't think that's what Manitobans want from us. They want us to actually get to work and get things

done. You know, likewise, you know, love—no love lost with the current Prime Minister, and I guess it's easy fodder, right? It's easy to go after the current Prime Minister and blame it all on him. Hey, there's lots that we demand out of our federal government and ask them to step up and be better partners about.

But we're not going to sacrifice action and sacrifice results when it comes to public safety because we want to have that political fight. We'll have the political fight, but we're going to get things done first, and we're going to get things done that enhance community safety throughout our province first.

You know, it's—I don't think—I think if you ask the average Manitoban how politics should run, they would say, that makes sense. When you say, the last government talked, you know, a big talk and then did nothing when it came to bail reform. Well, I think they'd be, first of all, surprised by that, maybe. But they'd also be disappointed.

And you know, the member opposite started by talking about his time in law enforcement. And, you know, I believe he was on the front lines, so he should know that it matters what we do in here and how we support those front lines. I hope that he hasn't lost that perspective now that he's here, because it's not beneficial to get into these political games and read the notes that are provided by political staffers. I think it's important to actually make a difference in our communities.

Mr. Balcaen: That's a great segue of what the minister left off with. I came from years of law enforcement, where we remained apolitical. And I don't believe we should politicize public safety. It should be something that is looked at for the betterment of all Manitobans.

So I'll just mention that I asked specific questions, and the minister takes up the five minutes of time that he's allowed to answer politicizing this event. So I'm going to try and keep this to what we're here to do and that's discuss Estimates and answer questions that are put forward on this.

So you mentioned that the funding is going to be over and above, I believe it was doing over and above what they are already doing. And you said you were going to continue to lean on law enforcement. The bail plan that you had brought forward was putting money into officers that the Winnipeg Police Service has been on record saying they can't hire until the fall. They're already stressed to the max, as are all police services, with staffing.

So is this money being put forward reasonable to expect more work from law enforcement that is already taxed and their mental health is taxed with overburden of work already?

The Chairperson: A reminder to all members that questions should be put through the Chair directly, and not addressed through members.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Honourable Chair, for that reminder. And thank you to the member of the opposition who mentioned the stresses and the mental health of our front-line and first responders.

You know, I've been in this building a minute now, and I've seen some pretty incredible things and some pretty incredible moments. But probably one of the most memorable and one of the most special for me was when we were able to bring members of the Winnipeg fire service, as well as many others from across the province, other members of the Winnipeg Police Service and the RCMP and many other first responders to this building to honour one of their fallen comrades.

* (16:10)

It was a powerful moment and it was a powerful day, and what made it that much more powerful was that the family was willing to use this tragedy to raise awareness of the challenges that first responders face with regards to their mental health.

It was something that I think I'll always remember, and to that end, I think it'll help motivate, or should help motivate, all of us to act.

We were very proud on that day to be able to announce that, specifically for first responders, we would be deploying three additional mental health workers to support the mental health struggles that so many face. We know it's just a start; it's just the beginning of an important initiative and it's building on our overall commitment around mental health workers in community. But to specifically be able to allocate individual mental health workers specifically for the Winnipeg police and for law enforcement was a big step that day.

So it was moving, but it was also a call to action, and that's why our government proceeded to act.

With regards to the question and the comments around resources, you know, and personnel, as the member rightly identifies, there are certainly challenges. He would know this from his time in the Brandon Police Service. We know challenges exist within the

RCMP, and certainly that's not—the WPS is not immune to those challenges as well. That's why it's important to have these partnerships to show that the funding and the support is available for those officers and these new units. The member opposite identified our bail enforcement officers who will be doing great work, and we're continuing to partner with the WPS to get those online.

But these specific—this specific funding is immediate, and what I mean by that is it gives the WPS—it will give the WPS the opportunity to bring people on right now who are already officers, but this is additional time that they'll be able to spend in our communities so that when people pick up the phone and identify that there's been an issue, that they're getting a response. That's what people expect, and that's what we're funding.

You know, I would imagine—well, I don't have to imagine; I suppose we have the words of the member himself when he was with the Brandon Police Service. He said resources are tight. The funding from government has been reduced. We don't have the resources to do what we need to do. That's the response he got from the former Stefanson government. That's the response that he got from Brian Pallister.

And you know, from our government, law enforcement's going to hear, we want to be partners with you. We want to continue to fund the good work that you're doing and find new ways that we can support the work that you're doing to keep our communities safe.

So we're not going to close the door. We're not going to pick fights. We're going to be partners. We're going to be partners with law enforcement. We're going to be partners with other levels of government. And, ultimately, we're going to make our communities safer. That's what we were elected to do and that's been our focus and will continue to be our focus.

Mr. Balcaen: Just for the record, again, Mr. Wiebe—sorry—the minister mentioned that there was reduced funding. Brandon Police Service actually received no reduced funding year after year. I was in the Chamber and presented the funding that was provided by our police board to the Brandon Police Service, and it was above inflation each year.

So every level of government worked together, and the job of the police board is to make sure that funding continues for police services under The Police Services Act to make sure that the funding is there to support the police services and the work within the police services.

So just want to put that on the record but also, further to the questions that I asked, I just want to clarify: These dollars that are going to go to the Winnipeg Police Service for retail crime enforcement, is this specifically for, so I'm—I got this right, specifically for overtime hours and it is no net new positions?

Mr. Wiebe: Well, you know, and, you know, the member opposite wants to bring up the, I guess, past Estimates. And we can—I think we can do that. I don't know that there's anything in the rules that prevents us from going back to 2016, to 2017, to 2018, to 2019, to 2020, to 2021, to 2022, where every single year, the previous government froze out municipalities. You know, froze or cut, in some cases, froze funding towards municipalities, and that included the dollars that were—are supposed to be allocated towards policing.

And so, you know, it—again, I would hope that he's not defending the previous government's actions, because I know he was frustrated when he was the chief of police. He was frustrated that they didn't have enough resources to do the work that they needed to do.

And now he sits in a caucus where, you know, I, you know, he doesn't have to ask this minister; he can ask the former minister of Justice; he ask ministers who sit at this table, who have information about why that decision was made. Did they fight Brian Pallister at the Cabinet table to say this isn't right? I thought we were the party of funding the police. That's what we've been telling people. And Brian Pallister said no, let's cut it, let's freeze it, let's make municipalities squirm. That's their record.

And so, you know, it's a new day in the Legislature. There's a new government that's listening, that's working on supporting communities. Might I suggest that it could be a new day for the opposition, right? It could be. But it isn't. Because all they want to do is talk about defending their previous record. It's frustrating.

It's frustrating because we know the challenges that law enforcement is—are facing are real. They are real in terms of enhanced or increased scrutiny that they face out in the field. The stresses of the job and the kinds of situations they're dealing with have become more acute and more challenging. And so they need to know that they have a government, they have a provincial government that's supporting them, that's stepping up.

Not just with words and rhetoric, you know, and the member opposite uses some rhetoric—I mean maybe he's not going to use it here today, but he uses rhetoric

that he just knows isn't true in the House. I guess, again, written by a political staffer, maybe by Shannon Martin or somebody else behind the scenes. I would hope that he would keep that kind of language out of the House because I don't think it's helpful. But they need to know that we stand, as a government, with the work that they're doing.

* (16:20)

Now, again, challenges are many, and not least of which is ensuring that there's enough officers to do the work that's out there. And so that's why we are—we have worked with law enforcement to provide the funding and enhance the number of officers that are out there: six additional staff in the violent apprehension unit, who have been staffed up; and additional officers on foot patrol that are coming out, 12 new officers coming in the fall and more to follow; our bail unit, which the member opposite, you know, has criticized in the past and now seems to be maybe in favour of. I'd hope he would be, because they're going to be doing important work too—12 new officers that will be coming as part of that work.

But, you know, these are new positions. These are new resources. And now in addition to those new resources that have already been provided, we're offering an immediate assistance for the people of Manitoba. We're offering additional resources to deal with retail crime and to deal with hotspots across our province as we head into the summer season.

It's important, it's an important investment and it's been well received by the mayor, by retailers, by members of the public. Folks know that they want action. They don't want just rhetoric; they want action, and so that's why we're taking action.

And we know the challenges will continue in law enforcement, but if they know that they have a true partner, along with true dollars, that will be a big step in the right direction about making our communities safer.

Mr. Balcaen: Just want to re-ask the question, because—not really clear. This is not for new positions; this is overtime for a reactive response?

Mr. Wiebe: Yes, and I appreciate the member opposite being specific in his question, and so I'll be specific in my answer.

Yes, this is additional overtime, or resources that we understand will be utilized in terms of overtime to deploy the resources immediately.

But I don't want to lose sight of the fact that there are additional positions, as well, that are being now funded and developed through the WPS.

And, likewise, you know, we're working right now with the RCMP, who have a 20 per cent vacancy rate across the province. And, you know—and so when we talk to communities, we hear about the challenges that they're having in staffing and in resources. And, you know, it's about going to the federal government and saying, we need to ensure that we have these resources for communities across this province.

I mentioned to the member opposite I was recently up in Swan River and, of course, we know some of the challenges that have happened out in that community. And, you know, they have been doing great work in working together with, again, community partners, with the First Nations in that part of the province and surrounding communities, to come up with a whole plan when it comes to community safety.

And the only missing piece, I would argue, because these are folks who have been, you know, screaming and shouting at the top of their lungs to say, there's real challenges out here in our part of the province, in the parkland and in Swan River, specifically. The only missing piece was that the provincial government wasn't at the table, didn't come in a way that was constructive and to say, how can we work with you? How can we support you?

So when we were up there, we had great set of meetings, but we also committed to the folks there that we're coming back. We're going to come back with our public safety summit. We're going to be listening to communities out there, again, all the communities that are out in that area of the province, about how we can support them and how we can work with them to enhance community safety.

The City of Brandon, you know, again, I've spent a lot of time in Brandon over the last few months and great, great partners. The mayor in Brandon is somebody who's, I think, coming to this in a very good way and in a very legitimate way about—he's not playing politics. I don't know what his politics are. Frankly, I don't care. Doesn't matter to me. What matters to me is, is are we going to work together to get things done?

The member's successor in the—at the Brandon Police Service, again, you know, great partners, willing to work with us, share their needs and how we can partner and—but, you know, but coming to it in a good way.

So that's the kind of relationships that we're building and we're developing. It's not just about Winnipeg. But in this case, what we're looking to do is to deal with specific issues that we've heard in our communities. And I would venture—I'm looking over at the other side of the table, realize nobody's from Winnipeg. So maybe I'll look on this side of the table, and I see we've got lots of members from Winnipeg.

And what are they telling us? They're telling us that we're seeing these issues in our communities, and we need to send a clear response from government that we stand with community, we stand with you to make your communities safer, and we're not going to sit by and just concede that this is the way it is. This is the way it was under the previous government. It's not going to be that way anymore.

And, again, WPS has been a great partner; the City of Winnipeg and the mayor's office; retailers. We've—we had an opportunity to reach out and speak to several retailers who have been impacted by this. And, you know, they're looking for constructive solutions as well. They came to our public safety summit. You know, we met with the retail council; we met with—with Restaurants Canada. And we met with, you know, a whole number of people. And they're telling us they want to be part of the solution. They've never seen this kind of engagement from a government before.

So it's certainly a new day in that regard, and we're going to do that work. We're going to continue to listen to those community partners. And when we do have an opportunity to talk about public safety in kind of a larger sense going forward, we're going to have some constructive and some good initiatives to talk about then. Right now, we're addressing the needs in community today.

Mr. Balcaen: Again, I appreciate that full five minutes of political dialogue to answer a very simple question.

As I said, Manitobans expect us to do better and to ask these questions and have answers, you know, that are going to help Manitobans and help us when we do our Estimates here.

So, the minister mentioned something that's very important, and that is retail crime and how it's affecting not only Winnipeg but rural Manitoba as well. And I can speak from rural Manitoba because probably 80 per cent of our caucus represents rural Manitoba. And all I've heard so far here is Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Winnipeg, and the money that's going to go to the Winnipeg Police Service.

Let me ask about the three other major police services within Manitoba; and there is 12 recognized police services within Manitoba, and then if you expand it out to Natural Resources and those other enforcement agencies. So there is the—next in line, obviously, the RCMP: funding going to them for all of the places such as Thompson, The Pas, Swan River that you were just at.

What about Brandon Police Service and the information that we're hearing from retailers there about the constant thefts that are happening there? And I'm sure that my esteemed colleague from Brandon East would want to know what's happening within our shared city. I know my colleague from Spruce Woods is also interested in that.

And, lastly, the third largest, Manitoba First Nations Police Service.

What is being offered up to each of those and the other nine police services, or are they just being left to fend for themselves in this wave of retail crime?

* (16:30)

Mr. Wiebe: Well, I'm surprised that the member opposite started by saying I was taking up too much airtime, then asks me to take up more airtime when it comes to talking about our rural—our support for rural crime and safety across the province.

I mean, yes, there's lots to say because we've been working hard. We've been working hard at supporting municipalities in a way that they, quite frankly, haven't seen in the last two terms of government. And members around this table know very, very clearly—I was at many of those AMM meetings and conventions during the time of the previous government.

And I saw first-hand, in fact, the moment where the former premier was shamed into taking the drive out to Brandon at the last minute to make a last-ditch election time commitment that was, apparently, never budgeted for or didn't have any record of going through Treasury Board. And I saw, literally saw in real time, the phone call being made by members opposite: you'd better get out here, we're in real trouble.

And, thankfully, we had AMM doing that important work of advocating for their municipalities; advocating for rural Manitoba and holding that former government to account. And, all of a sudden, there was a scramble and I don't know how they got the premier out there so quickly, but they drove her out, you know, probably breaking the speed limit on the

highway—Highway 1, to get her out to Brandon to do a mea culpa and to beg for forgiveness and to say, oh don't worry, just trust us. Give us four more years and just—we'll get it right then.

Well, Manitobans rejected that and with good reason. And so then when I became minister responsible and Minister of Justice, I took the opportunity to not just say we were going to listen to rural Manitoba but to actually take the time to meet; to meet with municipalities from all parts of our province—all parts of our province. Wasn't picking and choosing. I wasn't, you know, listening to one community over the other.

We heard, first hand, the struggles they were having in Swan River. We heard, specifically, what was happening in Thompson. The member mentions Thompson, another important community that Mayor Smook is doing a great job of representing the challenges that they face which are unique, which are different than other places in our province.

Again, I've spent a lot of time in Brandon lately, you know. And—but we started that work immediately. It was one of the first undertakings that I took and I was—it was a big undertaking because there are a lot—there's a lot to—a lot of challenges that had happened under the previous government that they wanted to let us know about.

So I worked with the municipalities individually. And since then, we've worked with AMM at every step of the way. And that's why we're pleased to be partnering with them in this springtime period, the regional meetings—I keep looking at the member for Dauphin (Mr. Kostyshyn) over there, who knows very well how many miles those folks put on at the AMM executive and all of the representatives from the different regions who travel the province and really listen to folks.

We're going to be joining them and we're going to be listening to them directly, again, this spring. It's important work and it's an important part of our public safety strategy.

But again, frozen funding from members opposite, year over year over year. We're not going to take that approach. We increased our funding, so just so that the member's clear about the support to the Brandon Police Service: \$7.4 million is in the urban policing grant; the \$1.5 million in the basket funding; \$225,000 for the guns and gangs initiative, and the \$175,000 to the MCIC, which totals \$9.65 million.

In addition to that, the RCMP is receiving \$193 million in our budget this year which is an

increase from '23-'24 and it shows our specific commitment to working with law enforcement and partnering with them as they go forward.

Municipalities matter and the voices in rural Manitoba matter. Our cities across this province matter, and that's why we're increasing our funding. We're increasing our support to them and we're going to continue to be good partners and good, you know, good partners at the province—

The Chairperson: The member's time is expired.

Mr. Balcaen: Thank you, Honourable Chairperson, for reminding when the time expires because it's a five full minutes of, again, putting in an answer but doing politicking. So I'll ask directly.

Today's announcement—the minister says he's not picking or choosing any winners or losers—today's announcement gives money to Winnipeg Police Service. I know I'm probably missing one or two here, but what about Altona, Winkler, Morden, Rivers, Brandon, RCMP, Manitoba First Nations Police Service, Victoria Beach, Ste. Anne, the RM of Cornwallis, to name a few of the other police services.

Will any of them be receiving funding or are they out on their own?

Mr. Wiebe: Yes, I was hoping—the member opposite went a little quick in his list because I was able to sort of, as he was going along, check off all the communities that I've met with as minister. And if he had slowed down a little bit, I might have even been able to say I met with all of them. And, again, that's important work that we're continuing to do.

But the one set of communities that unfortunately the member opposite left off of his list was our First Nations communities. And that's unfortunate because not only when we're talking to municipalities, cities, towns across our province, do they often, almost immediately, recognize the important work that's being done by First Nations in their vicinity and the partnerships that they've developed, I also would say that every meeting that we've taken with First Nations partners has been absolutely a posture of how can we get—how can we work together; how can we get things done?

And so we know that it's an important part of kind of the overall public safety throughout our province. And, again, municipalities understand that. We as government understand those partnerships. I hope that

members opposite will get on board with that important work. They certainly didn't in the past and it's frustrating.

And so that's why that's an important part of our budget '24, is we wanted to ensure that there was \$8.5 million for the First Nations, the FNIPP, First Nations policing, and that work is important. But also to start deploying the First Nations safety officers throughout our province, who've been incredible partners, to understand the needs in community and allow communities to direct those resources themselves, to be partners with us, certainly, and to understand that there's an important role.

So we've enhanced not only the scope that First Nations safety officers are operating under, but as well as the funding. And that's important. That's important. All told, we're talking about an increase of \$8.7 million that will enhance safety and public safety on First Nations and in partnership with First Nations.

* (16:40)

And so that's—that's an important indicator of our government's priority when it comes to working with First Nations, and seeing that we can continue to support the work that they do and continue to support the work that they do in partnering with municipalities and with others across the province.

But when it comes to those—that list of communities that the member opposite rattled through, again, I don't suggest that that is not a, you know, that shouldn't be an exhaustive list because I would suggest there was a lot more communities than I met with that weren't on the list that he rattled off. Maybe he's getting to it in his next question; he'll expand the list.

Bottom line is we know there's challenges across the province. That's why we're listening and that's why we're enhancing and increasing the funding that we're providing through the Urban Policing Grant. The increase this year is \$13.7 million above the levels under—in '23-24 that were provided by the former government. And that accounts for \$55.8 million in the Urban Policing Grant.

You know, a real commitment to increasing that amount and with the message to those communities that we're not walking away from the table. We're going to continue to meet these challenges head on, alongside them. If we can partner with them, if we can leverage the knowledge that they have and the work that they're already doing, that's how we're going to have success.

That extends from municipalities and towns and cities all the way to First Nations across this province. When we have a true partner in the provincial government at the table, we're getting good things done. It's not about playing politics. It's not about using divisive rhetoric and amping it up and, you know, sort of, you know, making wild claims about one party's position or another. It's about actually stepping up with the resources and being true partners, listening at the table. That's how we're going to get good things done when it comes to public safety.

Mr. Balcaen: Interesting, at a minute and 12 left, minister said that's why we are listening. He obviously isn't listening because in my last question I mentioned Manitoba First Nations Police Service, and the question before I mentioned Manitoba First Nations Police Service, which is our First Nations police service of jurisdiction for Manitoba. Outside of that it is the RCMP that provides those policing services. So I want to be very specific.

You announced, today, funding for a retail crime strategy, overtime dollars for the Winnipeg Police Service. You've provided a lot of readily available information on budgets that are open in—to all of us if we open up the documents. So that wasn't my question.

The question is: you funded Winnipeg Police Service specifically. Is there financial dollars, overtime dollars, that other communities can expect?

And I mentioned the polices services specifically, not communities. So the Altona police Service, the Winkler Police Service, the Morden Police Service, the Rivers Police Service, the Brandon Police Service, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Manitoba First Nations Police Service, the Victoria Beach Police Service, the Sainte-Anne Police Service, and the RM of Cornwallis police service. And I'm sure I'm missing one more that's just not coming to mind.

Is there going to be dollars coming to them for overtime deployment, as you've offered Winnipeg Police Service, or are they on their own for this crime?

Mr. Wiebe: Now we've been clear with the committee here today, clear with Manitobans, that no one's on their own, that we're going to be partners. We're going to be true partners with communities across this province and the good work that's being done by law enforcement.

And that's why we've been clear that if the member opposite, on one hand, says we're not providing enough specificity in terms of the detail in the budget, and then, you know, on the other hand, says why are

you providing me these numbers from our budget? Well, that's what the process is here for.

So that's—you know, he may not like it that we're stepping up where his previous government failed, but it's the reality. And it's the reality that is appreciated by police forces across this province.

But I guess I'm also surprised that, you know, and again, I mean, we could maybe—we could probably imagine that—he mentioned specifically in his last question that members of his caucus are representing those police forces around the province, and that's why he's bringing them forward. And maybe he doesn't have the same kind of voice when it comes to the city of Winnipeg. You know, maybe he hasn't heard some of the challenges that have happened around the city of Winnipeg recently. But I would hope that he is, at the very least, picking up the newspaper and reading the headlines, at the very least, to know that there are serious concerns right now in our city.

And so I don't know it's—if it's because he doesn't have members of his caucus advocating for the serious nature of the situation right now in the city of Winnipeg, but I think he should understand this is a very serious and unique situation that's happening right now, and that's why we're taking this action, this immediate action. You know, across the province, the work that's being done in law enforcement, there is a multitude of options that we can help work with police forces to enhance the work that they're doing.

And when he, you know, talks about—you know, as he goes through his list of different police forces, I can, in my own mind, sort of—I remember that conversation, and what they were asking for was different than what that community was asking for and what that community's needs are and what the challenges are in that community.

It's not a simple paint with one brush. It's about providing the base-level funding that increases—rather than being frozen, rather than being cut, rather than playing political games—providing that baseline, increasing funding and then listening to communities about what their unique challenges are, meeting those challenges.

Communities are willing to do that. Communities have come to us in a very good way, willing to undertake these projects and these challenges—undertake solutions to these challenges head on. They're willing to do that.

The opposition seems stuck on the idea that—well, don't—you know, the previous government did everything right, so that's their starting position, which I think is in most—I know most Manitobans would reject because they did in the election in 2023. But they would also, I think, just be bewildered that the member opposite, you know, who sees these headlines the same as everybody else, maybe doesn't know the people in the same way that we do, because we talk to them every single day. But should understand this is a unique challenge that's happening right now in our city—in the city of Winnipeg.

And that's why—the Winnipeg Police Service has been a great partner. The mayor has been a great partner. But we're not limiting it just to one place or another. We're working with communities, understanding what their needs are and continuing to build on opportunities.

And the member opposite would be advised to undertake some of that work himself, you know. Get on the road. Get outside the Perimeter and put some miles on travelling our great province. *[interjection]*

And they—you know, members opposite think it's funny. I don't think visiting folks in their communities and listening to their concerns first-hand is funny. I think it's important work. And they may think it's funny because they didn't do it. They didn't understand the importance of it.

We're not going to do that. We're going to listen to communities and work on their specific challenges.

And so, you know, again, the funding has increased. Member opposite doesn't want to hear it, but it's increased, and that's clear in the budget, as he mentions. It's clear in the budget. We're increasing funding. And when it comes to specific challenges, we're going to stand with law enforcement, we're going to stand with municipalities and those—

The Chairperson: Member's time is expired.

Mr. Balcaen: I'm wondering, Honourable Chairperson, the process in this—my understanding is you ask a question, you try and get an answer or you get it under advisement.

But—so my question is, one more time: Is there overtime dollars going to be distributed to the other police services that I have listed and all other police services in Manitoba? Without the rhetoric, yes or no?

* (16:50)

Mr. Wiebe: I appreciate the opportunity again to reiterate our commitment to working with communities that have a unique set of challenges and, you know, and I think are coming to this in a way that is honest and is realistic about the ability to support the work that they're doing.

We do, in fact—the member opposite should know; he's former law enforcement, so he should know a little bit more about the joint forces operations that communities have the opportunity to apply for that can offer some of those targeted resources specifically when it comes to organized crime or other specific challenges that they're facing.

And this is a program that has actually been utilized, you know, by the communities that he's listing off. For example, in Winkler, which was funded for an illegal weapons project that they undertook, just within the last month or within this month, an additional \$43,000 that was allocated directly to Altona, Morden-Winkler area, to specifically deal with a challenge that they were having.

So that's the kind of partnerships that we want. Those are the kind of ways that we can work with different communities that are having a challenge.

But for the member opposite to turn a blind eye and to say, you know, the challenges in Winnipeg aren't a concern of his? I'm very surprised that the member opposite—I know he has a focus on Brandon and he has a caucus that is exclusively filled with members from outside of the city of Winnipeg, but I would hope that he's doing the work necessary to go out and talk to communities here in the city as well.

Because these are unprecedented situations that developed over year over year over year of cuts and, you know, and ignorance from the previous government that reached levels that left us with a giant mess to clean up. Cuts have consequences, the member opposite might have heard me say. And that means that a cut in education now has an impact down the line in health care, in education, in housing, in mental health supports—all things that the members opposite did nothing about. And, in fact, every chance they had, they would cut it.

And, you know, I'm just bewildered that the member opposite wouldn't understand that what's happening right now should not stand, that we need to be clear from a provincial government standpoint that we will take action, and that's—this is how we do it. This is how we do it, Honourable Chairperson. We take action by

funding initiatives like this, by working with communities, whether it be the City of Winkler or the—that region of the province with regards to the illegal weapons project that they undertook, or whether it be the City of Winnipeg when it comes to what's happening right now. We're going to continue to partner at every point with law enforcement and with communities that are doing that work.

So, you know, again, the member opposite continues to want to tell Manitobans everything the Stefanson government did was bang on and that's what we want to do again. Well, Manitobans rejected that. They rejected the division, they rejected the cuts, they rejected the short-sightedness of the previous government.

Because at the end of the day, that's one of the most egregious things that I think, or—I don't know the right word to say here, Honourable Chair, but, you know, it's just so base for a politician to only be thinking about what can I do that'll benefit me right now instead of what can we do over the long term to invest in our province and make things better.

The changes that we're making as a government, the work that we're doing, is going to see benefits now, but it's going to see more benefits in five years from now and even more benefits in 10 years from now, and even more benefits in 15 years from now. But am I—are we doing it because the short-term political gain? No. We're doing it because it's the right thing to do.

And at every step of the way, if we're listening to community and we're partnering with the good people that are already doing that work, then we're on the right path. That's what Manitobans elected us to do, and that's what we're going to continue to focus on as we go forward.

Mr. Balcaen: So many questions that I have left. I would have loved to ask questions more specifically about Winnipeg, but the minister seems to take time grandstanding and reaching for straws in his statement.

You know, we've probably got over \$1 million in staff resources at your fingertips and very capable staff, because I've worked with them in my previous life. And I would send a message via email and in less time that it takes the honourable minister to answer to a question today, Honourable Chairperson, I would get a response back, a telephone call I could pick up.

The staff are readily available to the minister, Honourable Chairperson, right here in this very room. I know they could lean over and answer this.

So I'm going to take the no answer as a no, there's no respect and no funding coming to the other communities and police services that are suffering the same fate as Winnipeg is; it's just much more highly publicized here. And I've brought those forward in the Chamber many times.

So, you know what—and it is so much grandstanding and grasping at straws that you heard laughter from both sides of the table here, knowing that it's almost embarrassing putting these words that the minister is putting forward, Honourable Chairperson, discussing this.

I know, Honourable Chairperson, he has no real life experience when it comes to policing, when it comes to law enforcement, when it comes to public safety. And being a career politician, somehow using those words to deflect and dodge, as I've heard, and being more of a showman than a statesman comes forward in these sort of things.

I was hoping to have some very robust conversations about what has been put forward in this budget, what we can expect. It was a simple question: Is there overtime dollars coming for the other police services? I'm going to take that as no.

But my next question, then, as we move forward, because retail crime is very important to me in not just Winnipeg but every place in Manitoba, and I know the minister, Honourable Chairperson, keeps saying our city, our city. And I know he's referring to himself and his colleagues, but stepping outside of the Perimeter, he'll learn that it's our Manitoba, and all Manitoba gets affected by this.

So my question is going to be—and I hope I get at least one answer before we leave Estimates today because I learned from my colleagues, talking to them at the table, that you come and answer—you come and ask questions, and you get an answer. And there's highly paid, highly qualified, highly efficient staff here that—the minister can take a break as long as he wants, take that time and lean into his very capable staff and get the answer.

And I wasn't going to use up my five minutes on questions, but on this one, I feel I have to because I haven't received one answer yet on any of this.

So my question is: Do you feel that \$300 for a security camera is enough to help retailers here in the city of Winnipeg and the province of Manitoba?

Mr. Wiebe: Well, member opposite denies the challenges that are facing folks in community here in the city of Winnipeg and across the province. He doesn't like the answer about the funding that I laid out in my previous answer. He wants to just say it's highly publicized—

The Chairperson: The hour being 5 o'clock, committee rise.

ROOM 255

EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

* (15:30)

The Chairperson (Robert Loiselle): Good afternoon. Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Nello Altomare (Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning): Well, merci, Monsieur le Président, for the opportunity to—for an opening statement.

I do want to take this time to really reiterate a lot of what we've already been talking about during this past session and in a session that occurred in late 2023 when we were handed the awesome responsibility of government here in Manitoba.

It is something that, of course, we don't take lightly; we take very seriously. Because when it comes to elections, elections do matter. And during the election, it became very clear that our message—message of unity, message of one Manitoba, message of hope—resonated with Manitobans. They took to heart a lot of our pieces around what we were going to do to make life not only better, but also affordable. To make life in this province something that all Manitobans can be proud of, so that when we do end up providing the proper supports and the proper investments into something as important as public education, they know that we are going to follow through on some of those very important pieces.

Throughout the campaign in 2023, Mr. Chair, what one of our signature pieces was, of course, our nutrition program that we took great pride in announcing.

But also, more importantly, when it comes to when we talk about programs that support not only students but also families in their public schools, we look at how is it that we can continue to build not only the school environment, but also the community in which the school exists. That's a really important piece.

I recall in my previous experience as an educator, the piece around the building of community was really important. And what we found is that when you have families, students, feel a part of the community, a part of the school, then that is something that ends up benefiting their educational experience, ends up also creating this whole notion around what it means to be a community member, which is something that our team really took to heart. I do recall, Mr. Chair, that, as an example, when we talk about nutrition program, it's not so much the food. What it is, is that the community that it creates. And I can give you some really tangible examples regarding that.

In some of the schools I worked at in my previous career, what we found was when we were offering services such as a nutrition program or an after-school program or a study program or a time before classes, what we found is that because of other services that were beginning to—I wouldn't call it wane, but, you know, it's—a lot of services require volunteers, require the time of people to put in, that, unfortunately, became really strained, especially coming into the pandemic and coming out of the pandemic. I worked in that time. I finished my career just before the pandemic piece.

But when it came to building community, what people really, really appreciated was the opportunity to come into their local school. And when we were able to create a study program, a nutrition program, what it did is it invited families and they even brought their younger children and sometimes their older children just to come and to have some time to get to, not only know the staff, but to get to know the building in which their children spent six and a half hours in; it's a really important part of their day.

And that was one of the biggest pieces that we found to be the greatest benefit when it came to things like study programs and nutrition programs. What it did is that it brought in parents that typically didn't feel very welcome in their buildings, didn't feel welcome, Mr. Chair, in coming into their school.

And what it did is it broke down a lot of barriers. And these are barriers that had existed for, in some cases, generations, multi-generational, where there was very little trust in that environment, and sometimes some families actually felt a little threatened. And so what

we were doing, we were working to build that community through something like the nutrition and study program. And what that did is it brought parents in.

Once parents and families are able to come in, what we found was that many of these parents then began to volunteer in the nutrition program, began to volunteer in the study and before-and-after program. And so what did that do? Well, that built skills within that parent group, within that guardian group, within that support group. Those skills, then, were transferred.

So in many cases, what we found, Mr. Chair, is that we found that parents would then begin to apply for positions within the lunch program. Some parents then began to apply and became educational assistants, and then in one case we had a parent actually, after being in the lunch program, after being an educational assistant, then went on to post-secondary to complete their degree and then did an after degree in education.

That person is now working within the school division that I used to work at, and is now providing a living for their family and also providing for that family in a very, I think, a way that's truly organic, that came from the community, and that was something that we were particularly proud of.

* (15:40)

The other piece that we're particularly proud of is the work of our Early Learning and Child Care Department. This is a department that is building a system, building a child-care system in Manitoba where, in this particular jurisdiction, we are taking an approach that wants to build reliable, predictable care and access to child care at the community level, at a public level.

And what we have here in Manitoba, what's—what we're able to do is certainly model our system based on the needs of Manitobans. And what we've found is, is that people are really looking forward to, of course, not only accessing child care, but also, more importantly, having affordable child care.

And this is an issue that is something that we're particularly proud of because what we're working to create is a new system here in the province.

And we have a very capable staff. Can you tell me, Mr. Chair, when can I introduce my staff? *[interjection]* After I'm done my opening statement? Thank you for that clarity. After—and then after the critic has also had the opportunity to put some words on the record. Okay, I appreciate that.

Back to child care. This is a piece that we're particularly proud of, because we have our child care—the child-care department here in the province is—was recognized by the project management association of Manitoba as the Project of the Year in 2024. Of course, we take great pride in that, and we would never, you know, of course, take all of that credit for that. This is the work of the early learning and child-care sector. They have a lot to be proud of in this particular area. And it's one that we do want to lift those workers up and that recognition. Being project of the year around the RTM model—outstanding. And that's something that we want to build upon.

The other piece, too, that I want to talk about is our reconstruction of the Department of Education. The Department of Education has a very important leadership role that it plays within the province of Manitoba. As a former educator myself, we looked to the department to provide, especially for smaller school divisions, a lot of leadership in around how we program and how we support kids in school.

And one of the very important things that we rolled out and that we had in our campaign was that we were going to reinstate the bureau éducation française, something that was missed by the sector, especially now, with a growing Division scolaire franco-manitobaine dans la province de Manitoba is something that required the support of an assistant deputy minister.

The other piece that we're particularly proud of, of course, is the creation of the assistant deputy minister for Indigenous Excellence here in Manitoba. And this is something that we're—as a government, see as very, very important, not only because of the work of reconciliation, but also because we need to Indigenize public education in Manitoba. What was known as a place of trauma for many generations, it is now—we want it to be seen as a place of hope, a place of new beginning.

And we're particularly looking forward to how this department will not only staff, but will also—how they'll be able to carry out their mission. And it's one that we look forward to seeing.

And as my time winds down, I want to thank you, Monsieur le Président, for the opportunity to put a few words on the record.

The Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments. Miigwech, grazie, merci.

Does the critic for the official opposition have an opening statement?

Mr. Grant Jackson (Spruce Woods): Thank you, honourable Chair, and thank the minister for his comments, as well. I'll keep my opening comments very brief.

It's a privilege to be here as the new MLA for Spruce Woods and as the critic for Education and Early Childhood Learning. As the youngest member of our caucus, it's also a privilege to deal with the next generations of Manitobans that are coming through our K-to-12 education system and who will be the leaders of tomorrow.

And so I take this responsibility very seriously and I take this file very seriously, and it is extremely important to the future of this province.

And I'd like to start by just thanking all educators—early childhood educators, K-to-12 educators, the staff that make the education system run, EAs, et cetera, ECEs. These folks are doing incredible work on behalf of parents and families and, indeed, in—on behalf of Manitoba in general in educating that future generation. So I want to thank them for the incredible work they're doing across the province in supporting our young people.

I'll just keep my comments fairly brief because I know we want to get into the serious questions that we need to have about this first NDP budget.

The NDP set them—expectations for themselves very high in this most recent election on a number of files, but we're focusing on Education and Early Childhood Learning here today, so I'll keep my comments relevant to that, Mr.—honourable Chair.

With respect to student populations, we know that this is a major issue across the province. It was one that our previous government was addressing by building 23 new schools, 14 of which were done or are set to be completed in the next year or so and another several on the way.

We don't know where that's at; we hope that the minister has more to say to us as we get into Estimates today about how he plans to address the growing student populations in our province. But we know that they're only budgeting for building two schools instead of nine this year. That's a concern for Manitoba families.

They promised a nutrition program which they've announced, but we have concerns and Manitobans have concerns about the amount that's budgeted to deliver that nutrition program appropriately in schools

across the province. So we'll be getting into that later today.

They also promised more daycare spaces, but they haven't been clear on how the RTM model that was so successful across the province will continue to be rolled out. No framework announced on what the criteria are for municipalities, or if they're even following the former municipal and school division model by which the RTM plan had been rolled out.

And they promised to lower class sizes without the use of portables, but they're building less schools and there is less capital expenditure in this budget.

And so with that, honourable Chair, I've outlined some of the concerns that we've heard from parents in the seven and a half short months, but I do want to keep my opening comments brief because I think it's more important that we get into the questions.

So with that, I will turn it back to you, and thank you very much again for the opportunity.

The Chairperson: We thank the member for Spruce Woods. Miigwech, merci.

Before we get under way, under Manitoba practise, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 16.1(a) contained in resolution 16.1.

At this time we invite the minister's staff to join us at the table, and we ask that the minister introduce the staff in attendance.

MLA Altomare: I would like to call upon the deputy minister of Education, Brian O'Leary; assistant deputy minister, Mona Pandey; assistant deputy minister, Sarah Whiteford; assistant deputy minister, Jackie Connell; assistant deputy minister Janet Tomy; assistant deputy minister Andrew Fraser *[phonetic]*.

Now, I don't know Cheryl's proper title. This is Cheryl Lashek from CPGS, correct Cheryl? And Cheryl, director, ADM? Executive director?

We also have Paulette Monita, same—*[interjection]* Right. Director, and we have Rebecca Chambers? *[phonetic]* No. Johnston. Sorry, Rebecca. We have a lot of Rebeccas, and so thank you, Rebecca—also responsible for system informants, right? *[interjection]* In Corporate Services.

Thank you, team. This is a great support piece. We also have Rylan Ramnarace, who is a support for myself as special adviser.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Minister Altomare.

Before we proceed, according to our rule 78(16), during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning for each department shall proceed in a global manner, with questions put separately on all resolutions once the official opposition critic indicates that questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Jackson: I was—welcome to all the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning staff.

* (15:50)

One of my first questions was to ask for an org chart, but perhaps the minister brought his entire senior staff team here today. But I will ask that question, if the minister can provide an org chart of the department executive breakdown.

MLA Altomare: We do have an organizational chart that I would like to read into the record and then afterwards, what I'll do is we'll provide copies, for the critic, of the organizational and we'll table it here. It'll be sent up by other staff in my department.

In the Early Learning and Child Care sector, we, of course, have assistant deputy minister, Sarah Whiteford, and we have a Policy and Planning executive director under that department; a Provincial Operations executive director; a funding and assistance executive director and a Capital Space and Expansion executive director.

With finance and administration services, we have Andrew Henry, who is present here today. And in Andrew's—we have a System Performance and Accountability assistant deputy minister, which is Mona Pandey, and a number of sections beneath which Mona's responsible for: Governance and Policy ED, and Education Funding executive director and a teacher certification and standards director.

With the bureau éducation française we have René Déquier; and with René, he'll be assuming responsibilities, I do believe, in September—August 15th of 2024. And, of course, there's a systems support director, a teaching and learning co-ordinator and a library and materials production director that reports to Mr. Déquier.

We have an Indigenous Excellence ADM, of course, with Jackie Connell, and Jackie is busy staffing up that particular department.

We have, with Corporate Services, Director Rebecca Johnston. We also have Student Achievement and

Inclusion assistant deputy minister, Janet Tomy, who is with us today. And with Janet, she is responsible for the Learning and Outcomes Branch, the Inclusion Support Branch, Manitoba School for the Deaf, as well, as well as the continuous improvement director.

I've also indicated that we do have Deputy Minister Brian O'Leary here with us today.

And as a bit of an aside portion of the organizational chart here in the Department of Early Childhood Learning and Education, what we have is the Teachers' Retirement Allowances Fund Board that is chaired by Bryton Moen, and they're kind of off to the side over here; that's kind of between myself and the deputy minister.

And we will provide copies to the Committee of Supply, and we'll table that once they arrive.

Mr. Jackson: I thank the minister for providing that information.

Yesterday, in response to a question in question period, the minister noted a division of the department responsible for examinations that he referenced had been cut, and so just wondering which of the assistant deputy ministers he just referenced that that department—or that division of the department—falls under and how many staff positions he has increased that position by in this budget.

MLA Altomare: I do want to thank the member for Spruce Woods for that question. It allows us to talk a little bit about Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning and the assessment unit.

In my previous experience, we relied greatly on the assessment unit and some of the pieces that—and support that they provided to school divisions, especially when it came to provincial exams and how they were to be administered and how they were brought into being. This is something that, obviously, takes a lot of time and consultation. I do recall there being not only a fairly large complement of staff, but also lots of expertise in the department around this area. The assistant deputy minister responsible for this is Janet Tomy, and she's part of the Student Achievement and Inclusion branch.

Now, I also would like to put on the record and inform the member from Spruce Woods that in 2016-17, there were 19 FTEs filled with—specific within the assessment unit that existed at that time. In '17-18, there were still 19 FTEs associated with that particular unit. In '18-19, it went down to 14 individuals that were assigned to that unit. In 2020-2021, it was

up to 15, an extra person. And then in '21-22, 11; '22-23, down to nine; and right now, there are six people in that unit. That is a unit that we see is very important and one that fulfills our responsibility to students and to their families to ensure that we have enough people in place to provide the necessary support for provincial examinations. We will be looking at this in the next round of Estimates so that we can begin to staff up that unit again.

I can say that that unit right now is somewhat overworked with the—not only the volume, but also with the responsibility that comes with that particular department. It's important that we move in a way that supports not only the work that goes on in schools but also helps the students understand how to articulate—not only articulate their learning, but also get their learning in a way that—express their learning in a way that is somewhat different from what—the experience that I had in school, Mr. Chair.

I can tell you it used to be very much a pen-and-paper task. Right now, the department based on the—on some of the latest best practices that have been identified spends a great deal of time on developing what is called a process exam. And process examinations take days to complete. And throughout—and the member for Spruce Woods may have actually experienced a process exam during his time in high school because it did take place over a number of days.

And the reason for that is so that, not only are we providing the reading, but we're also providing the opportunity for debate afterwards in some of these examinations, Mr. Chair, and the opportunity to articulate a person's ideas on the spot, to be able to think on the spot. Not only are they doing a reading and then responding to some of the readings, but what they're also doing is they're having to collaborate with their classmates to come up with reasoned responses to particular items that are brought up by their educator and teacher in the classroom.

* (16:00)

The process piece is something that Manitoba is known for. I can tell you, Mr. Chair, too, that we have a particular person that has—that was—that worked for the Canadian ministers of education, and was seconded by CMEC for the incredible work that that person had done in that particular branch, and was noted for some of the really innovative pieces that they were undertaking in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning.

This is something that we take great pride in, and of course, you know, it's something that Manitobans would expect from a fully funded, fully staffed Department of Education. It's one, like I said earlier in my—in—earlier in this response, something that we were going to be bringing to Estimates for the fall so that we can help support the people that are currently in that branch so that they can continue to do the very excellent work that they're doing for Manitoba students and Manitoba families.

Mr. Jackson: I thank the minister for that. I just want to be clear. The minister, about halfway through his answer, switched from talking about FTEs to talking about people. And I think the last time he said FTE was when he was referencing the number 15, and then as the numbers went down he just started talking about people.

So there's six people in the unit, but how many vacant FTEs are there in this branch, or is it six FTEs assigned to the branch? Just for clarity.

MLA Altomare: Just to answer that—the question from the member for Spruce Woods, we have currently six people that are in the unit, and 13 vacancies.

Mr. Jackson: Well, I thank the minister for the clarity on that. And so if the FTEs are existing, and have been existing for some time, can the minister outline some of the challenges in filling those vacant FTEs, and if there—are appropriately budgeted for in this budget.

MLA Altomare: I do want to thank the member for Spruce Woods for that question around some of the assessment unit and how it's being staffed. Right now we're beginning to shift resources back to the unit. I don't have the exact number of what—of the number that we're aiming to shift, but like I said earlier, we are going to be heading into the Estimates process for the fall for the next budget, and we will be ensuring that we have a budget line in place for that particular unit so that we can begin to staff up.

One of the biggest problems that, when it comes to staffing up a unit such as this, is the—it's the fact that we're also in competition with school divisions. And throughout the time, even through COVID, there was a real challenge in recruiting people into the department because the department did not offer a very competitive salary. This is due to the years of cuts that they had to endure.

And so what ends up happening is because school divisions are generally responsible in making sure that they have set aside enough dollars and resources to

ensure that they're—they can meet their contract obligations, what happened through the civil service is that, of course, they were frozen in salary, and that impacted, Mr. Chair, the ability to recruit people into the department, and that's something that we need to rectify.

One of the biggest pieces, too, is—and something that's important to remember is that we don't—because right now the system is still very much recovering from coming out of the pandemic. What we're also really cognizant of the fact that we don't want to recruit people during a school year and then leave some school divisions in a bit of a challenge.

So what we need to do is first, especially during the Estimates process, is come up with a budget that will reflect and be able to compete with what school divisions are paying currently for teachers and for educators, and so that we can begin to staff up that department again. That is something that we're going to take very seriously moving forward. Because, like I said earlier, and I know the critic has heard me say this in the House before, we take assessment seriously, and it's something that we're going to ensure gets completed properly during our mandate.

Of course, we want to ensure that not only are students properly supported but the people that are actually—that are in communication with the department, especially around assessment, this part is important, and it's something that we will continue to ensure gets the resources it needs, and, like I said earlier, we'll do that in the fall in the Estimates process.

What I also would like to do right now, Mr. Chair, is I do want to table the departmental organization chart. Now, I do have a number of copies here. I'll provide, I guess—I'll provide all of them, and that way they can be distributed appropriately. And that particular chart, of course, is in reference to the executive team that's part of Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning. And, again, as I said earlier, we're very pleased to be working with this dedicated group of individuals that have now, I think for the first time in seven and a half years, now have a government that's going to work with them as opposed to one that's going to provide resistance and friction.

This is something that we take very seriously because here in the department right now, we don't see education as a cost; we see it as an investment in the future, Mr. Chair, as something that we take very, very seriously. I can say that we don't see it as an annoyance. We don't see this as something that is a burden on Manitobans.

* (16:10)

Manitobans take great pride, and I know the member for Spruce Woods has heard me say this in the House on a number of occasions, where Manitobans take great pride in their public education system. They want to see the system properly invested in. And what that means is a department that's as important as the assessment piece, that works under our ADM, is properly funded so that we can move forward with these very important pieces that we're tasked to do.

This is, again, a really—really indicative of how seriously we're taking this file and how we need to invest to ensure that Manitoba's youth is ready for the future and whatever that holds for them.

Mr. Jackson: Well, I thank the minister for most of those comments and certainly his very verbose, lengthy answers to my questions. Very healthy discussion going on here.

I just want to clarify this for the record. So yesterday in question period, the minister said that the previous government had cut the assessment branch from 19 positions to six, and now he's clarified that actually, there are six people working in the branch but that there are still 13 additional FTEs assigned to the branch that are not full. So that is not in fact a cut. That is what he just said in his last response, or perhaps I didn't word my question well so if he wants to correct the record on that, but that's certainly what he responded to my question.

And I have more questions on other topics, but perhaps the minister wants to take a few minutes to just clarify that for the record.

MLA Altomare: I do want to thank the member for that question. It's an important question because I will clarify for the record that there are nine full-time equivalents assigned to this particular branch. Currently, there are six people working in that branch.

Now, why are there six people working in that branch? There are six people working in that branch because we have some challenges in recruitment. The recruitment challenge has come into play because of the fact that we can't offer the salaries that we need to offer to attract people into working into the branch. I do want to thank the six people that are currently assigned to that branch because they're very dedicated to the work that they do for Manitoban students and families. This is something that we take very seriously and that we're going to address.

Manitobans made it very clear. I do want to put on the record that Manitobans made it very clear in October of 2023 that they see public education as an investment. They don't see it as an annoying cost, Mr. Chair. This is something that's important to the future of our province, and we will work with department staff to ensure that we're properly staffed moving forward and that we can appropriate the proper resources to this important fund.

Mr. Jackson: Thank you to the minister for that clarification on those FTE positions.

Just picking up on something else the minister said there. He talked about recruitment challenges with the department and particularly with respect to this division and wages being a challenge. I would suspect, although I could be corrected, and please do correct me, that these positions would be subject to a collective agreement.

And so is the minister advocating for changes to a collective agreement for the Manitoba government general employees' union in order to help with his recruitment efforts in his department, and what impact will that have being on the public record when the next time the general employees' union contract comes up for renegotiation?

MLA Altomare: Well, merci, Monsieur le Président, pour le opportunité pour [*Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity*]—to answer the—this question.

I do want to know to—I do appreciate the opportunity to do—to indeed provide fulsome responses to questions from the member for Spruce Woods (Mr. Jackson), because these responses are based on not only the important work that the department does, but also what we want to see moving forward.

What we saw earlier, and I don't know if the member remembers this bill or doesn't remember. Because we know that this is a new person in the Manitoba Legislature and probably wasn't apprised, Mr. Chair, of what previous government was doing with—regarding Bill 28; Bill 28 that set back employee relations for a number of years, set back to the point where people did not want to work for the Province of Manitoba any more.

They didn't want to work because they weren't being respected, not only at the collective bargaining process but also having their wages frozen. Nothing says, I welcome your work, more than having your wage frozen. Nothing says, you know, I disrespect you, more than not having the ability to negotiate, Mr. Chair, and to negotiate a fair and competitive salary.

This is something that has really impacted the Department of Education. I do recall earlier, in one of my earlier responses, is how important the public school system sees the Department of Education and the role that it provides educators; especially, Mr. Chair, and I do want to ensure that the member from Spruce Woods understands this: especially for school divisions that are outside the city of Winnipeg.

They're typically smaller, typically have resources that are dedicated more to the classroom, because that's the important work that really happens. But also are really looking for the department for—in leadership, and not only professional development, but also in some of the important pieces around training, around recruitment, around all of those things that a rural school division has many challenges in.

And that is something that we certainly saw loud and clear when we were visiting Prairie Spirit School Division, all along Highway 2. We made it out to Treherne, we made it down to a Hutterite colony south of Highway 2, where, you know, I do want to highlight this, though. You know, in the Hutterite colony, I do—I want to—I do want to share a story here.

* (16:20)

Hutterians are the first people that saw the value of a nutrition program. I remember as a student in elementary school, one of the very important things that I noticed right away when we did a field trip—I think it was in grade 5—went to a Hutterite colony just outside of Hazelridge, Manitoba, because I was in the northeast; we had connections. Because this is the old Transcona-Springfield—you remember this—the member for Springfield-Ritchot (Mr. Schuler) knows exactly where I'm talking about.

And one of the things that we talked about was, wow, they fed us lunch. Imagine—

An Honourable Member: And a good one.

MLA Altomare: And a good one, exactly. And they saw the benefit of a nutrition program and saw the benefit of the community that it created.

I can tell you that when you create community, you do that by respecting employees as well. I can tell you Bill 28 did not do that. And not only did it not do that, there was also the clear message that the previous government was refusing to negotiate with the—with their employees. And what that does is that it makes it a less attractive place to work.

We're beginning to change that narrative. We're beginning to change that narrative, because we're now

beginning to put into place a workforce, a work environment, a new culture that values the expertise of people in the education system, to the point where we're able to recruit two new ADMs into the department. I do want to read into the record, again, bureau éducation française, one of the first things that was cut in 2016, Monsieur le Président.

Imagine. A growing DSFM school division, without the support of the assistant deputy minister here at the Department of Education. That sends messages. Also too, now, we have an ADM for Indigenous excellence. Again, staffing up the department to the point where we can now provide the necessary resources and talent so that small school divisions can access the very latest supports for their students and their communities.

Mr. Jackson: Well, I thank the minister for that answer. I think he, perhaps, took it a little more broadly than the question was intended. But that's okay. I understand he's got a set of notes that he wants to get on the record here as well.

With respect to these specific positions that are under discussion, the minister seems to be concerned about wages as a recruitment initiative. We're not sure how he plans to facilitate higher wages when their government has recently signed a new collective agreement that lasts for a number of years. But I'll leave that up to this new government and their collective bargaining process, and the impacts that that would have.

He also suggested that he doesn't want to compete with school divisions for these positions to be filled. So—and that led him to think that they didn't need to be posted until the summer months, when school divisions are doing less hiring, I believe is what he said.

So can the minister specifically let us know, and the public, when the postings for these positions are going to go up, and will he guarantee that he won't be poaching staff from school divisions to fill these positions?

MLA Altomare: I do want to thank the member for Spruce Woods (Mr. Jackson) for that question.

We are in the process right now of posting positions that are available in the Department of Education, and that's something that, again, it's a tricky balance, right? Because the field is feeling a, you know, it's feeling a lot of the challenges that we've had to experience these past few years coming out of the pandemic, especially around some of the mental health pieces.

You know, and this is something that was really articulated quite clearly by the board members of Prairie Spirit School Division when we visited that school division, I believe it was about three weeks ago, in early May. One of the things that they really appreciated, Mr. Chair, was the opportunity to invest again into their communities and into their families. And one of the biggest pieces that they noted was really the demands being put on them around the mental health needs of their students and their communities.

You know, one of the really interesting things that we saw when we were on that trip was they have a very unique—this—let me rephrase that. They have a piece in place where they use high-school students to help with kids in the early years. I think the member for Spruce Woods (Mr. Jackson) may even know this, because this occurs at Glenboro School in the Glenboro area there.

And they take great pride in having their high-school students work and mentor with their younger students and provide support not only in the classroom but as positive role models in the community. This is what it means to be part of, you know, a community school and what the responsibilities are as you move forward as a student in that particular school.

I can tell you, too, that this is something that they really—were really appreciated of, because now they weren't constrained by the previous government's mandates around: you can't raise your local levy; we don't trust you to do this; we don't trust you to invest in your communities. As a matter of fact, what we'll do is, not only are we going to hamstring you, we're also going to penalize you for wanting to invest in your communities.

Can you imagine that, Mr. Chair? And so that's what we were working with. And they were finally now able to put in the necessary human resources and staff so that they can get on to the business of supporting their families and their communities in that particular area. And I'm sure this is the case throughout Manitoba, even within the Perimeter Highway.

I do want to say, when it comes to the department, many educators—and I was one of those educators, actually—is something that, you know, working for the department through secondments was something that we saw as an important part not only of our own professional development, but it was our ability, then, to support schools outside of our school divisions.

* (16:30)

I—during the time when I was seconded to what was at the time the development of the middle-years science curriculum, what we were able to do is second staff where the school division, of course, was paying my salary, but then I was providing some of the—some of these—I wouldn't call it expertise. I don't want to call myself an expert. We're always learning. We're always doing professional development. We always get our cues from kids and our families.

But I do want to say that secondments are an important part of what we do and we will continue to do. Teachers still want to be able to contribute more than just in their classroom. They see themselves as contributing, obviously, to their schools, but more importantly, they want to provide important professional development and leadership to other parts of the province.

That is something that was really, really, really important, not only to myself but also to the other people that are on that committee. And a lot of us also did work because what does this do then? What this allowed us to do, because of the leadership of the Department of Education the time that I was seconded, what it allowed us to do is then take a lot of that training that we were exposed to and all of the learning that we were exposed to from other teachers, and then allowed us to present at our—at the Manitoba Teachers' Society SAGE Conferences, the Special Area Group experiences that are really important.

And so these are things that the department provides, and this is something that we look forward to having the department continue—

The Chairperson: The minister's time is expired.

Mr. Jackson: I'm glad the minister took a drive out to Glenboro in my constituency of Spruce Woods. That was nice for him. We're always happy to see NDP members outside the Perimeter Highway. I—he referenced how happy everyone there is, at least from the school division side, to be able to raise property taxes with respect to the education tax on property.

I wonder if he also took the time to consult with any farmers around Glenboro while he was out there, or perhaps even the Hutterite colony that he visited, about their thoughts on education property taxes going up on farmland.

MLA Altomare: This is something that I think there's the clearest distinction that we draw between us as a Manitoba NDP government and the previous government: where we see local levies as supporting and investing in communities, they see it as an annoyance.

You know, I can tell you when we meet with boards, and I will say—and I will reference Prairie Spirit once again, they were really happy to be able to once again invest in their communities. And when we asked them, did they hear from their ratepayers, and what they heard was, they were now happy that their schools were able to respond to the needs of their students and communities. They didn't hear the other part. They don't see it as an annoyance; they see it as an investment in their community.

I can tell you—I can tell the member for Spruce Woods (Mr. Jackson), and he knows this, the 50 per cent rebate on farm property is still in place. He knows that. Because we understand the important work that farmers do.

So what did we do before we were in government? You know, it's unfortunate, a couple of my colleagues didn't have this opportunity, but some of my colleagues that were with us before election in 2023—and I can—this allows me to tell a bit of—another bit of a story.

We did an incredible amount of consultation, not only with school boards but also we reached out to Keystone Agricultural Producers, which is, you know, interestingly enough, Mr. Chair, just right over here at 386 Broadway. And, boy, were they interested in meeting with us. I can tell you we met with their general manager and a number of their support staff—Brenna Mahoney—and they were thrilled, because they wanted to hear about our plan, about how we were able to keep farm families together and able to stay in their communities.

Because as you know, when you talk to producers, when you talk to people in rural Manitoba, what they want is they want a fully funded public education system so that they can actually raise their family in Souris, they can raise their family in Glenboro, they can raise their family in Anola, they can raise their family in Dugald. These are very, very important to them.

And so when we talk about school boards having the ability to, once again, impact positively on their local levies, they don't see it as something where they're just going to, you know, oh, we can just do this now; we'll go ahead and do it. Out of the 37 school divisions, Mr. Chair, I would say every one of them carefully deliberated on what they were going to do with their local levy, not only because this is—it is an investment in their community, but they're also acutely aware of the challenges, the affordability challenges, that are facing Manitobans right now.

They know this. They're locally elected by people that are in their areas and regions. The member knows this. They're very careful with how they do this stuff. And this is something that they were very appreciative of, of once again, Mr. Chair, being trusted with the responsibility not only of investing in their communities, but making their communities remain attractive to rural Manitobans.

What is the No. 1 thing that people are very proud of in their communities? Their local school. And I know every member here is nodding their head at that around this table. They are busy right now saying to themselves, nothing can be more important than investing in education; than ensuring that, in our public schools, not only are they fully resourced, but also a piece that the community can look to with a great deal of pride and say, you know what, I send my child to that school. That particular school division now has the ability to ensure that that child gets the proper resources in place.

* (16:40)

Now, is everyone perfect? Absolutely not. What we're always doing is that we're striving to get better each and every year. And now they have a government that's going to be working with them to ensure that students, their communities, especially producing families have a place where they can go home instead of working on these very large farms for an impersonal person, that family farms still exist in Manitoba, that farmer still gets their 50 per cent tax rebate and they can be guaranteed that their school would be reflective of the needs for their children.

Mr. Jackson: Just based on that answer, I think the minister, you know, is caught a little bit here, because the Finance Minister had to make some budgetary decisions in this budget, no question.

But I know that this minister knows that 50—a 50 per cent rebate of a higher number is still more; is still more taxes that farmers are paying this year than last year at a time of increasing challenges in the agricultural world, at a time when the overhead of operating family farms has never been higher, insurance premiums never been higher for farm families, 50—a 50 per cent rebate. If our government's plan had still been being imposed, they would have been up to a 67 and a half per cent rebate this year.

Instead, they're getting the same level of rebate on a higher property tax bill. So that is not, in fact, keeping the same amount of relief for farmers. It is less.

So a simple yes or no question for my last, because we're reaching the end of our time here today: Based on the minister's response, can he confirm that they will not be phasing out education property taxes completely, yes or no?

MLA Altomare: Again, I do want to thank the member for Spruce Woods (Mr. Jackson) for that question.

It's an important one because, again, it really—it really highlights difference between a Manitoba NDP government and a PC government. We see education, along with Manitobans, including rural Manitobans, as an investment, not an annoying cost, not as something that, you know, we have to pay for.

This is something that we are investing in for the future of Manitoba, and this is what the clear delineation is here. I can tell you I'm surprised with all these pieces that the member brings forward. It's kind of too bad, Mr. Chair, that they didn't run on that in the last election in October of 2023.

Can you imagine, instead of putting up those terrible billboards and bus benches and silver boxes that tried to divide Manitobans, they would have run on something a little more positive? Maybe—maybe—maybe that could have happened. I don't know.

But I can tell you, with a Manitoba NDP government, we're going to be working with school boards. We're going to ensure that they understand that they have a real partner, now, in the Manitoba government and that they will be able to work with us to provide the very best for their children and their communities. This is an important piece.

You know, one of the things we have to remember here is that, as rural Manitoba begins to hollow out, people are really, really concerned about the viability of their communities. And what keeps a community viable, what really keeps a community on the map, essentially, is their local school. Their school has to be invested in. And again, I see a number of nodding heads around this table, and the reason for that is that they also understand, the members around this table, how important this is. This is a special, sacred trust that we have, not only as government, but also as elected school board officials.

So school boards, yes, will continue to exist and will continue to work with the Province of Manitoba to provide the necessary resources so that their students, their kids, their families and communities can thrive. Where a person from small-town Manitoba can actually raise their family in small-town Manitoba in an affordable fashion, knowing that their school will

have the resources in place in order to support their families.

People take great pride, and I've said this on the record before, in their public schools. And that's something that the previous government never understood. They saw it as an annoying expense that had to be done away with, that they were going to control completely. They were going to get rid of the locally elected school boards.

Manitobans were having none of that, Mr. Chair. Absolutely none of it. And so now, like I—as I began my answer earlier, it's too bad that this member didn't have enough influence around that election table there in October of—or whenever before, whatever before they came up with their election strategy. I would hope that that member would have sat there and said, you know what, I think we need to run on this, because this is something that builds community.

But I guess that didn't get through. And that's really unfortunate because, you know, even in the way that we comport ourselves in the House, I will say this, and I will say this about this member from Spruce Woods: I do believe in his authenticity. I think he wants to do a really good job. I think also, too, that he wants to come to the House and actually make it a better experience for, and advocate for, public schools. I know that member wants to do this.

I know that member also wants to see proper investments in public schools because that member also benefited from proper investments in public schools, like many of us around this table here. And I see the many nodding heads again. This is important.

And I can tell you, Mr. Chair, this is something that this government takes really, really seriously. It's something that we've been entrusted with now, because they weren't buying what was being sold to them before.

And I do want to continue to say this: what they see as an annoying cost, Manitobans see as an important investment in their communities. I'll leave it at that.

Mr. Jackson: Well, there's certainly lots to unpack in that response.

But I am a person of my word, and I did agree to cede the remainder of my time today to the member for Tyndall Park (MLA Lamoureux), and so I will do so, and I look forward to resuming with the minister as soon as we are able.

MLA Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): I'd like to thank my colleague from Spruce Woods for allowing me some time this afternoon.

Can the minister provide an update as to how many schools are not currently administering the universal nutrition program in the province?

The Chairperson: We might ask the member for Tyndall Park to repeat the question.

An Honourable Member: You know, I heard it. It's okay. Just moving forward, if I—because—or if you can come closer—

MLA Lamoureux: I'll try to project.

An Honourable Member: Or, yes. Or come—like, move closer, even.

MLA Lamoureux: Sure, yes.

* (16:50)

MLA Altomare: Merci, Monsieur le Président, pour l'opportunité [*Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity*] to answer this question from the member for Tyndall Park.

I do want to welcome the member for Tyndall Park—

An Honourable Member: Over here.

MLA Altomare: Oh, good; I was looking over there—to Committee of Supply.

She raises a very important question when it comes to nutrition programs. I can say that this is something that we have in common.

We have in common because I'll tell you this: Not two and a half weeks ago, I was in the presence of Elwick school, where I had the opportunity to meet for the very first time the member's father; I never met him before. We were both at Elwick school because the federal government was wanting to partner with us in this very important initiative. And you'll see that that's been rolled out. You know that they're—I know the member knows that the federal government also sees this as a very important initiative as well.

I can tell you this is so important for us. I do want to inform the member that when we came into government in October of 2023, after—because I can tell you throughout the four years previous when we were sitting on the other side of the House there, what I was always strongly advocating for is that we need to do something about nutrition in this province.

And what we were noticing—and when I left the public education system, I took advantage of the support and services of the Child Nutrition Council. Now, the Child Nutrition Council does very important work. I was working in some neighbourhoods during the end of my career that had required the services of nutrition programs on a regular basis.

And one of the things that we used to do as school leaders in the particular area that I worked in is that we would get together and fill in the application form for the Child Nutrition Council. And what they would do is they would review all of our expenses throughout the year, and then what we—they would look at what our previous expenses were. And then what they would do is cover 20 per cent of the costs of what we would submit. Of course, we were responsible for 80 per cent so, many times, we used some other community partners in that place.

But here's the one thing that occurred—and a number of my colleagues that pointed this out—is that what used to be 20 per cent support from the Child Nutrition Council and supported over—I believe at the time over 300 schools. I—you know what. I want to make sure I get that right, so I'll ensure that I'm saying this correctly, especially when it comes to the number of schools that they used to support when I was still working in schools.

But the biggest thing that occurred, and people—what my former colleagues were telling me was this: is that what used to be 20 per cent was cut to 17 per cent because they didn't get enough support from the previous government. Not only cut to 17 per cent, but they also had to cut back on the number of schools that they could support.

And so what did we do immediately, Mr. Chair? Immediately upon election, we eliminated the wait-list that was at the Child Nutrition Council. We immediately increased support from 17 per cent to 20 per cent of their costs because we knew how important this was.

And I can tell you with the extra support from our government—and I just met this person at Elwick school, Mr. Chair, two and a half weeks ago—the Child Nutrition Council was able to hire an extra dietitian—one more full-time-equivalent dietitian—and I see a lot of nodding heads again—because they're able to now provide not only menu support but also have—actually have the person come in and provide a little bit of guidance around the best time to serve those particular meals and also the best time to involve—and how you would involve community members to make your

program even more effective. And this is something that we take a great deal pride in.

The other piece is that 37 school divisions right now are submitting their plans to the department so that they can be ready to go in September with the plan, because they know best what their particular school and school divisions require.

And right now what we'll be able to put in place for the summer is we're putting funding in for summer programs in the high-needs areas that are identified by the school divisions in concert with the department. So we're looking forward to that.

And just for the record, the Child Nutrition Council—I'll say it next time.

MLA Lamoureux: I'm going to try to rephrase the question here for the minister.

Since forming government, how many nutrition programs—universal nutrition programs—have been implemented tangibly, where students are currently using them?

MLA Altomare: I'll—merci, Monsieur le Président, and I do want to thank the member for Tyndall Park (MLA Lamoureux) for that question.

The member will remember that one of the bills that I took great pride in was bill 222. Bill 222 was enacted in—prior to when we were in government. It's a bill that I sponsored. In that bill, what that bill had to do is report the number of schools that had a nutrition program running, supporting their children, their families and their communities. And that is something that was, that we found necessary to do so that organizations like the Child Nutrition Council could provide and budget for the support that these schools would require as they were rolling out their nutrition programs.

We found this really important because this provides not only the data, but also gives us a more fulsome picture of what's happening throughout the province, because this is something that we noted while we were in opposition that the—previously was never—you know, and I won't blame the other government for this. They probably just didn't think to do this. They probably didn't think that it was important to itemize how many schools provided support to their students.

I'll let the people around the table decide how they're going to react to that, but I can tell you, we took it very seriously and brought forward bill 222, where we could itemize the exact number of schools

that would benefit from—that are benefitting from a school nutrition program.

And we are using that number right now, Mr. Chair, to really formulate how this is going to roll out throughout the province.

Because we're not going to work on this alone. It's really important that—and here's the biggest thematic piece that I think is coming out of today. The biggest thematic piece that's coming out of today is that, now, there is a provincial government that is going to work with partners throughout the system. And again, I see a lot of nodding heads here.

You know, and this is something that is long, long, long overdue, Mr. Chair. And it's something that Manitobans certainly put us—you know, they gave us the awesome responsibility of being the stewards of the public school system. Not—we don't own this. We are here to look after this.

And I know this member takes it very seriously, as well, because I do appreciate in question period the really important questions that that member brings to the floor of the Chamber. And this is something that I think we can all agree is a really important piece.

So that, right now, out of the 685 public schools that are in Manitoba, 478 are providing some type of nutrition program to their students. And this is something that was collected out of bill 222. This was the data that was submitted to me in a report—

The Chairperson: Order.

The hour being 5 p.m., committee rise.

CHAMBER FINANCE

* (15:20)

The Chairperson (Tyler Blashko): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order.

This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Finance.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement? No? So we—*[interjection]*

Does the official opposition critic have an opening statement?

Mr. Obby Khan (Fort Whyte): I'll keep my opening statements relatively quick.

Just want to thank the minister and his department officials for being here today, when they come in.

Looking forward to getting some good dialogue, good conversation, good questions and answers, hopefully, today, for the betterment of the people of Manitoba. Looking forward to really engaging in some in-depth conversation around what's in this budget, what does it mean for Manitobans and what we can expect from this NDP government.

You know, I also want to be clear and say that we'll try to keep the questions moving forward. I'm not going to go on a preamble for five minutes, like I've seen other departments do, or other critics and ministers do. I will try to get to the questions as quickly as possible with a short preamble.

I hope the minister can do the same thing and, hopefully, answer the questions directly for Manitoba.

We have a lot to cover. This is a very extensive budget, Estimates period, that we're going to go through. So I will, you know, ask the minister kindly if we can please remember that.

I will also try to indicate to the minister and department which areas I'm going to be focusing on moving forward. So, you know, today's the first day, first time we've had a chance to have a conversation, but going forward, I would, you know—hopefully, at the end, if I remember, or if the minister remembers, to give them a heads up on where we're kind of going, just so they can prepare answers, and then we can make the best of our time and have an efficient day getting some good stuff on the record.

With that, I want to say, again, thank you to the minister, his staff, everyone that works in the building, clerks, Chairperson—honourable Chairperson for this, and for my colleagues and for the minister's colleagues as well.

So with that two minutes, let's get down to business.

The Chairperson: We thank the critic from the official opposition for those remarks.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 7.1(a), contained in resolution 7.1.

At this time we invite ministerial and opposition staff to enter the Chamber, and I would ask the minister and critic to please introduce their staff in attendance.

Honourable Minister of Finance. Honourable Minister, would you like to introduce your staff?

* (15:30)

Hon. Adrien Sala (Minister of Finance): Sorry about that.

So I'd like to start by welcoming and introducing our wonderful staff here, some of whom are with TBS and others with Finance, starting with our deputy, Silvester Komlodi; Matt Wiebe from Treasury Board Secretariat; and Ann Leibfried from Finance.

Delighted that they're here to help me provide good information to Manitobans today.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Mr. Khan: I just got one staff here with me today, and Duncan Hamilton, the best researcher in this Legislative Building. So happy to have him along for the ride.

The Chairperson: In accordance with subrule 78(16), during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning for each department shall proceed in a global manner, with questions put on the resolution once the official opposition critic indicates that questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Khan: As I said in my opening remarks, I'm going to try to get down to some questions right away, without long preambles, and kind of outline for the minister and his department where we're going to be going today.

So today, I—the focus, I think, mostly will be on the fuel tax holiday, fuel tax questions, and then follow that with education, then hydro after that. So, just to give the minister and his team little bit of heads-up and some—what's it called—professional courtesy on where we're going.

So with that, the first question. I know the minister has talked extensively on the fuel tax holiday and what that means for Manitobans.

So in the minister's—and one thing I also want to say, sorry, in the preamble I forgot to mention earlier, is that the Finance Department as the minister knows, we've touched a lot of different topics. Finance, everything in this province essentially flows through Finance, whether it's Education or Justice, health care. I mean, you name any aspect of the province, flows through Justice, and it's all outlined within the budget. So the conversation will be a bit of a global discussion at times because it does all flow through Finance.

And that being said, this question in regard specifically to the fuel tax in the Estimates, the budget, the estimated increase in revenue for the fuel tax later

this fiscal year, when the fuel temporary tax holiday is to end, October 1 or September 30.

Can the minister tell us what their new tax fuel rate will be? Will it be returning to the 14 cents a litre? And how much revenue does the minister expect to generate from this fuel tax from October 1 until December 31 of 2024?

MLA Sala: I'm grateful to be here to have this opportunity to respond to important questions being brought forward by the member opposite.

One of those—of course, these key areas that I'm looking forward to discussing today is on affordability. And, of course, the member opposite, the critic, will know that we have done a lot of important work in improving affordability in a very short period of time since we've come into government here in Manitoba.

Shortly after we were elected, we, of course, made it a top priority to respond to the affordability challenges that we knew Manitobans were facing and had been facing; unfortunately, for some time due to inaction on the part of the last government.

And so, in response to that, again, shortly after we got in, we did that important work of focusing in on how we could bring relief to Manitobans who'd been facing, you know, years of unattended-to increases in their costs, especially when it comes to energy costs.

And we know that one of the biggest costs that Manitobans face in this province when it comes to energy is, of course, the costs of buying liquid fuels or diesel fuels. And that extends especially to those folks, Manitobans living in rural and northern communities, where they have to travel long distances, where the reality of day-to-day life is that you have to go, in some cases, long distances to get to work, to get to your kid's hockey game, to get to the grocery store.

And we know in speaking with folks across rural and northern Manitoba and having conversations with them about the work that we've done since coming into government, that this has been super meaningful for a lot of families, like—and I know my colleagues and I, when we do head to communities across the province, but again, especially in those rural and northern communities, we hear about this. We hear how important this fuel tax holiday has been for folks who have been struggling for a long time but weren't getting that help.

And the reason—one of the reasons—I just want to highlight this—this measure was so beneficial is because it deals with the reality of cash flow challenges, the month-to—or, sorry, week-to-week cash flow challenges that many families face, and that this puts money directly in their pockets that help them to deal with those bills on a week-to-week, month-to-month basis, day-to-day basis.

And so that's one of the reasons why this measure is so—I think has been so impactful is that it works immediately to start putting money into the pockets of Manitobans.

And so we do know—and this was spelled out very clearly or has been spoken about in this House—that we know that the estimated savings to a family with two vehicles, is about \$250 for a six-month period or, of course, \$500 on an annual basis. So, that benefit really does add up for folks—\$250 over a six-month period and, of course, we've committed to nine months. We had the initial six-month holiday that was put in place and then, of course, in our recent budget, I know our team were very proud to announce that we were going to be extending that for three more months.

There was, of course, concern that some of the issues with the fuel pipelines serving Manitobans—about the potential impacts of that. And so, you know, this was one measure that, in addition to responding to affordability challenges, will also help to provide a bit of a policy to ensure we mitigated or responded to risks of fuel prices spiking in response to that. We haven't seen that, thankfully, but we know that it was a really important measure to extend that and bring those savings to Manitobans.

* (15:40)

So, going to the questions, the specific questions that were asked, what will we raise it to? At this point, we've committed to that extension, that 3-month extension, going out to the end of September. And we will be revisiting, you know, this measure as we get closer to that date.

And in terms of, you know, the response to how will be raised between October 1 and December 31, well, that will be dependent on those decisions, so of course, I can't provide an answer to the member on that specific question.

Mr. Khan: I thank the minister for that response.

And you know, in my preamble I'd mentioned that I would try get to questions quickly and that I appreciate the minister wouldn't spend five minutes and do a five minute speech about—you know, talking about all the stuff he's doing and when I answer the questions, and I was watching the clock and he took 4 minutes and 20 seconds. I believe Manitobans should know this: 4 minutes and 20 seconds, and then he finally answered the question in the last 40 seconds.

So if we can please stay focused on answering the question. I've heard the minister in Manitoba—I've heard the minister talk about affordability and talk about the measures they're doing and that's all great. But we're here to talk about the questions and answers for committee so Manitobans can hear.

So again, I would just politely and as respectfully as possible, please ask the minister to just answer the question.

So he did say that no fuel tax rate is set. Does the minister have any forecasts of projected—based on various, I'm sure, algorithms they're running—based on different tax rates of what they are estimating or forecasting the revenue from the new tax fuel rate? Does he have a range of what that would be from October 1 until the end of the fiscal year, March 31, 2025? Does he have a range in which Manitobans can expect that based on a wide variety of factors, of course, but I am sure him and his department—great department—have forecasted that.

So the minister provide that for the House today of what that revenue would look like on this tax rate, from October 1 until March 31, 2025?

MLA Sala: Appreciate the question that was asked by the member in regards to, you know, what we would expect the range of revenues to be raised during that period. I believe he said October 1 to March 31. Is that accurate, critic?

An Honourable Member: Yes.

MLA Sala: So, appreciate that question. It is really an extension of the previous question which I believe was answered quite clearly, but there's some dynamics here that I think are worth just digging into. Because if the question is fundamentally about what type of revenues we might expect during that period, regardless of the level of the rate of the fuel tax applied, there are a number of other dynamics that will impact consumption during that period.

So those are some things I think that are worth just highlighting here. Like, for example, the—of course, the

price of oil will alter people's consumption habits, and that's not something that we, as a province, have control over. Of course, the critic will understand that's a commodity and there's all types of major economic supply chain, global, socio-economic, security-related issues that impact the price of oil. That have a big—that can have a major influence in terms of ultimately what that price of oil is and then ultimately, you know, the degree to which consumers are willing to purchase that product.

So the question does bear consideration of those factors and, ultimately, you know, those are things that we need to, we need to be mindful of in thinking about the answer there. So, you know, those consumption ranges which could be impacted by, you know, changes to the price of oil, the volatility in those oil markets, those will translate into different levels of consumption. And that's something that, you know, we have to consider in thinking about the degree to which, or the revenues that could be generated during that period.

Now we know that we did, starting January 1, bring in a fuel tax holiday that dropped the 14-cent-a-litre tax down to zero. Again, we know just how incredible of an impact that's had here in Manitoba. And if I could just quickly—we know that that decision has been unbelievably consequential for Manitobans.

And you know, I think about that Statistics Canada data that was released not too long ago, I believe it was last week, that spoke to that impact of that decision that our government made to bring those savings to Manitobans.

The, you know, the fact that we've had the lowest inflation in the country for four months in a row is clearly connected to the work that's being done by our government and is clearly, at least in large part, or is driven in many ways, by this decision to offer this fuel tax holiday to Manitobans. So we're seeing, you know, just how broad of an impact that that decision has had in saving folks money.

You know the other StatsCan data that I think is worth referencing here, that again we saw come forward last week, was that we have some of the lowest food price inflation—or we had the lowest food price inflation in the country.

* (15:50)

Think about what that means, Chairperson, to Manitobans. We know that food costs are one of the biggest costs that families face. We know that we've

seen, you know, the cost of food go up for families across not only the province but everywhere.

And so, to be able to see Stats Canada, you know, that data of record, that empirical evidence that shows that not only is our fuel tax holiday bringing forward that inflation relief in a period of high inflation, I think it was 0.4 per cent. I mean that's completely, you know, orders of magnitude lower than what we're seeing in other provinces. That's incredible. Think about what that means. So, lowest inflation in Canada for four months, lowest food-cost inflation—those are major benefits—and, of course, thanks to that measure, the lowest gas price inflation in the country.

So the question, you know, about what type of revenues we could expect from October 1 to the end of March, to the member's question, that will be again dependent on the range. If it remains at zero, hypothetically, should we make that decision, the revenue would be, of course, what it is. And it would go up based on whatever we decide to raise it to, so there is, at this point, no ability to answer that question specifically, but we are very proud of the affordability benefits that have been brought by our fuel tax holiday.

Mr. Khan: You know, the minister, I'll give him credit. He is a crafty individual.

First question I'd asked to please answer the question quickly and he spent, you know, four minutes on a preamble and then one minute on the answer in the very end. And on the second question, he reversed it. He spent one minute and 40 seconds answering the question right off the bat and then the remaining three minutes plus on a preamble about food costs and inflation.

I think it's important that Manitobans know. Two questions now, the minister has spent over 80 per cent of the time not answering the question. I'm asking to just ask a question, have it answered and move on to the next one. There's a lot of questions to get through here and the minister's doing a fine job answering the questions when he gets to them and I appreciate that. It's hard to forecast.

So, that's the answer. Thank you. Let's move on to the next one. Cash flow changes, I get it. Let's move on to the next one. We don't need a three-minute preamble. Please, minister, I'm asking for the sake of Manitobans. You're doing a great job answering questions here. I wish you did that in question period some more. But you're answering the questions and I

appreciate that. We just don't need the preamble, please. So I'll get to question number three now.

So, there is estimates for revenue based on this fuel tax that this minister has brought forward. So they have estimates for revenue but not for expenses or the tax generated from that. You can't have one without the other. The minister, and I implore his department to please consider the fact that if you're going to have estimates on revenue, you're going to have estimates on expenditures as well. They're estimates. There's a range in estimates; that's how financial projections are put together for the fuel tax for the year, which you've done and presented in this budget.

So was that estimate a fiction, then? Is it a made-up number that you'd have no basis for, because if you have a basis for the estimates of revenue, you would have a number for the estimates of expenses and tax revenue generated from that. That's what I'm asking. I'm asking the minister two questions and it doesn't seem like he wants to answer that.

So I'll move on to the next one, unless he, at a point, wants to go back and ask that and say, we do have estimates of revenue; here's where our estimates of expenses and here is what we're going to generate from these fuel taxes. Up to the minister if he wants to answer that for the people of Manitoba.

Minister talks about commodities, and I knew he was going to bring up commodities because himself and the Premier (Mr. Kinew) love to talk about commodities as if they control commodities. And the minister knows that commodities are set by—not the Premier and not this minister—they're set by the world. They're set by the free market. They're set by consumption. They're set by usage, and many other factors set price so if there's a commodity and the minister says based on consumption, if you look over consumption of fuel over the last few years, it's relatively stable. It's relatively consistent.

There is a forecast to be generated from the consumption of fuel. From that, you'd be able to estimate how much taxes will be generated. Understanding it's a commodity, understanding that the price of oil fluctuates, these are all factors that we would have accounted for. I hope the minister would have accounted for that.

So I'll ask one last time: Can the minister please, for the people of Manitoba and sake of purpose in the House today, when this fuel tax holiday is to end, end of September, from October 1 until the end of the first fiscal year for this NDP government, to March 31, 2025—can

the minister—based on consumption, which has been fairly stable, commodity pricing, which we understand fluctuates—have a range of what the tax fuel will generate for this Province of Manitoba?

Again, bearing in mind that the minister said it might be zero cents, it might be 14 cents, it might be 16 cents, it might be 10 cents, what is this minister estimating for that fuel tax generation?

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Before I give the minister a chance to respond, I'll just remind all members to flow questions and answers through the Chair.

* (16:00)

MLA Sala: Might be good to just start by just highlighting for the member who stated that myself or the Premier (Mr. Kinew) on record have suggested that we control oil commodity prices. I don't know what he's referencing or if that was just fun, or—*[interjection]*—interesting.

So, of course, the Premier or myself made no such commentary around being in control of global oil commodity pricing. That is, as outlined in my last answer, something that is a function of broad-reaching forces in the economy that are far beyond the control of our Manitoba government. So that's just something I wanted to make sure we clearly set straight here on the record.

So, you know, the—there's a page, of course, in our—in the budget that I hope the member, in doing his research, has looked at this. He can see that in the '24-25 budget year we have projected a certain amount for fuel tax revenue. That's spelled out very clearly on page 10 of the budget in the Summary Budget and Financial Updates document that speaks to, you know, what we budgeted for, for this year. So my hope is, again, the member's already done his research; he's looked at this, he's read the budget, he understands that number that we've budgeted for.

And his question is fundamentally about, you know, what's the range of revenues we might expect from October 1 to the end of March. Well, again, I think, you know, going back to page 10 here in the summary of the revenues that we're expecting, we've said the number is \$159 million, which is what we've budgeted for, for revenue. And, of course, you know, depending on decisions made by government about what will happen beyond September 31 to the end of the fiscal, that will be, as I've said in my previous two answers, what will drive this number.

And so, the response is contingent, of course, not only on our decision, but it will, going back to what we've discussed so far here today, be related to oil prices and the market and how Manitobans are feeling about wanting to gas up their cars based on, you know, again, in part by those commodity prices.

And so, the answer to his question—again, we've budgeted \$159 million for the 2024-25 budget year. Invite the member to go back to page 10 in the Summary Budget and Financial Updates doc. And then from there, that number will be impacted by the decision that we make about how we're going to go forward on that fuel tax holiday.

That decision is not a decision or is not something hypothetically we'll explore today. That's something that I know our government—we know the benefits that have been provided because of that fuel tax holiday. We understand it. We can see it with that information we saw last week from StatsCan. So we know just how beneficial this is, again, especially for folks who have to drive a lot, for regular families who depend on their cars to get around and, again, get to the sports games, get to the Tims, get to the—get to work.

So that decision will ultimately—that will be the ultimate determinant of the, you know, to the answer to the question that the member is seeking here, will be based on that decision point, which again, we're not going to be discussing hypotheticals here today about how we're intending to proceed there.

What I can say is that we know just how impactful that fuel tax holiday has been. And so we will be looking at that decision, Chairperson, and we will be, of course, letting Manitobans know about how we're going to proceed when the time comes.

Until now, we know that Manitobans stand to continue benefiting from that fuel tax holiday to the end of September. Again, this was a decision that we made knowing how—just how quickly that was going to help. And that's after many years of the previous government talking about helping. You know, they talked about their ideas about carbon pricing. They supported a carbon tax in Manitoba that would have ultimately raised those fuel prices for Manitobans.

That's not what we're doing. We're working to do the opposite, which is to lower the cost of energy and liquid fuels for Manitobans.

Mr. Khan: Sorry, I dropped my piece of paper. I couldn't find it.

So, yes, to clarify, you know, I—the minister and the Premier (Mr. Kinew), when I was referring to commodity pricing, what they had said numerous times was they took credit. And the—I believe the minister has done here today when they're taking credit, Chairperson, for the low price of gases in Manitoba. And saying that it's the NDP and this minister that are responsible for the low prices of gas in Manitoba.

And we just heard clearly from the minister—thank you for clarifying for the record—that no, they do not control commodity pricing. So you can't take the credit for the gas price when it's low. He—the minister said it himself, he does not control the pricing of that. It is set by many more factors other than the Premier and this.

They can take credit for their gas tax cut that they want to claim as a big champion for the province. But they're going to increase taxes on Manitobans, and we'll get into BITSA bill shortly, where the minister has allotted himself powers to do this through regulation and not through legislation.

But again, Minister, thank you for clarifying on the record you do not control commodity pricing, so therefore you have no right to take credit when Manitoba has the lowest price of gas, of fuel, in Canada. And I'm glad you have now clarified that for all Manitobans. Thank you.

Moving on to the next one. We talked about families driving their kids to practice. I drive my kid to hockey. He's got a hockey game tonight and football on the weekend. And you know, those savings, making their way down to Manitobans.

In our bill briefing and in committee, the minister had committed that his department had done research; that these 14-cent savings would see their way down to Manitobans, and that he would be willing to share this research, these findings with us and to this date yet, we still don't have that.

So I'll ask the minister today, will he follow through on his commitment in the bill briefing and committee to see the research and the studies and the data that supports these 14-cent savings are making their way down to Manitobans?

* (16:10)

MLA Sala: Thank you to the critic for the question. Of course, I do have to start by responding to some of the critic's commentary there. This notion that we have somehow—that we've made claims that were—that

aren't accurate here in regards to the benefits of our fuel tax holiday are specious at best.

The member will know, of course, to be clear we are not in a position to control global oil commodity prices. However, we are absolutely in a position to control the fuel tax rate that's charged to Manitobans. And that fuel tax rate and the lowering of that fuel tax rate has unquestionably had like a massive impact on lowering cost of living for Manitobans.

One of the best sources of, you know, proof or places where that can be substantiated is through the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics. And the member might know this or maybe not, but—that Manitoba Bureau of Statistics produces analysis that tracks a variety of items' costs that are fed into the CPI. And, of course, a piece of that breaks out energy costs.

And I would invite the member to look at that data and, again, it's publicly available—the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics website—where he'll see that, you know, to—quite distinct from what he's claiming, the work that we've done in bringing in a fuel tax holiday as, again, empirically and statistically shown to reduce the cost of fuel to such an extent that Manitoba has the lowest fuel price in the country, month after month now.

So to suggest that somehow, you know, there's no relationship, as the member is, between that action we've taken—in fact, I find it kind of confusing as to why he's pursuing that line of argument. Obviously, reducing a fuel tax by 14 cents is going to have a direct impact on the cost of fuel for Manitobans. So I'm not sure what argument he's making, but what we know is that, again, statistically, he can go to the website of the Manitoba Bureau of Stats to see the unbelievable impact that our government's decision to offer that fuel tax holiday has had, lowering energy costs for Manitobans.

I'd also invite the member, if he's interested—there's a CBC article. There's a quote from it that speaks to this, and I'm happy to point the member to where this article is coming from. It is CBC. It says the quote: Stats Canada acknowledges in its report Manitoba's decision to remove the provincial gas tax temporarily beginning in January has contributed to its low inflation rate.

So again, I know, I don't blame the member for not wanting to repeat, you know, the positions of our government or to position—to repeat the, you know, the great successes that I like to talk about and that my colleagues like to talk about that we're bringing

forward to benefit Manitobans. But, unfortunately, I don't think he's in a good position to deny what Stats Canada has to say about things, and I don't think he's in a good position to deny what Manitoba Bureau of Statistics has to say about the impacts of that great decision that we made.

And so I don't know if he's got some, you know, some insights that the rest of us don't have here or he's got—he's running his own statistics agency on the side that's suggesting that, you know, what we're saying is—not bear out in terms of fuel tax holiday resulting in, you know, a huge decline in fuel costs for Manitobans. But again, he's got to contend with reality here, which is that Stats Canada and the Manitoba Bureau of Statistics—not exactly agents of, you know, of government—are saying, empirically, that it's clear. The jury's in. The verdict is clear. We are saving people that money. Those—that holiday is—that 14-cent-a-litre holiday is being passed on into the pockets of Manitobans who need it. That's a great benefit.

So I don't know what it is about that that he doesn't want to support or exactly what he's contending or what he's arguing here but, look, it's pretty clear. That decision has resulted in huge financial benefits for the Manitobans who need it most.

Mr. Khan: I want to thank the minister for the—another five-minute answer again.

I am pleading with the minister now, for the fourth time, to please answer the question so we can move on quickly. We have lots of questions to get through. We're not even an hour into Estimates. We have a lot to get through. So I am pleading with him—I'm imploring him to please answer the question, and let's move on to the next one. We don't need a history lesson or a—eloquented preamble, like the minister loves to do.

* (16:20)

So, in the last question, I'd asked the minister point-blank: At bill briefing and at committee, this minister and his department had said they had research, they had quantifiable research, that showed the 14-cent savings would go directly to Manitobans, that the data is showing that that savings would go on to Manitobans. They said at committee that they would provide us with that data. They have not provided us with that data since.

So I'm asking the minister if he can please answer quickly, not for five minutes: Will he be willing to provide the data like he said he would on this 14-cent

savings that are being directly passed on to Manitobans and what effect that's having to Manitobans?

Where's the data behind this? He said he had it, he said he had the research, he hasn't provided it yet. Simply asking if he would do what he said he would—what he will—follow through on what he said he would do.

MLA Sala: I want to thank the critic for this important question about the impacts of our fuel tax holiday that we've brought to Manitobans.

The question he's asking is, fundamentally, are the savings that are being generated by the fuel tax holiday actually being passed on to Manitoba consumers? And I'm very happy to say that we can see very clearly in data that that is exactly the case, that we are seeing, if not all, the vast majority of that holiday ending up in Manitobans' pockets.

And, again, I'll remind the member, it's—the total savings for a family with two vehicles, six months, \$250. And that's a lot of money for the average family in this province, and we know how helpful that is for families.

And it's something that I haven't touched on here today that I do think is worth also expanding on is that we know that the fuel tax holiday isn't just a benefit to consumers and to the average Manitoban; it's also a benefit for businesses. And we've heard that in speaking with businesses across the province.

I know during our prebudget consults, I had really remarkable opportunities to talk to people in every corner of Manitoba. And in those discussions, in those visits to communities around the province, we spoke with, of course, not only everyday Manitobans, but we also had the great opportunity to speak with chambers and speak with business people and hear from them about what that fuel tax holiday means for them, especially in a context where those businesses themselves, many are continuing to face challenges post-COVID in getting back to where they were pre-pandemic and, you know, are facing elevated costs themselves in—when it comes to a number of different areas. Then, of course, those areas track with the kinds of cost increases that all Manitobans have faced.

But we know that the holiday is bringing big benefits to Manitoba businesses. We're seeing, I think, some evidence of a relationship between that fuel tax holiday and food price inflation. You know, that Stats Canada data perhaps isn't conclusive on that front, but we can see it's a big difference in Manitoba relative to other jurisdictions in Canada, that we are seeing lower

food price inflation and ultimately, of course, lower inflation overall being driven by that decision, and that's benefiting so many Manitobans, and it is benefiting many Manitoban businesses.

* (16:30)

To the question, you know, getting down to the question of data or substantiation of how, you know, whether or not that fuel tax holiday is being put in the pockets of Manitobans, I've already highlighted one key source of data that I would encourage the member to visit. It's publicly available. He can go check it out tonight if he wants when he gets home, over a glass of tea, and that is the Manitoba—or whatever his beverage of choice may be—maybe it's, I don't know, juice, coffee.

But he can visit that Manitoba Bureau of Statistics site, and one thing I can—there's a data point on there that I want to share with him. Again, it rolls up the various items that contribute to CPI and that ultimately speak to inflation, and one of those key items is gasoline. And that website will show him that there's been a 12.7 per cent change to the negative over a 12-month period on gasoline prices. That is statistically incredibly significant, and it speaks to the impacts of that fuel tax holiday.

There are also a number of publicly available fuel price-tracking websites that the member and all Manitobans can go visit to see the impact of that fuel tax holiday. That speaks—he can see it; again I encourage the member to go check it out. He can go visit Calibrate or GasBuddy. Those are two good sites he can go look at, and he'll see, if he goes on to visit those sites tonight—again, maybe he will when he gets off work this evening—he'll go and spend some time and go see that it's crystal clear.

When you look at gas price tracking in provinces across the country, you see what happened January 1st effectively. And it's the—he'll see this in the graphs—a precipitous decline in the cost of fuel in Manitoba by about 14 cents, and effectively that's held; it's tracked. Our fuel prices have more or less been 14 cents cheaper than neighbouring provinces since we brought that in, and we're proud of that.

Mr. Khan: I want to thank the minister for offer of tea later. I do enjoy drinking tea, so thank you for that. And I will thank the minister for answering a question that he answered in 30 seconds. He didn't need the extra four minutes and 30.

I'm imploring the minister to please—I see him looking up at the clock with five seconds left, running

out the entire clock. We're not here to waste time; we're here to answer questions. So please, I'm going to implore the minister again. He's answering—well, that last one he kind of beat around it, so if he can just answer the question, would be great.

Now, to be clear, the question was asked, will he share the data. The minister shared anecdotal data of savings being passed on to Manitobans. In bill briefing and in committee meetings, they said they had research and concrete data that they would share with us, and to say that those savings make it down without providing anything, I think is a farce, and I think Manitobans can see through that.

What we can see, though, is that I've tabled in the House numerous times for the minister, and Manitobans can go online and see this, and maybe I'll post this later as well today, that within three weeks of this minister and this NDP government putting in their gas tax holiday stunt, that in three weeks the gas prices had gone back up to what they were—higher than what they were on January 1st.

And the minister referenced GasBuddy, to go to that website, and he can go to that website. His department can go there and take a look. Those savings evaporated within three weeks, and gas has continued to climb since then. So you can say, where is the savings?

Now, the minister had referenced earlier asking what my line of questioning was around commodity pricing, because commodity pricing sets the prices for such things as crude oil. That remained stable. So if crude—a commodity pricing stayed stable and this government enforced a 14-cent tax savings, but then a month, three weeks later those prices were higher, and yet the commodity stayed the same, you would have to ask, where are those savings to Manitobans? And the answer is, they're not. They're gone.

It's smoke and mirrors used by this minister. I've asked three times now to provide the data to show where the savings are. He references \$250. Yes, we have lower prices in Manitoba than across other parts of Canada, but again, the minister, in the second answer, said he does not control the pricing of commodities.

So, you can't take credit when the gas price is low. You have nothing to do with it, especially when the commodity stays the same, or minimal fluctuation, and yet the gas prices go above that. That is literally proof—evidence—that this is not true; that what is being touted as a massive win for this NDP government is

actually nothing but smoke and mirrors, and the savings aren't being passed on.

What is happening is that this gas stunt holiday is costing Manitobans in this minister's own budget \$160 million, approximately—\$160 million. And you know what they cut from the budget, honourable Chairperson: \$160 million from infrastructure spending.

What else did they cut from this budget? I won't get into that as we have, you know, I think, 100 hours or 30 hours to get through here in Finance, so we'll move on from that. But I want to be clear for the record that the minister said doesn't control commodity pricing. That's remained stable and yet the savings have gone away and he will not share the concrete data with us on—that his department said they had before they put this into place.

Moving on to the budget bill and BITSA. Simple question for the minister, and hopefully, answer this quickly. We don't have to spend five minutes. In clause 8 comma—(2) it says if a rate prescribes, sorry, number 2, I'll go to the second line. The applicable rate for the fuel listed in that—

The Chairperson: Order.

I'll just remind the member that questions about specific bills would be most appropriate in committee, not in Supply.

Mr. Khan: It's hard to ask a question in committee or about a bill that this government won't allow you to go forward and ask questions for the Manitoban public to come forward and ask questions on a BITSA bill.

So we'll digress from that line of questioning since this government doesn't want Manitobans to come speak to bills. It's been clear. We've asked repeatedly in the House. We've asked repeatedly in the House, will he allow Manitobans to come speak to this, and he said, no. Premier (Mr. Kinew) has said no. They think it's okay to shove this through in the budget bill that the minister has authority to increase taxes by regulation.

So without commenting on that part of the budget bill, the simple question is: Going forward, after September, October, going—October 1 forward, how does the minister propose that he is going to set the gas rate at that time?

* (16:40)

MLA Sala: You know, I do want to just, for whatever it's worth, point out that the member continues to

waste about a minute every time he asks a question. So if he wants to speed it up or, you know, have this be more efficient, I encourage him to stop wasting time on that—his preambles himself.

You know, one thing he said is, you know, we're—it's \$160 million that we're wasting in doing this, it's essentially the, you know, the summary of what his message was there. And I just want to—I want to take this opportunity to say, we get it; we can tell that you don't support the savings that we're bringing to Manitobans here. That's what you communicated there, and I think that's something that your constituents and Manitobans across the province would be interested to learn about, that you do not support the \$160 million of savings that are going right into their pockets.

So let's be clear about that. You—we hear—we've heard you today state that you do not support the fuel tax holiday. You believe it's wasteful, and you do not like that we're putting that money into Manitobans' pockets. That's what you've communicated here on the record in this Chamber, and so I just want to highlight that, that I think a lot of Manitobans would be concerned to hear that that's your take on what we've done here, especially given how consequential this action has been in reducing inflation for Manitobans. And it's put such an enormous amount of money back in their pockets when they need it. They need that help right now.

And I guess one of the main distinguishing features between the member's previous government and our government is that we recognize that. We recognize that that support is needed.

And, you know, they've heard it right from the critic here today. They've heard why they didn't get that help that they needed, because they didn't seem to think that that was needed, or that wasn't important. It's no surprise that Manitobans didn't get any relief on their energy prices when that's the position, the opinion, the attitude of the critic and his colleagues and their previous government.

So that cost Manitobans a lot of money, because for seven and a half years—well, first they started out, of course, when it comes to energy prices, we know they came forward with their own version of the carbon tax. So the member—I know he probably will lean into the fact that he wasn't here at that time when his colleagues and his team brought forward a carbon tax, a made-in-Manitoba carbon tax, which would have increased the cost of gasoline, which would have increased the cost of diesel, which would have increased the cost of natural gas. He—his team brought

that to the House, voted in support of it. That's cut and dry. There's no question that that is—that's the record that they have when it comes to energy prices and the decisions that they made. They were seemingly focused, for whatever reason—I don't really understand why—on increasing those costs with a made-in-Manitoba carbon tax.

So, you know, the member likes to poke around at that and our positions and what things have been said, et cetera. Here's the reality: On the record, his previous government voted in favour of a made-in-Manitoba carbon tax which would have raised the price of fuel. So not only does he not support putting this—these dollars back in Manitobans' pockets from this fuel tax holiday, he's also part of a team that fought to raise prices on Manitobans, raise their energy prices by fighting for a made-in-Manitoba carbon tax.

We're not going to do that. We know that's not the right direction. And the member opposite has to account for that. He has to deal with the reality of his government's record and the work that they did to make life more expensive for folks.

Going to the—this very important question of, you know—and this is something I can't emphasize enough how seriously we take this, the importance of knowing that that fuel tax holiday is actually ending up in Manitobans' pockets. I've already shown the member; I've told him. Again, he seems to think that these are just sort of, I don't know, NDP talk boxes. I don't know how he wants to characterize them. But, again, I can assure him they're independent organizations. I don't own GasBuddy. I don't have any stocks in Kalibrate. You know, I don't know that any of my colleagues do. I don't think so.

But they're independent sites that will show that those fuel tax savings are being passed on, almost in their entirety, right where they belong, in the pockets of people who need it most.

Mr. Khan: Minister says I've been wasting one minute while he's been wasting five minutes for every answer on a preamble that doesn't answer anything.

I asked—the question I asked last was will the minister tell Manitobans how he's going to set the fuel tax rates after October 1. No answer. No answer at all on how he's going to set the tax rate.

I asked him what's the forecast for spending or how much money is going to be from that tax. No answer. What's the low-end forecast? No answer. He admits that he has no control over commodity pricing,

and yet he wants to take claim when the gas prices are low in Manitoba. And when they're high, they're not his fault.

We showed today, unequivocally, that those gas savings went away in three weeks. And yet, commodity pricing stayed the same. Gas price is higher now. It may be lower in Manitoba than it is in the rest of Canada, but he admits he does not control that.

It's sad that when he talks about savings for Manitobans, the only thing this minister has brought forward is a temporary holiday. Holiday, holiday, holiday. He said it 10 times today. It's a holiday. It's going to come back up, and it's going to be set by this minister at the Cabinet table. That's the authority he's giving himself, removing Manitobans from that conversation. That is on the record today.

Real savings for Manitobans. If this was \$160 million of real savings to Manitobans, like the permanent tax savings the previous PC government did by lowering this NDP's 8 per cent PST to 7 per cent. This NDP raised it to 8 per cent. We permanently dropped it to seven. We eliminated NDP 'dath'—death tax. We removed PST from wills, insurances. And ironically, the only thing this minister is advertising other than the holiday is the \$5,000 average Manitoba's families will save due to the previous PC government.

Those are permanent tax savings. I think the minister needs to 'disfranchise' between permanent and temporary—and holiday, as he said. It's a holiday. It's coming back. That's what we're talking about.

And we will—Manitobans deserve answers. And how are you going to set that rate after October 1? That is crucial to understanding how this minister's going to operate.

* (16:50)

And the powers he's giving himself—unprecedented—to do whatever he wants is of concern to Manitobans, just like the \$148-million tax increase that this minister is putting on middle-class Manitobans.

Education and property tax, the largest tax increase in the history of this province, done by this NDP government, just like they increased the PST. Just like under this NDP government, Manitoba's Hydro debt tripled to \$25 billion, that we are still digging ourselves out of; \$148 million under this minister for education and property taxes increase. That is what is budgeted in this—on—in their budget.

The question for the minister is simple. That's—I would—for the full year, Estimates; so the question would be, what is—as this property tax is based on mill rates, is based on education taxes throughout the province—and we can get to that question a little bit afterwards, on page 41 of the minister's budget, where they talk about the mill rate of 11.7; 11.7 in 2023 is the rate they're using.

Does the minister have a mill rate for 2024 average? Does he have a forecast for 2025? What is the education and property tax going to cost Manitobans in 2024-25? It's going to be higher than \$148 million, because, why? Houses are going up. Average house in Manitoba is getting more expensive. Under this minister, they're going to get higher.
[interjection]

Yes, and I am going on a speech, because the minister's going to take the next 10 minutes and then we're done, so this is the last question I'll get for the day. If NDP colleagues on this side could understand how to do some simple math, they would understand that this is probably the best way to use the time, because this minister will block me for the next five minutes from asking.

So the question is: What is the rate going to be; what will the tax—education property tax be in 2025-2026 and does the minister have real mill rates for 2024 and 2025, because that's what's going to hit hard class—hard-working middle-class Manitobans?

MLA Sala: It honestly makes me unbelievably happy to have a chance to talk about our homeowner affordability tax credit because we know how much value that's going to provide for Manitobans across the province.

What we've seen, actually, just, you know, off-hand, I can say the impacts of this are going to be so enormous that there's a number of communities across Manitoba where residents will almost—a hundred per cent of residents will no longer be required to pay school taxes. That's especially true in rural communities across the province. Places like Dauphin, I think the number I heard was 99 per cent of residents of Dauphin are going to pay no school tax as a function of this measure. And that's repeated over and over and over again in communities across Manitoba.

Think about that, Chairperson, what that means for those families. We're talking about, in some cases, hundreds of dollars going into their pockets thanks to that decision.

And I know the—you know, the member opposite will have community members across his riding that, of course, are going to stand to benefit as well. And one question I have for him is: What does he say to those constituents when he's on the doorstep and they're talking about this measure, how does he hide from that?

I mean, we know the number is—the global number, estimated number—we've said it in the House; this isn't going to come as a surprise for the critic—83 per cent of Manitobans are estimated to do better as a function of that rebate. That—or, sorry, that credit. That is—I mean, that is a massive majority of people across this province, and, frankly, it's bringing help to those who really need that help.

So, what an unbelievable measure that is. And that's going to be a game changer for so many people in Manitoba and, again, a huge majority of people in the critic's riding and in all of his colleagues'. I'm—you know, I think when they hit the doorsteps this summer, they're going to have a lot of explaining to do about why they're not supporting this measure that is—frankly, is helping 80—again, 83 per cent of homeowners. It's a—it really is a remarkable, remarkable thing that we've done, and it—what it does is it highlights our focus on affordability, and really, that is the key focus of our last budget.

The member will know we've had great opportunity this afternoon to talk about, you know, the huge impacts of the gas tax holiday. I appreciate that he gave me almost an hour to talk about how we're putting those savings back in Manitobans' pockets. That was remarkable opportunity he offered me here to highlight that. I mean, that is awesome that we got to talk about putting all those dollars back in people's pockets. I appreciate that he gave me that opportunity. And now, here, I appreciate that he's giving me this opportunity to talk about this \$1,500 homeowner affordability tax credit.

You know, these two measures are two measures that we've undertaken here of 21 new ways to save, including—and I'm going to mention this because the member opposite did mention this. They like to take ownership over the personal income tax changes, but I'll remind him, they're not in government anymore. And those changes would not have been completed if our government did not make a decision to ensure that we bring that reduction in personal income taxes to Manitobans. That wasn't a decision that was made by the critic. It wasn't a decision that was made by his

leader. It was a decision that was made by our government.

And that decision is an important one because we know they put a significant amount of dollars in Manitobans' pockets, and we—

The Chairperson: Order.

The hour being 5 p.m., committee rise.

Call in the Speaker.

IN SESSION

The Deputy Speaker (Tyler Blashko): The hour being 5 p.m., the House is adjourned and stands adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Wednesday, May 29, 2024

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